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THE CONTEXTUAL JESUS AND THE COVENANT AS CONTINUOUS CHALLENGES TO ETHNICITY²

ABSTRACT

This contribution deals with the themes of the contextual Jesus and the covenant under the heading of the inclusiveness-exclusiveness dilemma.

The intention of the emphasis on the contextual Jesus can never be to restrict him to a specific culture. Jesus can only be “at home” in a specific culture if he also, simultaneously, transcends that culture. This transcendence has everything to do with the recognition that there are important features in the contextual Jesus that transcend that specific context as well.

In Reformed theology, covenant, prophetism, and kingdom belong together. The covenant does not lead to the striking of a bargain with God in favour of nationalist or ethnical self-interest, but it is “a strategic covenant” aimed at the application of the norms of the kingdom of God.

The exclusiveness of the covenant, agreed upon in a specific situation with a selected group, does not exclude but includes so-called “outsiders”. This element of inclusiveness belongs to the very essence of the biblical concept of covenant.

THE CONTEXTUAL JESUS AND ETHNICITY

Culture and religion

The current emphasis on inculturation strengthens the awareness of the cultural roots of our ideas and concepts. It places the gospel in our own context. It facilitates our “owning” of the gospel, but it does not intend to make us its “possessors”.

It is especially the contemporary debate on the contextual Jesus – for example, *The Chinese face of Jesus Christ* (Malek 2002/2003) and *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Schreier 2000) – that confronts us with the question whether or not this tendency runs the risk of a “domestication” of Jesus. Does the talk of Jesus as “ancestor” imply that he becomes just a

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² Paper delivered at the concluding conference of the sub-Saharan project on Religions and the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies at Stellenbosch, March 2010.

tribal saviour? (Cf. the Stellenbosch dissertation (2007) of the Zimbabwean Victor Nakah on *Evangelical Christianity and African culture* with an extended part on the veneration of Jesus as ancestor in his (Nakah's) Shona culture.)

By appealing to that which transcends tangible human existence but influences thinking and acting, religion acquires the character of something intangible. Neither those in power nor its adherents can control it. Religion always represents something transcendent, something that hints at that which is "greater than". This explains why religion and culture are never completely identical, and it is for that reason that critical questions can always be asked about the nature of the relationship between them. These questions do not concern the cultural embedding of religion as such – religion never arises in isolation and there is no single religion without any cultural attire. Rather, these questions explore the latitude between religion and culture. This also expresses the ever-present paradox in the culture-religion relationship: on the one hand, religion is part of an existing culture and more-or-less forms its trusses; but, on the other hand, it also always claims to be in a position to criticise existing culture. The relationship is therefore always characterised by both integration and segregation (separation).

This specific cultural attire does not constitute a straitjacket; religion and culture are not riveted to each other for good. Every religion – as indeed every culture – has a certain dynamic (vitality) that allows change as a result of internal development or the influence of outside events. And, (cultural) clothing can be changed. That is why the question arises, "Must God (or Jesus) remain Greek?" In 1990 the Afro-American Protestant theologian Robert Hood published a book by that title in which he asked whether the Greco-Roman concepts in which the early church articulated the meaning of God and Jesus should also be normative for other cultures in other times. For believers in the non-Western world, Hood argues, those concepts hinder faith more than they help it. These concepts make it harder rather than easier to pass on the faith. Thus, the intentional *rooting* of the faith in a non-Greco-Roman culture also always requires a certain *uprooting* from that Greco-Roman culture. *Traduire c'est trahir* ("to translate is to betray") was true then as well. No single culture can be declared the bearer of the gospel, and it should also be remembered that any culture can also stand in the way of the spreading of the gospel.

In contemporary non-Western theology, the transmission of faith and thus also the relevance of faith is one of the most important arguments for a different conceptual apparatus for the proclamation of the gospel. Non-Western theologians see a form of Western imperialism in the Western stress on the continuing validity of the terminology used by the early church. One specific inculturation – that of the Greco-Roman culture that the West has appropriated – is absolutised. Other inculturations, such as those in contemporary Africa and Asia, are considered second-class right from the start.

A contextual Jesus?

Christianity was never viewed as a faith that was bound to a certain territory. It was never viewed as the faith of a specific people that lived in a specific area. From the beginning it

has always moved across borders and was universally inclined. This is even one of the most prominent features of the transmission of Jesus' message and it enabled Paul to say that "[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

The most essential problem with respect to the inculturation of the meaning of Jesus in cultures other than the Greco-Roman one pertains to the fact that, in the case of Jesus, decisive religious experiences are always bound to both time and place and also always transcend it. In the Greco-Roman world, Jesus was never presented purely as a local hero (of faith) who was associated exclusively with his immediate environment. If that were so, one could never introduce him into other cultures. Jesus made an impression on the people around him in a historical situation that can be described with reasonable accuracy. On the basis of that impression, a number of terms and titles were ascribed to him that had certain meanings. These meanings, in turn, had to do with the role that people ascribed to other people or things in their lives. In Jesus' case, it always concerned a role that transcended any one person's specific experience; the particular is always connected with the universal.

For example, Jesus' disciples had the experience that he revealed the nearness of the divine in a unique way. On the basis of this experience, they subsequently ascribed to him a meaning that he in principle should have for everyone, everywhere, and at all times. Could this have been done as easily as that? Here we encounter the classic problem that confronts any religion with universal claims. At the founding of such religions one finds very specific experiences, often more or less historically placeable. These experiences also proved to be of great value for later generations, but in circumstances different from the original context in which they occurred. Later generations can realise the value of these experiences of the first witnesses of a religion only if they can make them their own; these particular experiences can apparently be broadened into universal experiences. True universality does not arise through abstraction but through the apparently unlimited possibility of connecting particular experiences with other more or less similar experiences, and experiencing their authenticity in that way. Authentic universality always concerns a particularity that, in the words of African Roman Catholic theologian, Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, (1984:115), "transcends its own limits".

Particularity and universalism

The well-known story of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech at the end of the march on Washington in 1963 illustrates this well. At a specific place and at a specific time, King articulated his dream of the end of racial segregation between black and white. This particular, historically placeable experience of King's has since then been recognised by millions of people all over the world because they have had similar experiences of racial segregation and longed passionately for it to end. In this way, a bridge was built between King's dream and the dreams of millions of others and it therefore could acquire universal significance.

When something is accorded universal significance, two specific experiences are involved: the *original* experience and the experience of *recognition*. Even though the latter can be experienced by millions of other people, it nevertheless remains very specific for the one involved and thus also unique. One could think here of the many millions of people who, down the centuries and everywhere in the world, could identify with the original experience of the disciples concerning Jesus. Those (conversion) experiences are often unique markers in the lives of these people.

The transmission of the meaning of Jesus concerns three such experiences. First are *the experiences of the disciples* close to him (1) that we find the expression of primarily in the four gospels in the New Testament. Then there is *the discovery* of people in the Greco-Roman world around the Mediterranean Sea that they could recognise and articulate these experiences in their own intellectual categories (2). Next are the experiences of *recognition* by contemporary believers who can see the same divine nearness in Jesus through the Greco-Roman conceptual apparatus (3).

Double transformation

So, the intention of the current emphasis on the contextual Jesus can never be to restrict him to a specific culture. He can never become a local hero. Jesus can only be “at home” in a specific culture if he simultaneously transcends that culture as well. This transcendence has nothing to do with abstraction or taking distance from, but has everything to do with the recognition that there are inherent, important features in the contextual Jesus that can be recognised beyond that specific context as well.

This dual character of “being at home” and transcendence is a consequence of the way the divine meets the human. Theologically speaking, inculturation always occurs between two poles: the incarnation at the one pole, and the cross and resurrection at the other. The incarnation of the Word (John 1:14) implies that God wants to dwell among people. That means that the divine wants to take on human cultural garb. While the incarnation represents the *fact* of the assumption, the cross and resurrection represent the *nature* of the assumption and, in fact, its *critical* character. The cross and resurrection is a model of dying and rising with Christ, an event that is symbolised in baptism. The latter is a critical event of dying and rising. We die to our old Adam and rise up as people reborn with Christ, our second Adam. It is not for nothing that Jesus says that only those who are prepared to lose themselves will find themselves (Mark. 8:35; John 12:24). Believers are expected to make this experience their own, not only at the moment of their baptism but throughout their lives. Baptism thus always refers to a critical *process of purification*, a catharsis. Whereas incarnation stands for confirmation, affirmation, the cross and resurrection stand for denial, negation and finding oneself through losing oneself.

If we then consider the incarnation and cross to be characteristic of a theologically adequate approach to the inculturation process, we refer to a *double transformation process*. That is why the incarnation can never be described without the experience of cross and

resurrection. *Indwelling* never occurs without change on the entering and receiving sides, and *change* never occurs without solidarity (identification). No single culture can reveal anything (new) about Jesus apart from this interaction.

THE COVENANT AND ETHNICITY

The history of the concept of covenant

In twentieth-century literature the theme of the covenant, which is closely related to the theme of the chosen people, was a popular feature. James Michener dedicated his 1980 bestseller to it in *The Covenant*, on the history of Southern Africa (1980:1), as did the Jewish author Chaim Potok with the related theme of *The Chosen* (1967) and Jan de Hartog in 1974 in *Het Uitverkoren Volk*, part three of his trilogy, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, on the history of the Quakers in the United States (published in English in 1975 as *The Peculiar People*). It is a well-known motif in European thought, elaborated in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed Covenant or Federal theology but, of course, with strong biblical roots as well. In Reformed circles, the concept of the covenant was made the generative and organising principle of a theological system; the puritan Pilgrim Fathers, travelling in 1620 on the *Mayflower* to New England, in particular contributed to the popularity of the concept.

Covenant theology sought to understand the whole history of salvation and divine-human relationships in terms of a bond or agreement between God and humankind, first in a covenant of works and then, after that had failed, in a covenant of grace. William Klempa (1992:94) succinctly summarises its meaning and impact as follows:

In its developed form covenant theology represented a significant reaction against a mechanical version of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. Instead of locating the work of salvation solely in the divine decree, covenant theology sought to provide a distinctly biblical and dynamic understanding of God's dealings with humanity in successive stages of human history, thus furnishing a formula for the Christian interpretation of history.

Particularity and universalism

Covenant theology became the ruling orthodoxy of the Reformed churches in the seventeenth century, as can be seen in chapter 7 of the Westminster Confession of 1647. This chapter distinguishes between two covenants: (1) a covenant of works made with Adam and his descendants on condition of perfect obedience; and (2) a covenant of grace made with believers in Christ that offers them the gift of salvation on the condition of faith in him. Sometimes the distinction is more detailed and encompasses first the covenant of God with Adam, then with Noah and further with Abraham, and finally with Moses.

The reference to the covenant with Adam is particularly important for our theme of the covenant and ethnicity because it questions the often exclusivist connotations associated with the concept of the covenant. It makes clear the universal character of the covenant.

From the very beginning it was open to the whole of humanity, not in the sense that all were automatically included in it, but in the sense that it was made for all and that it is the destiny of all to be included in it. Later, not only in Judaism but also in Christianity, this universalism was quickly obscured, if not obliterated. Even in the covenant with Abraham can this universalism be heard. Similarly with the contextual Jesus, particularity does not exclude universalism but is often the only way to achieve it.

The political role of the covenant

In many countries of the Reformation, the concept of the covenant functioned as the moral basis of a nation. Not only our individual existence as believers, but also our collective existence as a nation was and is based on a covenant, a contract with mutual obligations, although this idea of a double, two-sided contract lacks a solid biblical basis. In the Bible it is God that always takes the initiative. This means that the covenant is always mono-pleural, founded on the initiative and on the credibility of *one* of the partners. God's grace is not conditional upon human obedience. The original meaning of the covenant refers to God that unconditionally binds himself to the human partner, and this is not connected to any idea of legalism.

As such, as a sign of God's reliability, the Reformed fathers were able to interpret human history in a dynamic way. It holds together God's sovereignty and human responsibility, God's intentions and our freedom. Provided that it is interpreted in its given biblical context, covenant theology represents a move in the direction of a more inclusive and universal understanding of God's work of salvation (Klempa 1992:106). In the Bible, the term "covenant" never functions within an exclusive ethnical, racial or national context, but always in a context of being moral and faithful. It has to be interpreted in its *pars pro toto* character, one for all. Hence its Christological interpretation is an adequate one.

The story of the covenant concluded in 1838 by the *Voortrekkers* on the banks of the Blood River is well known. More than a hundred-and-fifty years later John de Gruchy, imagining what Calvin's comments on this would have been, wrote in his *Liberating Reformed Theology*:

Not only would he have disapproved of the contractual nature of the covenant, which meant that a bargain was struck with God, he would also have disapproved of the identification of the Trekkers with Israel or the church (1991:266).

This identification could already be observed among many Reformed people in the Netherlands, Scotland and in the United States in earlier centuries. The one-sided biblical concept of the covenant developed into a two-sided equivalent in the field of politics. This "doctrine" created a new political situation that could be interpreted as the foundational idea behind modern Western democracies. To quote De Gruchy again:

Now not only were rulers accountable to the people, but the people could even decide that particular rulers were tyrants and that therefore their rule was illegitimate, in terms of the covenant. God's blessing was thus dependent upon the rulers fulfilling their contractual obligations to both God and the people (1991:268).

Covenant and prophetism

The idea of the covenant as a political contract creates room for political prophetism. De Gruchy concludes that, in order for the prophetic voice to exercise its critical function, it must be able to appeal to some norm or set of values regarded as binding upon society (1991:269). This set of values can be derived from the biblical message of the kingdom of God. Therefore, in Reformed theology, covenant, prophetism, and kingdom belong together. This covenant is not a covenant that leads to the striking of a bargain with God in favour of self-preservation and nationalist or ethnical self-interest, but it is, in De Gruchy's words, "a strategic covenant" aimed at the application of the norms of the kingdom of God (1991:271).

The exclusiveness of the covenant, agreed upon in a specific situation with a selected group, because of its critical content, does therefore not exclude but include so-called "outsiders". This element of inclusiveness belongs to the very essence of the biblical concept of covenant. The implication is that all people on earth are allowed, even expected, to consider themselves as chosen people: the Tiv, the Shona, the Dutch, the coloured, the Xhosa, etc., provided that they understand their election as a calling, a vocation, to be a blessing to all according to the values of the kingdom of God.

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KEYWORDS / TREFWOORDE

Incarnation / Inkarnasie
 Double transformation / Dubbele transformasie
 Ethnicity / Etnisiteit
 Covenant / Verbond
 Universalism and prophetism / Universalisme en profetisme

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