POST-MODERNISM AND THE USE OF SCRIPTURE IN THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: FOOTNOTES TO THE APARTHEID THEOLOGY DEBATE

F E DEIST

ABSTRACT
The need for a ‘biblical’ validation of conflicting ethical views results not so much from people’s ‘view of Scripture’, as Vorster argued, but rather from the foundationalist methodology underlying ‘Scriptural’ theology. Advocating certitude, foundationalist theology views the Bible as a secure source for knowledge and rejects relativism. A post-foundationalist approach, however, advocates as the basis of knowledge continually defensible convictions based upon transparent argumentation. Because of contextuality, such convictions, even though they may be firmly held, cannot be paraded as certitudes. In such an environment the Bible obtains a completely different epistemological status—the ‘paradigm shift’ Vorster was calling for.

Vorster’s writings on the use of the Bible in theological argument centred around the role of the Bible in (anti-)apartheid theology debate of the seventies and eighties (Vorster 1979b; 1983; 1984). Apartheid is now dead and buried. Yet, the issue of the use of Scripture in theological argument remains.

Since it would be unfair to get the last say in a dialogue on the use of Scripture that had been going on between Willem Vorster and myself for more than two decades,¹ my monologue will, rather than offering a critique of all his writings on the theme, merely add five footnotes to our discussions over the years. I shall use his last evaluation (Vorster 1984) of (anti-)apartheid theology as an example.

¹ In 1978 these discussions gave rise to a symposium held at UNISA under the auspices of the Institute for Theological Research, of which Vorster had been the Director since its founding till his untimely death (see Vorster 1979a).
1 THE APPEAL TO SCRIPTURE AND THE BIBLE AS CANON

Why do ordinary Christians, the clergy and theologians, when discussing daily issues from a religious point of view, refer to the Bible the way they do? Vorster (1984:213-217) suggests that reference to the Bible puts a communicator in a position of power. Even though he granted that both pro- and anti-apartheid theologians might have been quite sincere in their search for the truth (1984:205), he remained fairly sceptical about their reasons for referring to the Bible. For him the illocutionary force of their referring to the Bible was not 'imparting information', but rather 'confessing allegiance to orthodox Christianity'. The book gives authority to their arguments and marginalises differing viewpoints.

It is, of course, possible that a Bible user may employ the Bible merely as an ideological power tool. I am, for instance, fairly sure that in the following argument (Du Preez 1953—my translation) the Bible serves as an ex post factum rationalisation for an already existing conviction:

We cannot and may not propagate the policy of apartheid or any other policy on mere "practical grounds" .... This would boil down to petty, selfish attempts at self-preservation based on human considerations foreign to the will of God. So completely should we subject ourselves to God's revealed will that, should it become clear from Scripture that complete equality and mixing of blood, even the extinction of the white population, is the will of God, we should accept it with our whole heart and demonstrate the moral courage to acknowledge that the idea of apartheid had been born from sinful unbrotherliness, and then oppose as contrary to the will of God all efforts to give effect to apartheid.

Du Preez, who had been an ardent proponent of apartheid, knew in advance what the outcome of this 'objective' Bible study would be, and his willingness to accept the 'as yet unknown' outcome of the research therefore amounts to nothing more than ideological rhetoric. But even from this passage, written for the ordinary reader, it becomes clear that practical considerations alone are not viewed as sufficient for the legitimization of a theological argument. The invocation of Scripture is, to my mind, not primarily the result of mere rhetorical power plays, but necessitated by two, to a large extent unconnected, considerations. Firstly, by the age-old confession that the Bible constitutes the canon for Christian conduct, and secondly, by particular epistemological choices.

The belief that there are certain documents that can provide believers with a canon of Christian conduct is as old as Christianity itself (see 2 Tm 3:16, where the practical functions of religious writings are listed). It is, of course possible, to show that many biblical pronouncements originated from everyday practical decisions and that complete sets of early folklore are now presented in the Bible as transcripts of original divine revelations (Carmichael 1967; Lohfink 1983). But that kind of evidence will not alter or impress the belief that
the Bible is the *canon*. To counter this age-old tradition and existential conviction, as Vorster (1984:212) did, with a mere ‘The Bible is not that kind of book’, is not very helpful (even though it is true from a historical-critical point of view). Declaring the Bible another kind of book—for instance, an ordinary story book (Vorster 1977)—from what it is commonly held to be may earn the academic a heresy trial (as Vorster and I experienced first hand), but it will not lead to a change in paradigm, for which Vorster (1984) called.

The fact, then, that the Bible functions as a *canon* (standard) for Christian conduct necessitates an appeal to Scripture in ethical matters. This practice may, and does indeed, result in various forms of ideological power play, but power play is not the origin of an appeal to Scripture.

What could be more helpful in the discussion between Biblical scholars, other theologians and the clergy, is to refrain from attacking people’s ‘view of Scripture’ (a theme running through Vorster’s arguments on the use of Scripture) and to focus on the reasons why some theologians use the Bible the way they do. For the way people use the Bible is not primarily caused by their view of Scripture (as the Word of God or the canon), but by a particular epistemology and its implied methodology to which they subscribe.

2 CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY, MODERNISM AND THE BIBLE

At the root of the appeal to Scripture, or rather the kind of appeal to Scripture attacked by Vorster, lies a foundationalist epistemology that entered ecclesiastical tradition after the Reformation and according to which truth was a monolithic, rationally demonstrable entity.2

According to Toulmin (1990: cover page) it was the social, economic and political chaos caused by the endless and seemingly irresolvable religious conflicts after the Reformation that led to the renouncement of ambiguity and uncertainty and the embracing of clarity and stability. This process led to the triumph of the belief in the unity of truth and the trust in reason (logics) to discover and formulate that truth, that is, to the triumph of modernism. In answering the question where reason could find appropriate data from which it could infer the truth natural scientists pointed to nature and experimental procedures, and theologians to the Bible and exegetical methods. This is how the Bible became the *source* for theological inference (rather than a canon of conduct). While the notion of a biblical canon had been a *functional* confession of

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2 Between this foundationalist position and fundamentalism lies but a membrane, that allows for osmosis. That is why even historical critical biblical scholars (who made us aware of the fact that the Bible was ‘not that kind of book’) may be fundamentalists (cf Oberforcher 1989).
faith, the new environment secured it as an essential source of information and assigned epistemological status to it.

In Reformationist circles the belief in the discoverability of the truth through the rational (and therefore objective) analysis of the biblical text caused
(a) the division of the church into various denominations (each based on rational inferences from the Bible),
(b) the formulation of scores of confessions of faith (each claiming to express the real truth about Christian belief),
(c) a subsequent series of heresy trials, and
(d) last, but by far not the least, the search for the ‘correct’ text of the Holy Scriptures, which could serve as a final source of information (see Deist 1988).

It is only where people believe in the availability, unity and logical demonstrability of truth that the problem of orthodoxy and heresy can arise. And it is only where people believe that this one truth is contained in a (a text-critically secured) book that an appeal to (an adequately exegeted) Scripture may be thought to resolve theological disputes. Consider the following pronouncements by theologians on the Bible as a book.

In his widely read book on canonical criticism Childs (1979:78) asserts that ‘Israel defined itself in terms of a book!’ and that the Hebrew Bible provided us with the only ‘stabilized’ form of that book (Childs 1979:97). In an article Heyns (1958:9-10—my translation) states,

In science of religion a distinction is made on good grounds between primitive and book religions....From this it is already clear that the book is an essensial factor in any spiritual movement...because it is a collection of words, while words embody thoughts....[T]he book is the incarnation of the spirit and the spirit a stimulus of life...Had Christianity not constantly been faith in the Bible...tradition would soon have degenerated into mythology, in which truth and fiction would become indistinguishable.

As recently as 1990 another Reformed scholar (Potgieter 1990:18) asserted, ‘Before the Bible existed in its final form the church possessed [the Word of God] as something in the process of becoming. For our time it exists in Holy Scripture as God’s completed, inscripturated Word...represented in a fixed form’, a formulation reminiscent of Child’s (1979:76) assertion, ‘It is only in

3 Apart from the anachronism in the assertion that Israel defined itself in terms of a book, it is this focus on a specific book, available in a definitive final form (see also Childs 1979:97) which makes his views extremely useful for conservative theology. For a discussion of these views, see Deist 1992.
the final form of the biblical text in which normative history has reached an
end that the full effect of this revelatory history can be perceived'.

In all these formulations the Bible is (wittingly or unwittingly) secured as a
pristine *source of information* and viewed as a fixed entity from which
theological inferences may be made with confidence. Viewed in this light, an
appeal to Scripture is neither mere power play, nor an innocent invocation of a
canon, but a necessary move for securing reliable knowledge.

The fact that anti-apartheid theologians branded apartheid theology a *heresy*
(and not just an oppressive and dehumanising theology) witnesses to the fact
that they also subscribed to modernist views of the truth and trusted their own
rational capabilities to infer that one truth from the final source of reliable in­
formation, namely the Bible. That both apartheid and anti-apartheid theo­
logians used the Bible in the same way, as Vorster ably showed, is therefore
not in the first place the result of similar power plays or views of Scripture, as
he argued, but rather the result of a shared modernity. And as long as that atti­
du e towards truth is shared by opponents, their use of the Bible will remain
the same and accusations and counter-accusations of heresy continue. The para­
digm shift called for by Vorster therefore implies much more than a mere shift
in people's view of Scripture. It implies a radical shift away from modernist
views of truth and its reductionist definition of rationality.

3 THE BIBLE, THEOLOGY AND POST-MODERNISM

For Toulmin (1990:139) post-modernism is a return to humanism. If one, for
the moment, takes 'humanism' as an indication of an era, it is interesting to
note that that era did not know a Bible detached from practical life, church
tradition and philosophy. In that time the Bible provided *one* of the sources of
information and inspiration (Bibles were, of course, scarce). Moreover, during
that time the most popular editions of the Bible were polyglots, in which var­
ious texts of the Bible could be read side by side. Some of these versions even
had more 'canonical' books than others, so that the contradictions on the level
of information were even more in number and serious in nature than those
experienced by readers of present-day (Protestant) Bible editions. And yet,
these texts were published and used. The Bible, even though it had been
viewed as canon, simply *functioned* in another way before the rise of modern­

However, what Toulmin had in mind with the term 'humanism' was not
'the humanistic era'. For him the term denotes the rehumanisation of know­
ledge through the reintroduction into our discourse of rhetoric alongside for­
mal logic, of particularities alongside general principles, and of practical diver­
sity alongside rationalist reductions (Toulmin 1990:31-32). In this kind of en­
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of our discourse. There is no need for demonstrating that our decisions con­form precisely to absolute, decontextualised universal or revealed laws or norms. In this view our arguments about ethical behaviour are by their very nature contextual.

Moreover, in this humanism a text, rather than being viewed as consisting of autonomous, decontextualised logical arguments (Joubert 1992:107), becomes a rhetorically constructed narrative, conversation, or discourse, that originated in a particular time and under particular conditions, as Vorster (1984:211) also argued with reference to the Bible. In such a humanist envi­ronment the biblical text, with its wide variety of practical opinion, becomes a contextual conversational partner, rather than a decontextualised collection of norms and truths, so that an appeal to Scripture can no longer be an appeal to final authority, but a reference to part of a variegated, sometimes even contradictory, tradition of contextual thought and action, that may be helpful in our own practical decisions. It may, of course, also prove to be completely ir­relevant for a particular contextual problem.

Vorster, who also wrote on New Testament scholarship and post-modern­ism (Vorster 1987; 1988), hinted in this direction when he said,

When theology becomes a contemporary theology of making, as in the days of early Christianity where ‘theologians’ had to transform and not only transmit, theo­logy becomes contextualized. The rediscovery of the importance of the unity in Christ irrespective of race, colour or sex...is a discovery of a latent force of mutual co-operation and experiencing of religious values and targets and of making one’s own decisions. It is in line with New Testament re-living the Easter faith, presence of God and so on—but it is not given as a norm in the New Testament. It is a model. Biblical associations cannot sanction, substantiate or undergird con­temporary decisions nor do they prescribe: they offer incentives to Christians who want to do likewise, not the same! The risk of making theological decisions in your own name is less dangerous than making them in the name of and on behalf of the living God (1984:217).

The direction of this passage with its emphasis on doing theology contextually and assuming personal accountability for the argument produced is clearly post-modernist. Whether its formulations are post-modernist seems to me dis­putable. Some terms, like ‘the unity in Christ’, ‘in line with New Testament faith’, ‘the Easter faith’, and ‘the presence of God’ still sound very much like ‘according to the Bible’, ‘biblical justice’, or ‘biblical love’, which Vorster (1984:210), from his perspective, called ‘zero terms’. What might the illocu­tionary force of these expressions be? Is it possible that these terms still mask a privileged epistemological status for the Bible, so that the validity of our deci­sions should still somehow be judged by the answer to the question whether they are ‘in line with’ early Christian practice? What exactly is the
epistemological status of the Bible or, for that matter, early Christianity in this scheme?

The suspicion of a lurking modernity is supported by Vorster’s (1984:211) remark, ‘Although new methods of Biblical interpretation are even taught at theological seminaries...and cognisance is taken of developments in Biblical interpretation elsewhere, it would be wrong to think that implications of these methods are integrated into theology or applied to views of Scripture’. It would seem that too much is expected here from exegetical methods (the Methodenstreit is in itself a modernist issue). The role of the Bible in substantiating pro- and anti-apartheid theologies had very little to do with method. Proponents of the same methods—like historical criticism and structuralism—could be found on both sides. Methods are mere instruments. One should ask why the application of new methods did not change the theologians’ view of Scripture.

On both sides these new approaches came to be applied in a framework in which Scripture had already been assigned a pristine epistemological status (a primary source of authoritative information). The fact that the new methods did not change the framework should thus not be explained with reference to the theologians’ unwillingness to discern the philosophical implications of these methods for their view of Scripture, for their mere incorporation into a foundationalist epistemological framework defused the implications of the methods for the framework.

4 THEOLOGY, CERTITUDE AND CONVICTION

The typical foundationalist argument against the kind of shift to postmodernism advocated above is that it leads to relativism. I have as yet to come across sound arguments why relativism would be such an undesirable and dangerous thing. Mostly the mere mentioning of relativism is supposed to vindicate foundationalism. One of the causes for ‘relatifobia’ seems to be an unhappy confusion of certitude and conviction. According to my Standard Dictionary of the English Language the term certitude refers to ‘perfect assurance, an assured fact, precision’. For synonyms of this term the user is referred to certain. The dictionary defines conviction as ‘the state or condition of being fully convinced or fully awakened to an awareness’ and refers to the term faith for synonyms.

It may be of some importance to ponder this point. Is it true that opposing points of view on, for instance, South African society or Christian ethics make it impossible to speak with conviction about this society and about what is good for it? Or does advocating convictions rather than certitudes really lead to a position where ‘everything goes’?
In this context a page from the book of post-Einsteinean theoretical physics may be of value. When Werner Heisenberg argued that, because of the relative position of an observer and the influence of observational instruments, it was impossible to observe a phenomenon (in our case the Bible) without disturbing it (so that complete relativism has to follow), Niels Bohr retorted (Heisenberg 1969:146-147—my translation),

I find a formulation like "observation disturbs the phenomenon" unprecise and erroneous....[One cannot] use the word "phenomenon" at all, unless one at the same time states exactly the experimental set-up and observational position that accompanied the observation. If the result of an observation is accompanied by a description of the particular experimental set-up, one may very well speak of a "phenomenon", but not of the disturbance of a phenomenon. It certainly is true that it may not be as easy as earlier physics supposed to relate various [i.e conflicting] observations to one another, but one should not interpret this difficulty as a disturbance of a phenomenon through observation. One should rather say it is impossible to objectivize an observation in the way earlier physics did and ordinary experience still does.

To be convinced or not of the nature of a particular phenomenon has very much to do with one’s observational position and experimental set-up. If one changes one’s position or observational set-up, the resulting conviction about the nature of the phenomenon under observation will obviously shift. What happened in the case of apartheid theologians that came to attack the very system they had once supported, is that their observational position shifted (amongst other things due to international isolation, economic hardships, the low intensity civil war that also claimed white lives, and the foolhardy position of the government of the time). During that shift in position (that occurred since the early seventies) the clergy also obtained new observational tools (e.g. alternative social and economic analyses of society, new exegetical methods). From Bohr’s point of view, it is obvious that their convictions about the South African situation and the desirable ethical behaviour in that situation would shift as a result of their shift in observational position and experimental set-up. They came to observe a new phenomenon. This is the nature of contextual truth.

Does this then mean that even academic work such as biblical interpretation is but the mere by-product of changing ideological observational points? Touraine (1977:76-77) would argue, ‘Scientists do not exist apart from the social and political fray; at the same time their science is not reducable to the ideology of the actors in confrontation.’ To admit that a theological argument shares in the ‘theological or political fray’ of the context is not to reduce theological argument to the ideology of the actors in confrontation, or the meaning of Biblical texts to the ‘factors’ contributing to their meaning. It re-
It remains possible to argue about ‘better’ and ‘worse’ interpretations, to tell why one is less or more convinced about an opinion, or why one is less or more awakened to an awareness, provided the parameters of such judgements are made clear. This is what distinguishes academic from everyday discourse.

The more theologians will come to (a) state the positions from which they observe society and the biblical text (Bohr’s observational positions) and (b) reveal the socio-political, exegetical and other instruments they apply in the process of interpretation (Bohr’s experimental set-ups), the more they will be able (a) to tell whether or not they speak about the same ‘phenomenon’ when they speak about their ‘context’ and ‘textual meaning’ and (b) to conduct a systematic and meaningful argument on the observations made, and the less they will be inclined to objectivise their interpretations as the ultimate (adequate!) truth about the meaning of the Bible in their context. Moreover, the more transparent, that is, the less ideological, the interpretative process becomes the less powerful and consequently the less dangerous and harmful will biblical interpretation be for society.

This brings biblical interpretation squarely within the orbit of the ethics of interpretation, a theme on which Schüssler-Fiorenza (1988) and Fowl (1990) wrote extensively. With no ultimate or absolute foundations of information to appeal to, a full awareness that different observational positions and experimental set-ups may reveal different phenomena, and being forced to supply practical and theoretical arguments for a conviction held, not only make one accountable for one’s opinions, but also lead to an awareness that interpretation is a thoroughly human, and therefore fallible, enterprise. It is in such a context that a remark by Vorster obtains validity: ‘The risk of making theological decisions in your own name is less dangerous than making them in the name of and on behalf of the living God’ (Vorster 1984:217).

5 A FINAL NOTE

To imagine that South African theology, especially Dutch Reformed theology, which is under great pressure at the moment, will bid foundationalism farewell, will be mere wishful thinking. South African theology might now become even more foundationalist in nature. Firstly, because anti-apartheid theology and its inferences from the ultimate source of knowledge may now, after the demise of apartheid, seem to have been ‘vindicated’ historically. The dispute between absolutists and relativists, conservatives and liberals may even die out in the years to come. There is hardly any use now for critical theology. Secondly, as a result of the democratisation of the country, more theological
Voices—not all of them Christian—will be heard. Various competing truths, each claiming to be the final truth about God, will thus vie for support. Their modernist frameworks will force theologians to assert anew the trustworthiness of their various sources of information. To keep the Christian dialogue going and to prevent the formation of a ghetto theology we need at least some theologians that will follow in the footsteps of Willem Vorster, who never refrained from putting forth the views of which he had been convinced.

But in doing so, we need to be tolerant. Especially those who claim to subscribe to post-modernist views should not now take an attitude of 'I told you so', since they are supposed to be accurately aware of the relative nature of their own insight and that the opposition might have a sound point. At the same time we have to be careful about joining the ranks of the reconstructionists ('let us restore true theology'). For the sake of the truth we need opposing views. Conflicting views may be complementary. And if conflicting forms of consciousness are entertained for long enough, consciousness itself changes to produce creative new insight into reality (Heisenberg 1969:146-147, 173). And we badly need new insights.

WORKS CONSULTED


**Prof Dr F E Deist, Department of Ancient Near Eastern Study, University of Stellenbosch, 7600 STELLENBOSCH, Republic of South Africa.**