

Christian Theology at the University: On the threshold or in the margin?

Elna Mouton¹

Faculty of Theology
Stellenbosch University

Abstract

The essay discusses challenges regarding the position and role of Christian Theology in twenty-first century university contexts. Questions asked include the following: How will a theology that is oriented to (Reformed) Christian Theology develop itself at universities worldwide, within contexts of secularisation and globalisation? What important strategic choices will it have to make? It is argued that answers to such questions inter alia relate to how Christian Theology responds to three crucial choices: (1) Being truthful to its biblical orientation and calling; (2) Accounting critically for its position on the threshold of interdisciplinary and interreligious dialogue; and (3) Being connected to the life stories of people.

1. INTRODUCTION

The University of Pretoria's centenary celebrations in 2008 afford all partners involved an ideal opportunity to take stock, and to ponder the institution's impact on (African) societies in the twenty-first century. This essay is concerned with the position, role and meaning of Christian Theology at the university (generally speaking) in years to come. Some questions in this regard may include the following: How will a theology that is rooted in, and oriented to (Reformed) Christian Theology develop itself at universities worldwide, within contexts of secularisation and globalisation? What are the scientifically strategic choices that Theology will have to make? Will it be marginalised by scientific religion/religious studies? Or will it be able to make a significant contribution to the dignity of humanity and creation at large within the context of transformed universities?

¹ A reworked version of my address at the official opening of the academic year at the Theologische Universiteit Kampen, The Netherlands, on 5 September 2005. It is republished here with permission (cf Mouton 2005).

Christian Theology at the University

I start with a brief overview of the current position of faculties of Theology at South African universities. I group them into three categories – all related to processes of internal and/or regional prioritisation since the country's first democratic election in 1994, and the acceptance of its new Constitution and Bill of Rights in 1996. All these faculties had to adapt their programmes in terms of the multifaceted educational needs of South African societies:

- At various institutions faculties of Theology were dismantled and reconfigured as part of the human and social sciences, as schools/departments/units of theology and religion, biblical and/or religious studies, religion and culture, or ethics and moral orientation (Universities of the Western Cape, Fort Hare, Durban-Westville, Zululand, Limpopo, South Africa);
- At Rhodes University (Grahamstown) the Faculty of Divinity became a Department of Divinity and was finally closed down completely;
- At four universities faculties of Theology were able to retain their status as *faculties*: The Universities of North West (Potchefstroom), Pretoria, Free State (Bloemfontein), and Stellenbosch. At the University of Pretoria two faculties of theology (*Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika* and *Nederduits Gereformeerde*) were consolidated into one faculty.

The Faculty of Theology in Stellenbosch has recently been assured that its status as a *faculty* will not be at risk as long as it remains academically and financially viable. This assurance was given in spite of Theology being the smallest of ten faculties, with a total number of 365 registered students (2007). This is largely due to its significance and symbolic value for (Reformed) churches and communities in general, as well as its strategic value for the University. It is not only the faculty with the largest number of research outputs per capita, but also with the highest percentage of postgraduate students (72% in 2007). Stellenbosch University has also taken note of the Faculty's diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, and denominations represented in its student and staff profiles. However, although the study of so-called non-Christian religions forms part of the curriculum (such as Islam, Judaism and African Indigenous Religions), these are not yet represented by practitioners of those religions or for the training of their leaders.

How do I anticipate the future position, role and function of Christian Theology at the university? Amid all the current socio-religious (secularised,

postmodern, fundamentalistic, pluralistic, globalised) tendencies and their impact on theological education, I would like to make a few suggestions with respect to an “ideal” situation for Theology. Since Theology does not have a privileged status in a multireligious environment – also with respect to financial support from the government – it will have to *earn* its right to (continue to) exist *as faculties of Theology* in such a society. In my view, this will depend on at least three important choices:

2. THE BIBLICAL ORIENTATION OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

A first and crucial choice for Christian Theology under any circumstances is to be truthful to its own dynamic, multidimensional, ecumenical, community-forming, life-giving identity, nature and calling. To lose its calling under the pressure of external circumstances, will always be a great temptation for Theology.

By its very nature and identity (Reformed) Christian Theology is oriented to, rooted and embedded within the biblical writings – its authoritative foundational documents. These texts are the result of very real human processes which sought to *understand* and to *interpret* transforming experiences arising from the authoritative yet paradoxical presence of a living God. In the case of the New Testament, this is dramatically embodied in God’s revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. In showing compassion (for instance) to children, tax-collectors, Samaritans and women, Jesus radically subverted the established values of (dominating) power in the moral world of first century Palestine. He consequently died violently at a place where criminals were executed. Through the trauma of the cross’s humiliation and shame, a shocking vision of God appears. The ultimate site where God would *not* be perceived, paradoxically *becomes* the site of God’s presence.

Yet, it is specifically in the overwhelming experience of the *resurrecting power* of Jesus as the crucified messiah that the origins of Christianity and the New Testament writings must be sought (Johnson 1999:95-122; Mouton 2006:57-60). Although the concept of resurrection after death was a popular theme in Greek and other mythological narratives (Van Eck 2004:564-565), the resurrection of a *crucified messiah* – and especially the life-changing *effects* of Jesus’ resurrection – was shockingly and surprisingly new to the Mediterranean symbolic world.

Because the resurrection faith of the early Jesus followers was rooted in paradox, it created an urgent need for *interpretation*. Continuous experiences of God’s life-giving Spirit in the present – in diverse and changing social contexts – would constantly challenge them to interpret and reinterpret

inherited traditions, and to imagine, re-imagine and reconstruct the future. Any interpretation, including the interpretation of *religious* experience, obviously happens in the light of available symbols. This was also the case with the early Jesus followers. They were forced to interpret new experiences and changing circumstances in the light of a pluralistic first-century Mediterranean symbolic world, constituted by diverse and complex combinations *inter alia* of Roman rule, Greco-Roman (specifically Hellenistic) culture, and the religious symbols of Judaism (torah, prophets and “writings”). The rapid spread of the movement by many messengers further required flexible adjustment to new settings. In the process they did not so much invent a new language, but rather *reinterpreted, rearranged* and *reappropriated* available symbols and traditions, particularly from the symbolic world of the torah (Johnson 1999:35-38). The New Testament *radicalised* inherited images from the very roots – particularly those related to *power* and *authority* – by describing the early Christian communities as being *recreated* by God in Jesus Christ, with a new identity and ethos.

Similar processes of *experience* and *interpretation* continued during the collection, selection and canonisation of these documents by the early church. This process was determined fundamentally by the *sensus ecclesiae*, the sense of the church – by its communal discernment and awareness of being inspired and guided by a living God. Through these processes the early church affirmed that those writings – *particularly* in their being addressed to, and conditioned by, specific historical contexts – possessed enduring authority and relevance for the church. The relevance of these writings would, however, not (necessarily) be the same in every time and place. It is specifically in their *diversity* of settings, genre and style (witnessing of the dynamic relationship between a living God and people in the *everyday concrete reality* of their lives) that these texts would be able to address different contexts through the ages. For this reason, the *whole* collection of writings – in all its diversity and even divergence, complexity and coherence – must be kept alive if the church and Christian Theology are to affirm their identity in every time and place.

Such an interactive dynamic provides Christian Theology with a useful framework – that is to act in continuation with those interpretive processes of the early church, while accounting critically for its own acts of interpretation in different times and places. Thus, because of its very roots, and its ability to *reinterpret* from within its basic Christological orientation, Theology should be in a good position to welcome, even embrace, a plurality of cultures, ideas and religions, without being threatened by it.

What could Christian Theology’s unique contribution to such a context be? What makes Christian Theology different from other disciplines reflecting on the same reality? What is the strategic value of Theology – its rhetorical,

reality-depicting, problem-solving potential – in a pluralistic, multi-religious society? Put differently: What would the educational, formative, and therefore scientific importance of Christian Theology in such contexts be? These, in my view, would be crucially important *qualitative* questions to ask with respect to Theology's position at a (secular) university.

Much of the integrity of the responses to these questions lies, I believe, in the dynamic yet mysterious ways in which Christian Theology *refers* to the ultimate reality called "God". The Christ event was to reconfigure and amplify previous experiences and interpretations of the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. It would challenge the early (and later) Jesus followers radically to revision their everyday lives from within a faith relationship with the living God. If Jesus (as interpreted by the NT writings) opened up new ways of thinking and speaking about God, humanity, society and creation – *how* did it happen, and how was it supposed to happen?

The ability to explore, know and describe reality, is an awesome responsibility entrusted to human beings. Yet, perhaps even more remarkable, is the ability of human imagination to *redescribe* reality, to *rename* experiences, to *retell* their stories from new angles. This refers to the human capacity to speak *metaphorically* – to see new possibilities and to make new connections between known images and (past and present) experiences.

Metaphorical language typically permeates the biblical writings. Literary devices such as *genre* (narrative, parable, poetry, apocalyptic symbols), liturgy, art, tradition (as extended metaphor) and even people all function rhetorically as instruments for *redescribing* reality from new perspectives.² My interest in metaphor here lies particularly in its imaginative and transformative nature, in its ability to *refer* to an alternative reality, and thus to make sense of this reality. According to Ricoeur (1975:63-145; 1976:89-95), the transformative (authoritative, life-giving) power of a text lies *in its ability to suggest, to open up, to make possible (glimpses of) a "proposed world" which readers might adopt or inhabit, an alternative point of view with which they can identify*. In this way a text may disclose new possibilities – new ways of looking at things, of relating to people, of thinking and behaving. In this way a text has a persuasive thrust towards renewal and transformation, inviting people to re-imagine their life stories and to inhabit its world as the real world for them.

² The early Christians – by, for example, referring to God as recreator and redeemer in Jesus Christ; to Jesus as son of God, lord (*kurios*) and saviour; by witnessing of the Spirit as the seal of their ownership by God; of themselves as the body of Christ, God's household, a holy temple – *reimagined* and *renamed* their understanding of God and their (ordinary) life experiences from the new perspective of the Christ event. In this way metaphor can function as a powerful, reorienting lens towards a renewed self-understanding and ethos, towards making sense of the past, present and future.

For Christian Theology to give an account of the nature of the biblical writings *and* their reception in new times and places – as life-giving and sense-making activities – the authority of these texts has to be (re)focused and (re)structured within the dynamic site of continuous *interaction* between God’s Spirit, their multiple textual dimensions, as well as the interests, dreams and fears of contemporary faith communities (Mouton 2006:60-64). Such an approach would embrace the many dimensions of the full hermeneutical circle, and would be truthful to the dynamic nature and purpose of these texts. Surprisingly, the spiral movement between the Spirit, scripture and the concrete needs of current audiences is also crucial for the *unlocking* of the liberating meaning of those ancient canonised texts. It is precisely their potentially persuasive power to affirm, nourish and sustain life – to facilitate new possibilities, to encourage and console, to invite, move and challenge their receivers to imagine and re-imagine – that makes them authoritative! *Where* do such metaphorical acts of redescription occur? It is within the creative yet complex interaction between Spirit, text and context that the imaginative, transforming and authoritative power of Christian Theology comes to the fore. The continuing, risky process by which the early Christians had to learn to match their new identity to a lifestyle and language worthy of their calling, occurred in the creative, liminal tension between their understanding of torah and their memories of Jesus (Mouton 2006:64-66). From within this space their hope for the future and their courage to live faithfully in the present were shaped.

This movement from one insight (position) to another may be described in terms of the typical metaphorical processes of orientation, disorientation (alienation) and reorientation (Ricoeur 1976:46-53). It is in this context that I find the concept of *liminality*, from the Latin *limen* for threshold, particularly helpful for describing the complex and ambiguous interface between academia, church and society – the epicentre of Christian Theology.³

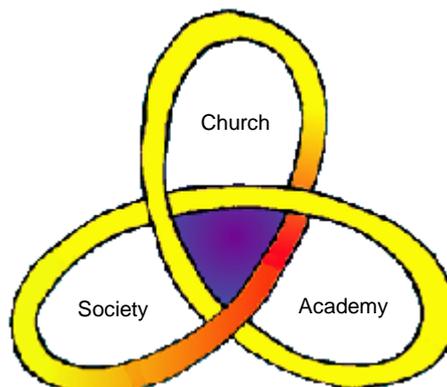
³ The concept of liminality was introduced by French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, who uses the term “rites of passage” in connection with the ceremonies and rituals performed at different stages in the life cycle of individuals and groups (Van Gennep 1960:1-13, 15-25). In the fields of cultural anthropology and sociology the notion of liminality has since been developed further by several scholars, in particular by North American anthropologist Victor Turner. It has also been adapted and appropriated by theologians such as Gerald Arbuckle and Leo Perdue, both with reference to Turner, and Mark Kline Taylor, with reference to anthropologist Paul Rabinow. Taylor, systematic theologian in Princeton, develops liminality— together with “admiration” – as a Christian reconciliatory strategy for dealing with human differences. He observes: “(L)iminality is the term I reserve for the kind of life known ‘betwixt and between’ differentiated persons, groups or worlds. This is an experience of the *wonder*, the *disorientation* and *discomfort* that can arise when one is suspended between or among different groups or persons” (Taylor 1990:200, cf 199-208). Taylor describes the liminal space between cultural (including gender) boundaries as a difficult, fragile, risky and trying experience, of which the ambiguities and strains are not easily tolerated. At the same time the liminal encounter represents a dynamic and dialectic process wherein no one remains static. As new alliances are constructed in the interaction between different worlds, people’s moral identities and lifestyles are reconstituted by it.

Liminality involves experiences of both the wonder and discomfort when one is suspended between different groups, persons or viewpoints. Such delicate processes are implied by the very identity of Christian Theology itself. The majority, if not all, of the implied receivers of the biblical documents found themselves within liminal or transitional phases – characterised by comprehensive changes in the attitudes of their minds, from within their concrete political, economic, social and moral contexts. In fact, the creativity, tension, paradox and risk of liminal spaces are implied by these texts as the optimal context for moral (trans)formation and spiritual growth.

In continuation with the rich yet fragile nature of these texts I wish to argue that liminality should be embraced as an essential characteristic of the Christian life, and of Christian Theology in general. Categories and skills developed by related disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, literary science, classical and modern rhetoric, history, philosophy, hermeneutics – and particularly the arts – would therefore be needed for ongoing explorations of the communication processes represented and stimulated by these texts. That is why Theology *needs* the larger context of a university to become what it is meant to be. This brings us to a second crucial choice for Christian Theology in a pluralist society.

2. THEOLOGY ON THE THRESHOLD OF INTER-DISCIPLINARY AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

In terms of David Tracy's well-known "publics", Christian Theology today is challenged particularly to account for the dynamic yet complex interface between the *church* (and its foundational texts), *society* (where those texts are appropriated or ignored), and the *academy* (which explores a universum of knowledge).



I wish to argue that it is at the very *epicentre* of these interrelated and interdependent publics or "spirals" that the primary functions of theological

scholarship have to be defined and nuanced. Since this epicentre is such a rich and densely structured space – involving the dynamics and intricacies of divine revelation experienced and interpreted by finite human beings – its exploration will of necessity be an interdisciplinary and ecumenical task (cf Mouton 2006:56).

Where does this happen, and where can it happen? To quote Tracy (2002:14): “Every great religious tradition lives by welcoming a genuine critical community of inquiry. In any religious tradition, the university (the academy in all its forms) is precisely one of the singular places where the freedom to enter the critical conversation occurs.” The question for the church, however, often is: Can a community of inquiry and a community of commitment and faith be united? Of all the disciplines, Tracy (2002:15) continues, “theology is that one where action and thought, academy and church, faith and reason, the community of inquiry and the community of commitment and faith are most explicitly and systematically brought together”.

The choice for Christian Theology, therefore, is whether to move beyond *intra*-disciplinary conversation and cooperation to *inter*-disciplinary conversation and cooperation *before* it is forced into it. The twenty-first century will not tolerate any ghetto theology but calls for bold, unthreatened conversation from within its unique orientation (epicentre).

This would imply that even where Theology is absorbed into faculties of arts and the human sciences, it will not *only* be negative. Even though theological specialisation may then decrease and the crucially important coherence of theological education be inhibited, it will still be important to stay in discussion with other disciplines in order to account academically, and to justify theologically, the content of the Christian faith in relation to other religious expressions.

3. CONNECTED TO THE LIFE STORIES AND NEEDS OF PEOPLE

This brings us – in continuation of the previous two aspects – to a third choice for Christian Theology in a pluralist society, namely to include the stories of all (so-called) “others” in its story, particularly those stories that differ from its own. The narratives of people from within multicultural church and (secular) societal contexts represent and invite new forms of theological education to which the new century will increasingly introduce us.

If we say that ongoing processes of *experience* and *interpretation* within liminal space are characteristic of the Christian faith and of Christian

Theology, we may ask more concretely about the spatial settings *where* such interpretations occur. As the experience and interpretation of the early Jesus followers occurred in concrete geographical, socio-economic, political, religious and philosophical contexts, the bible is read analogously in (South) Africa today from within many diverse socio-cultural, historical and economic-political contexts.

To illustrate the dire need for intelligible, life-changing Christian Theology in years to come, I briefly refer to two stories from Africa during the past two decades. One is from a (Western, Euro-North-American-South-African) *postmodern* perspective, and the other from a (two-thirds world, African) *postcolonial* point of view. Both, from related yet distinguishable angles, present elements of the struggle for survival and sense-making on the continent. Both resist and subvert domination by a particular group, person or institution, including the idea of absolute, objective truth. Both offer alternative perspectives, and have serious implications for how people speak about God and respond to social challenges. Both may (and probably will) influence the moral choices of believing communities in years to come in significant ways (Mouton 2006:67-76).

The first is a story with some observations from South Africa. The radical processes of transformation taking place in South Africa since 1994, with numerous societal shifts, have left no person or institution untouched – including the church and theological education. In spite of significant shifts away from simplistic, one-sided interpretations of the bible, relations among various forms of theology/faith and socio-economic realities in South Africa remain extremely complex. As far as Reformed Theology in general is concerned, “(i)t cannot be denied that, both within the Reformed communities and from the perspective of outsiders, apartheid has given the Reformed tradition, and even Christianity itself, a bad reputation in South Africa and has caused a lack of credibility and even self-confidence” (Smit 2003:238). In the process many people – black people and women in particular – feel *disillusioned* and *deceived* by the many ways in which scripture was used to justify and solidify racial, gender and other forms of apartheid within and among people, even between them and God. It has indeed become an enormous challenge for such people to be surprised (again) by the scripture’s liberative and healing power.

Although the present moment in South Africa bears the promise of a new, more accountable hermeneutic awareness, ironically it often seems to *strengthen* the deeply entrenched sense of alienation among and within people. A potentially constructive yet dangerous consequence of a secular

society and postmodern thinking, for example, is that it leads to a breakdown of the hegemony of truth claims.⁴ Instead of celebrating the richness of plurality and complementarity, of *sharing* one another's identities and stories of joy and pain (which I believe is what postmodern thinking is about), the postmodern attitude for many becomes synonymous with a certain *disintegration*, with a *loss* of orientation and cohesion, the *loss* of a collective moral identity, memory and destination, and consequently, the *loss* of a corresponding (corporate) ethos of dignity and respect for life, of responsibility and involvement, with a general attitude of "who cares?". For many this means a loss of trust in all forms of leadership – including church leadership. Due to such detached and disinterested attitudes, extreme postmodernist thinking necessarily fails to cultivate a sustainable agenda for transformation.

From a rhetorical perspective, such a profound sense of loss pertains to all three the basic elements of communication (sender-message-receivers), to which Aristotle referred as *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos*. In South Africa many people – including Christians – have lost trust in the *ethos*, integrity, truthfulness and authority of their (pastoral) leaders, as well as the *logos*, content, authority and intention of their (spoken and non-verbal) words, even the truthfulness of the bible itself. Consequently, the *pathos* of their audiences, the rhetorical *effect* of their words and gestures in the lives of people, is often inhibited detrimentally, leading to a sense of *apathy* – particularly among critical thinkers and historically disadvantaged groups. With regard to Christianity, all these prerequisites for authoritative communication have come under deep suspicion, have lost credibility, and need to be revisited fundamentally.

As far as the church is concerned (and this seems to be a worldwide trend), the tendencies towards disintegration and lack of memory go against its distinctive nature as a diverse yet uniting, life-giving and life-sustaining *community*. These trends often tragically witness to the reality that Christians have somehow lost their *orientation and integration*, their sense of calling, their *primary identity as Christians*. This is essentially a *theological* (or "spiritual") problem, which often manifests itself as a *moral crisis*, but in actual fact goes much deeper. It therefore calls for a careful and coherent *theological* response.

This brings me to a second story from Africa. Like the first one, this story underlines the importance of *theological perspective*, *communal identity*

⁴ In a secular, postmodern society no institution, including Christianity with its truth claims and authoritative biblical texts, has any privileged status. For many people this means that all truth claims merely become a matter of opinion, and that morality is a matter of personal preference. Quite often the emphasis is on *different* rationalities and view points, with little regard for that which binds people together.

and *choice* in Christian people's (also Christian Theology's) daily ethos, particularly regarding their public responsibility. It also shows how a (biblical) story can function to "open up" (Ricoeur 1976:89-95) and facilitate alternative perspectives of reality.

A remarkable contemporary example of continuous interpretation stimulated by the biblical texts can be found in the activities and writings of *The circle of concerned African women theologians*, founded in 1989. The Circle consists of about 600 women from across Africa, within various contexts and disciplines, committed to searching for and publishing on creative alternatives to *all forms of power abuse and injustice* in African churches and societies, and gender justice in particular. Their efforts led to the establishment of the *Institute of African women in religion and culture* at Trinity Theological College in Accra (Ghana), of which Professor Mercy Amba Oduyoye is the director.⁵

From the outset the Circle's consultation for African biblical and cultural hermeneutics was challenged with issues of methodology, particularly regarding the new approach of African feminist readings of the Bible. They needed to devise alternative ways of reading the Bible that would account for African women's life experiences from within a plurality of religious, socio-cultural, geographical, racial, political and economic contexts, and that would encourage and inform discourses and practices towards radical church renewal and transformation. These ways of reading needed to account not only for the continuing authority of (written) biblical texts in those contexts, but also for the authority of other vibrant texts in the lives of women, such as (oral) African cultures.

For the purpose of developing African women's ways of interpretation, the Circle shows a preferential option for a *storytelling* approach. Many reasons have been articulated for considering narrative to be a potentially

⁵ What makes the contributions of the Circle particularly remarkable, is how boldly its members take responsibility for their own destinies, in spite of their disillusionment with how the bible often functions in (mainly patriarchal socio-cultural and church) contexts in Africa, and amid the dire societal needs of the African continent regarding employment (poverty), health (HIV and AIDS, prostitution, neglect of environment), education and safety (violence, human trafficking). A fundamental problem for women (including Christian women) is *the polarity between the household and public sphere*. Women's roles (in church and society) are defined largely by their domestic roles, leading to unequal power, even when secular laws provide for equality. Recognising how important the bible is for churches in Africa, the Circle approaches the task of deconstructing some old and reconstructing anew the ways in which the bible is being read as a primary challenge. They consistently emphasize the necessity to reread the bible through women's eyes *if there is to be gender justice in the church*.

powerful instrument (lens) for rereading the bible and culture towards liberating and healing practices in churches and societies.⁶

Women interpreting the Bible in Africa is of course not a new phenomenon. Within various church traditions women form the backbone of core activities such as bible study, catechetical training, women's auxiliary associations and works of compassion. However, due to the socio-culturally determined private and submissive position of most African women – often ironically legitimised by one-sided biblical interpretations – the (public) voices of women had been kept silent for centuries.

The emergence of African women's contextual biblical hermeneutics as a response to the situation, however, is relatively new and certainly to be welcomed and encouraged. By placing the presence, contribution and survival of women in history at the centre of the interpretive process, these women introduce academic and non-academic interpreters of the bible to new understandings of both the biblical texts and present-day contexts. By doing so they invite later audiences to build a world in continuation with biblical perspectives that honour diversity and justice. Through re-telling and re-imagining biblical stories from their socio-cultural perspectives, African women not only find models of power abuse which relate to their own circumstances, but also models of women who use their power creatively to empower others. In the process *the oppressed boldly and ironically become agents of their own empowerment.*

⁶ I list some of them, which aptly illustrate the imaginative, transforming power of (biblical) narrative as extended metaphor (cf Dube 2001:3-13):

- Storytelling in Africa, very much like singing and dancing, is largely a participatory and performative activity. Listeners are invited to comment and add their interpretations through which fixed stories are opened up for continuous and fresh retelling. As such it is a familiar *genre* to literate as well as illiterate audiences;
- In Africa, storytelling is a *traditional source of theology*. Narrative provides space for alternative visions, perspectives and values in the struggle for economic, ecological, gender and racial justice;
- Various characteristics of African stories make them useful for developing biblical and cultural hermeneutics that empower women. Many African stories (including proverbs and idiomatic sayings) represent philosophies and strategies for survival. Stories are often gender-neutral and can be used subversively to counteract patriarchal and colonising interpretations of life. As such they provide a lens for social analysis and critique, as well as *role models for resistance against, and survival amidst* oppressive systems and institutions;
- Stories have the potential of *re-imagining, re-telling and re-enacting* the experiences of biblical women from the perspectives of later audiences. Biblical narratives are retold and re-imagined through the biographies of women living in patriarchal societies. They identify with the point of view of those narratives as if they were insiders in the stories. In this way the dynamic nature of ancient texts may be unlocked in fresh and surprising ways, *even beyond the intentions and capabilities of their patriarchal authors.*

How can Christian Theology respond to the present *kairos* of postmodern and postcolonial thinking and practices (in Africa)? What attitudes and actions would match the proportions of such an opportunity, and contribute to lasting solutions? How can Christian Theology mediate the discernment of an alternative world, a world characterised by God's radical presence, as suggested above?

If the epicentre of Christian Theology is characterised by such a rich yet complex dynamic, it certainly provides Theology with important clues about the ethos and pathos of its task. While honouring the paradox of richness and complexity, Christian theologians have hopeful and powerful perspectives to offer. If, as we have seen, the authority of the biblical texts lies in their metaphorical ability to disclose radically new perspectives on reality and new ways of living in the world, Christian Theology is challenged to do *likewise* – to mediate the discernment of such an alternative world, a world characterised by God's radical presence in Jesus Christ and the Spirit. It is in this regard that I believe Theology is called to assist the church – particularly with respect to its social responsibility – by becoming a *liminal site*, by boldly stepping into those risky, liminal spaces and facilitating dialogue amongst diverse and even divergent discourses from within its multidimensional epicentre.

Thus, whoever “we” are as Christian theologians, choices like whose interests and voices we represent (or ignore), whom we choose as discussion partners (and whom not), these choices will determine the *pathos*, the persuasive power and life-giving authority of our words and actions in significant ways. Let me therefore try to summarise the opportunities for Christian Theology at the university at the beginning of a pluralistic, multireligious, and in many ways secularised twenty-first century. I have argued that Theology is challenged with (at least) three crucial choices:

- Firstly, to be truthful and committed to its biblical orientation, to its multidimensional, life-giving, ecumenical nature, calling and inheritance. As prerequisite for interdisciplinary dialogue, theology has to focus on its own coherent study – with excellence and sophistication, and with spiritual vitality. It has to undo the devastating separation of spirituality from theology and philosophy in our ideas of a proper education. “Even metaphysics and the most abstract theology serve not only an intellectual but a spiritual purpose” (Tracy 2002:20);
- Secondly, theology needs to remember that it is on the threshold of open, multidisciplinary and interreligious dialogue from where the definition and appreciation of its own traditions may be strengthened

Christian Theology at the University

and re-established. Christian Theology cannot afford to withdraw into a ghetto theology, or even from the university context into seminaries. (This, however, necessarily means that Theology should involve itself in critical public discourse with the philosophical and scientific presuppositions implied in the ethos of modern universities);

- Christian Theology has, thirdly, to be connected to the life stories and multiple needs and dreams of the people it ultimately wishes to serve. In order to become centres of authoritative, life-giving knowledge and practical wisdom, faculties of theology may consequently have to reconfigure themselves in terms of other “non-church” careers (such as education, media, caring for the sick and the deprived).

However, will these “ideals” be powerful and persuasive enough to carry us through the impasse of secularisation and the new economic dangers of globalisation? There are simply no guarantees. Yet, allow me to invite you to ponder a final possibility.

It should be evident that the interactive epicentre of Christian Theology is a surprisingly rich yet complex, noisy and even messy space. If its inhabitants are to be truthful to its nature and purpose, they should first of all experience the silence, solitude, perceptivity, sensitivity and *sensibility* that will enable them to hear, see and feel, smell and taste, to discern, to make sense of the past, present and future, and to be moved towards imagining new possibilities. In order for Theology to be taken seriously, to be *heard*, its practitioners firstly need to become receivers themselves, to listen carefully and prayerfully to what those ancient canonised texts sought to *accomplish*, and to pay special heed to their intended *functions* in various contexts then and now.

If such are the sensibilities required at the epicentre of Christian Theology – as requisite for its *pathos*, persuasive thrust and healing power – it is, according to its very nature, a deeply sacred, sacramental and liturgical subject, utterly dependent on God’s grace for its survival in a secular world. I therefore finally suggest that what Christian theologians need most, is a *hermeneutic of listening* that implies the willingness to hear with openness and receptivity. It includes *paying attention to, acknowledging, submitting to* the paradoxical, life-giving authority of God’s words in human language. As such it would be truthful not only to the nature of Christian Theology’s primary texts, but also to the Reformed principle of biblical reading as listening to, as *discerning the voice of the living God*. A hermeneutic of listening reclaims the transformative potential of the biblical writings as an invitation to accomplish a healed and healing body of Christ. It pays attention to all the voices

represented in the epicentre of Christian Theology, refusing to mentally block out the voices that have not been considered important in the past, including the silenced voices within the biblical texts themselves. “Such openness does not eliminate a hermeneutics of suspicion and evaluation, but it does eliminate a hermeneutics of arrogance and of accusation and a presumption that prejudges and presumes the ancient world should look like the modern or that we already have the truth. Humility is part of a hermeneutics of hearing; it seeks to know rather than professes to know” (Snodgrass 2002:28)! It therefore does not offer universal, absolutistic, final and unalterable answers, decisions and certainties, but rather seeks for solutions that would be truthful to, and that would make sense in individual contexts. It challenges Christian Theology to live patiently and humbly with the tension of risk, paradox and ambiguity.

Ultimately, a hermeneutic of listening gives *priority* to the imaginative, hopeful possibilities of the living God’s radical and healing love over the broken realities of our world, including the world of (secular) universities. May Christian theologians – in continuation with those early Christians – be overwhelmed and surprised by God’s presence in the resurrected Christ and the Spirit, even though they do not fully understand.

Works consulted

- Dube, M W (ed) 2001. *Other ways of reading: African women and the Bible*. Atlanta: WCC Publication.
- Johnson, L T 1999. *The writings of the New Testament: An interpretation*. Rev. ed. Minneapolis, MA: Fortress.
- Mouton, E 2005. *Christian theology at the University: On the threshold or in the margin?* Theologische Universiteit van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, Kampen. (Kamper Oraties 30.)
- Mouton, E 2006. The pathos of New Testament Studies, *Theologia Viatorum* 30(1), 50-86.
- Ricoeur, P 1975. Biblical Hermeneutics. *Semeia* 4, 29-148.
- Ricoeur, P 1976. *Interpretation theory: Discourse and the surplus of meaning*. Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University.
- Smit, D J 2003. Can we still be Reformed? Questions from a South African perspective, in Alston, W & Welker, M (eds), *Reformed theology: Identity and ecumenicity*, 233-253. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans.
- Snodgrass, K 2002. Reading to hear: A hermeneutics of hearing. *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24, 1-32.
- Taylor, M K 1990. *Remembering Esperanza: A cultural-political theology for North-American praxis*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Tracy, D 2002. On theological education: A reflection, in Petersen, R L & Rourke, N M (eds), *Theological literacy for the twenty-first century*, 13-22. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Van Eck, E 2004. Die opstanding in die Jodendom, die Grieks-Romeinse wêreld en die Nuwe Testament. *HTS* 60(1&2), 555-574.
- Van Genneep, A 1960. *The rites of passage*, tr by M B Vizedom & GL Caffee. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.