WILLEM VORSTER AND POPULARISED THEOLOGY

FRANCOIS SWANEPOEL

ABSTRACT

In this article the importance of popularising theology in the new South Africa is emphasised by referring to the work of Willem Vorster, who did not specialise in popularising theology but was convinced that the results of theological research must be accessible to all. It is argued that the people of Africa are overwhelmingly religious and that Christianity is one of the fastest growing religions in Africa today. Traditional theological training does not fulfil all the needs and there is an increasing need for non-formal theological education. In non-formal theological education narratives can and must play an important role. Popularised theology must be accessible, relevant and contextual.

1 INTRODUCTION

Theology can never be an ivory tower business. Theology must reflect the situation of the theologian and address the questions, problems and aspirations of the people in a specific situation. If I am correct, the message of the Bible centres around a living relationship between living people and the living Lord in the concrete historical life situation. Popularised theology played an important role from the beginning of Christianity up till now, in all continents and countries and amongst all denominations. Popularising theology is therefore also the challenge of our time. The future of theology is debatable and will, to my mind, to a great extent be determined by the success or failure of popularising theology (cf Swanepoel 1992; 1993). For many years theologians had the perception that popularising should be done by their students or is a ‘secondary’ task that may just as well not be undertaken. Up till now very little has, however, been done regarding contemplation about and planning of popularised theology (cf Swanepoel 1994:223). ‘Much has been done in the area of popularising theology, but books and articles on the theory and practice of theology are almost non-existent’ (Swaneepoel 1994:223). Popularising theology must be done in such a way that people can be led to think anew about their religious base, religious commitment and indeed their whole life. It

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must be instrumental in intellectual and spiritual upliftment of the community at large (Swanepoel 1994:223).

In this article I would like to emphasise the importance of popularised theology in the ‘new’ South Africa by referring to the implications of the work of Willem Vorster and entering into debate with Willem Vorster the populariser. At the outset I must, however, state that he did not write even one article on popularisation as such. His work was of such a high standard that it could rightly be asked on which grounds I can ‘label’ him a populariser? It may seem strange to those who read his articles; who knew him as scholar; who crossed swords with him in conferences and academic circles. He was indeed a scholar of standing, learned, informed, inquisitive and sharp. Let me try to justify my view by briefly referring to him as scholar, populariser and man as I had the privilege to know him.

2 WILLEM VORSTER A POPULARISER?

Willem Vorster was an uncompromising man. He set very high standards—not only for others, but first and foremost for himself. Only the best was good enough. What he did he did to the best of his ability. For him there was no second best. He was never static but dynamically on the move, moving the boundaries, setting new goals and pursuing new avenues. Therefore it is not surprising that he was in the foreground in many respects—in any case in his discipline in South Africa. He had a very wide scope of interest and could talk on a high level on many a subject.

Willem Vorster was a creative theologian. He read extensively and his bibliographies were always impressive. However, he was not rewording what others had said. He was building on that. He had the ability of conveying important results from other disciplines into his practice of theology.

Willem Vorster stood with his feet firmly on the ground. He was no ivory tower theologian. His situation was of the utmost importance. In this regard one can think of the impact the loss of a baby and the death of his mother and recently his father had on him—and not only on his personal life, but especially on his thinking and on his doing theology. His situation included more than his personal situation. The situation in the country and in Africa also had a great impact on his thinking and his work. He was a contextual theologian.

Willem Vorster was also deeply involved in his society. For him theology had to reach the ground. To make the results of theological research accessible to the man in the street was a high priority for him. In this regard one need only to refer to his efforts in establishing the CB Powell Bible Centre as a Centre in the Institute for Theological research at Unisa and the leading role he played in the activities of this Centre. This he did not only formally as the head of the Institute, member of the organising, advisory and management
committees, but especially in presenting lectures for the Centre. He frequently described these as some of the most enjoyable and enriching experiences he had. He also said that the work of the Centre is the type of work that is really important and crucial. In his opinion, without popularising, theology could not exist or develop.

Willem Vorster was a leader in all respects. He set the pace in many new avenues for South African theologians, such as narratology, reception theory, the sociological reading of the New Testament, Africanisation and interfaith dialogue.

During the last years of his life, he stressed more and more the importance of our being in Africa and the importance that theology must reach the man in the street. His visit to the All Africa Council of Churches conference in Harare was one of his most important visits ever. He came back with enthusiasm, determined that we must reach out and have much more contact with Africa and be fully part of Africa. Popularisation, Africanisation and interfaith dialogue became issues that received his attention.

Willem Vorster was not the author of many popular theological books or articles. He did, however, write a number of popularised theological articles (cf Vorster 1988b:1-30; 1990; 1993:11-21). One almost dares to say that popular theological material was substandard to him. With his inquisitive mind he dug deeper than the surface and was not satisfied with good sounding words on paper; nor did popularity interest him. In his popularised articles he maintained the same high standard as in his formal theological articles, to such an extent that two of his popularised articles were later published in an accredited scientific periodical (cf Vorster 1990 and 1991a; 1991b). It was to him important that popularised theology should not be 'watered down' theology. In popularised theology the results of sound theological research must be reflected in such a way that the man in the street can understand it. As a scholar who was well acquainted with his field of study he could convey complicated issues in an understandable way without oversimplifying the subject matter and questions.

The words of Larue (1975:1) are applicable:

We inherit the structure of our society; it is predetermined when we arrive on the human scene. As we grow into it, it continues to develop and change. To some extent, each of us contributes to the form it is taking and will take. What we accept and live by becomes our life-style and contributes to maintaining the status quo. What we refuse to or rebel against may produce reactions that tend to harden the life-set of society or to help develop new societal values. No one fails to make a contribution; no one is uninvolved.

Willem Vorster indeed made a contribution to new societal norms.
Let us therefore look at Christianity in Africa, before giving attention to the applicability of some of his words for popularisation and nonformal theological education in an African context.

3 CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

The people of Africa are overwhelmingly religious. Christianity is one of the biggest and fastest growing religions in Africa today. Statistics show that in 1990 there were 10 million Christians in Africa and estimates show that there are 225 million Christians on this continent today (cf Rigien 1994:1). This resembles a growth of 2150% in four years. One must, however, take into account that recent statistics may be more reliable than those of 1990. However, it remains a fact that Christianity is an important factor in Africa influencing the lives of millions (cf also Kruger 1994:3-4). This phenomenal growth of Christianity can be ascribed to a number of factors. I am of the opinion that the influence of Christian leaders from Africa itself nowadays plays an important role in the spreading of Christianity. Whereas previously missionaries from European origin played the major role, this is no longer the case. The results of their missionary work must not be underestimated, but they did not have phenomenal numerical results. It was only when Africans themselves made Christianity their own and started to play the leading role that numerical growth came to the fore.

The significant influence of African leadership is not only visible in the numerical growth, but especially in the form of African Christianity. African Christianity does have its own character incorporating many traditional African religious elements, thus enriching and contextualising African Christianity.

Christianity in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, does not exist in a vacuum. It is rooted in the history of this part of the world. It has been and will be influenced by political, economic, social and religious factors.

It is a well known fact that political turmoil haunted most of the African countries. In South Africa a new democratic government recently came to power. Under the previous regime Christianity had a privileged position. Although it was not the official state religion, it had a number of privileges over the other religions. Certain churches had been in a more favourable position while others had quite a struggle with the government of the day. All indications are there that this will no longer be the case. Religious freedom will almost certainly be instituted and there will most probably be equality amongst the churches as far as government is concerned (cf Kruger 1994). This will open new doors for interdenominational and interfaith dialogue in South Africa. The possibility of greater co-operation, especially as far as education and training are concerned is bigger than ever. Hopefully the time of government interference in church affairs is past. The changing political situa-
tion in South Africa up till now did not change society to a great extent. All political answers have not been given. One can expect that in future politics will also have a significant impact on Christianity. One thing is clear: people are war and unrest weary. The high crime rate is becoming unacceptable to more and more people. Politics will not only influence Christianity, but Christianity will also play a role in politics and political matters in the years to come. This makes training even more important.

Economic matters also had and will have an impact on Christianity. The declining economic base, unemployment and inflation will have an effect on the churches and religious activities. It is interesting to note that Christianity grew in Africa in economically pressing times. One is almost tempted to say that economic difficulties ‘forced’ people to look at the solutions Christianity offered. But let me immediately say that this would be an oversimplification. To my mind it might have been a minute factor in church growth in Africa, and then only insofar as people in periods of crises naturally tend to turn to religion as one of the places to find answers and help. In spite of efforts from American prosperity-Christianity to gain ground in Africa, church growth did not materialise. It had an impact amongst whites, but was received negatively and even with hostility by blacks. In this regard it may even have negative consequences for Christianity.

Social factors also play an important role in Christianity in Africa. There can be no doubt that Christianity had been brought to South Africa by Europeans whose form of worship had been partially formed by their culture. The African Initiated Churches similarly reflect African culture. This must not be seen in a negative light. On the contrary, it is a fact that must be appreciated and extended. In order to be relevant and to address the real life issues of the people Christianity must be presented in an understandable an acceptable way, in line with the cultural heritage of the believers and must not be something foreign. Christianity in Africa has been and will be influenced by other religions. From the beginning of Christianity on this continent there were also other religions. Christianity had to find its place amongst the other religions. The contact with other religions took various forms, ranging from direct opposition, antagonism and hostility via dialogue with other religions to interfaith dialogue. There can be no doubt that Christianity has been influenced by other religions. In this case the African Initiated Churches are an excellent example. The African Initiated Churches put Christianity in African cloth. In doing so, elements from the traditional African religions were incorporated. In this regard one can think of the role of the ancestors, and the important feast and cultic acts with regard to rainmaking. Some aspects referred to in the Bible receive far more emphasis in the African Initiated Churches than in the main-line churches, such as exorcism and even baptism. The rich cultural diversity
and heritage in South Africa can be an enriching aspect for Christianity in the future. To sum it up, the growth of Christianity in Africa can be a problem, but it is also a challenge. The diversity in Christianity must be seen as a challenge for dynamic and creative deepening of Christianity.

The growth in African Christianity can not be seen only as a blessing. It is a significant and positive aspect for which all Christians are thankful. It does, however, also present a number of negative aspects and creates a number of problems. In this regard one can think of the tension between the traditional ‘mainline’ churches and the African Initiated Churches. Many members of the ‘mainline’ churches regard the African Initiated Churches as a mixture of ‘pure Christianity’ and traditional African religion (sometimes referred to as pure heathendom or paganism), resulting in a syncretistic religion. To this the African Initiated Churches replied by referring to themselves as being contextual and relevant for the people in Africa at this stage in history. We will not discuss this problem here, but it is of importance to note that all religious forms, churches and theologies grew from specific historically bound socio-political situations. Thus we do not have a ‘pure’ form of Christianity. It is also a fact that Christianity through the ages borrowed from other religions and socio-cultural heritages of their society to make Christianity relevant for those people in that situation. This calls for empathy with the African Initiated Churches but does not exclude critical reflection on their theology and religious customs—but that is also and to the same extent, applicable to the ‘mainline’ churches.

One of the problems regarding the rapid growth of Christianity in Africa is that it still lacks written ‘theology’ at this stage. Theoretical reflection on what is happening is absent. But more important, theoretical and theological reflection are to a large degree absent, especially in written form. One can understand this as the church leaders are so occupied with church growth and the spreading of the gospel, that they just do not have the time to reflect on theological matters. At the same time one must, however, qualify this by saying that the mere fact that people believe is a reflection of their theology and is a sign that they have a theology. This theology may not be well defined or theoretically worked out, but at the basis of belief lies theology.

I would also add that neither the proclamation of the gospel nor the worship of God is possible without “theology”, however unsystematic and implicit it may be. In other words, the hellenistic missionaries and poets were also theologians—certainly not dogmaticians, but proclaimers and singers of a living theology through which they expressed the Word of God in a new cultural context (Padilla 1986:305).

On the one hand we do have the situation that in Africa these theologies had not been formulated in the sense that is the case in the ‘western’ world. On the
The situation in which the African Initiated Churches operates is furthermore not the same as the sophisticated situation in which the mainline churches operate. One must also remember that Africans do not to the same extent have the tradition of higher learning education and in particular of universities as part of their culture. They function primarily within a close community where charismatic leadership is of greater importance than educational qualifications. The almost ivory tower type of theoretical reflection is foreign to Africa. This leads to the fact that theological depth is to a large extent absent in African Christianity. ‘The rapidly-expanding population of Christian believers adds width to the church without a corresponding depth’ (Regier 1994:1). That the church is growing at a phenomenal rate in Sub-Saharan Africa, is undisputed. ‘This phenomenon has led some observers to compare the African church to a river a mile wide but only a few inches deep. Others use the metaphor of a tree with a lot of leaves and few roots’ (Regier 1994:41). Krabill (1993:3) compared the church in West Africa to an elephant tottering precariously on chicken legs. It is important that African church leaders are aware of the fact that church growth outpaces spiritual depth and maturity. Tienou (1987:154-155) therefore warned that the rapid growth may come to an end and says: ‘Africa has the fastest growing church in the world, it may have the fastest declining church also!’. This may be true. At the same time it can be asked whether the depth of African faith has been studied. I am of the opinion that the people of Africa are not only deeply religious, but also have a Christian spiritual depth that has not yet been fully realised. Fact is that their spiritual and theological depth is expressed in other ways than what we are used to in European circles.

It is then obvious that some creative initiatives will have to be taken to assist spiritual depth. If the church in Africa is at least to sustain the position and even grow more, training will be of the utmost importance. At this stage there is some resistance to training and theological education. Regier (1994:42) referred to a conference where ‘it was suggested that the more educated the clergy, the slower the growth in the church’. There are, however, also testimonies to the contrary. In this respect one can refer to the Kale Heyet Church in Ethiopia where 70-80% of the members are in training of one kind or another and which is one of the fastest growing churches in Africa.

The emphasis should now be moved from numerical church growth to theological and spiritual growth and deepening.
4 NONFORMAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

I am of the opinion that it is of the utmost importance that new training programmes should now be developed that will be as indigenous as the new churches and Christianity in Africa. The fact that Christianity is only now beginning to have an impact in Africa, shows that leadership from within is the answer. It was only when Christianity became a religion closely related to old customs and practices, that it grew. The deepening of the church must therefore also be from within, as African as the church itself. The principle that the gospel must be brought to people in culturally known terms to my mind also applies to popularised theology and nonformal theological education.

If God's Word is to reach them, it must do so in terms of their own culture or not at all...every culture possesses positive elements, favourable to the understanding of the gospel. The same cultural differences that hinder intercultural communication turn out to be an asset to the understanding of the many-sided wisdom of God (Padilla 1986:301).

Popularised theology and nonformal theological education should be seen as a second phase in conveying the Biblical message.

The traditional training of ministers and lay Christians on the western pattern and especially on university based training programmes with well prepared high academic lectures followed by test and examinations, will simply not work in Africa for all the people. It may still be a valid and appreciated method amongst Europeans and may appeal to a number of 'westernised' blacks, but it is not appropriate for all the people. Attention must be given to the cultural heritage of Africa and to the traditional educational systems to determine new methods and ways of training. This will, to my mind be one of the most gripping challenges for theologians in Africa in the next few years.

There can be no doubt that there is a need for theological training and education. This is at present being addressed in schools and universities. It is a fact that Biblical Studies is one of the most popular subjects in South Africa. It is, however, also a fact that many of the Christian leaders in South Africa do not have formal school or university education. Many of the bishops of the African Initiated Churches have less than five years of formal primary school education. Although many of the younger leaders have higher qualifications, it will still be the case that the majority of leaders will have insufficient theological training according to western standards. It will not be possible to train these bishops and other church leaders in the traditional way.

To my mind the future of Christianity in Africa will depend to a large degree on nonformal theological education for the church leaders and laity. It is a fact that formal theological education will for a number of reasons not ful-
fill all the needs. It is expensive and only a few can afford it. The leaders of many churches do not have the required academic qualification to gain entrance to universities. University degrees are not seen as of utmost importance for leadership positions in many churches. There is even the perception amongst some that such qualifications could be detrimental. It must also be taken into account that the majority of African Initiated Church leaders have fulltime occupations. It will therefore be impossible to work during the day, do church work in the evenings and during weekends and still fit in formal university studies. Lastly it is still the case that university training is seen as foreign to Africa, especially in theology. If formal theological education is not the only answer, what then?

Popularisation and nonformal theological education as a facet of popularisation may to a great degree fulfil the needs of Christianity in Africa. What are these needs? It is impossible to outline the needs here in any detail. There is a need for deeper knowledge of the content of the Bible. This may be seen as the primary and most important need. There is not much interest in the systematic or dogmatic problems with which Europeans wrestle. Ethical values and norms and ethical questions are, however, a need to be addressed. There is also a need to know more about the running of a church. Programmes on church administration can therefore be of importance. There is also the need for expression of faith in cult and life. Many African Christians are uncertain about their experiences and how to formulate and legitimise them. I am of the opinion that the most basic need is for knowledge of the Bible and especially the message as seen from their situation and the relevance of this message for their situation. Thus a need for a theology from below.

Nonformal theological education is a part of adult education. The specific requirements for adult education and the results of research on andragogy will have to be taken into account. Research will have to be undertaken as far as andragogy in Africa is concerned. To a large extent our whole educational system is based on European models, which are strange to Africans. Even a number of nonformal theological education programmes have a Western basis and impact. Theological Education by Extension originally came from Latin America in an era of popular liberation movements in Central and South America stressing bottom-up theology. Many of the TEE programmes in Africa are more top-down. What is called contextualisation is often little more than putting African wraps onto Western thought (Regier 1994:16). A church leader said: ‘We are sold out to teaching Western Christianity in Western, paper ways’ (Regier 1994:28). One will have to give attention to traditional African education and not regard it as ‘primitive’ or unfit. In this regard Eleck Mabhena said: ‘In any learning we Africans need to incorporate talk, dance, song’ (Regier 1994:27). Research on the needs of the laity, especially in
Africa, needs urgent attention. Let us confess that for too long others’ perceptions on what the needs may be had been the norm and were accepted. Many popularised works and many nonformal theological education programmes were based on these assumed needs. The low success rate of these can also be ascribed to this fact.

The importance of stories in African culture can hardly be overestimated. Africans are storytellers par excellence. Many of these stories became songs. Regier (1994:28) referred to the Zimbabwean Fambidzano programme saying: ‘Small group activities and discussions, drama, music, reading and other methods appropriate to the context are used in participatory, holistic, integral training’. There can be no doubt that stories played a very important role in traditional African education. I would even go as far as to suggest that stories played the same role as in the world of the Old Testament (cf Botha 1992:1-11). In these bookless societies, stories were the primary way of communicating truths, history, religious principles, events and norms.

In recent years the importance of narratives has been emphasised in theological research (cf Deist & Vorster 1986:72-108, Capps 1971, Hendricks 1973, Kayser 1969, Ohlsen 1978, Scholes & Kellogg 1966, Thompson 1978). Willem Vorster devoted much research to this aspect and I am of the opinion that he can be described as the father of narrative research in South Africa (cf Vorster 1971, 1972, 1977, 1986b). In his inaugural lecture he addressed the problem of the gospels as narratives. There was serious criticism of his inaugural lecture. In this way he, for the first time in South Africa, put narrative theology on the table. In spite of all the criticism, he continued his research in this field and a substantial number of articles flowed from his pen on this topic. A number of his doctoral students carried out research in this field. Today narrative theology is well established in South Africa, to an extent due to Willem Vorster’s initiative. However, one of the most important application fields for narrative theology, namely in the conveying of the Biblical message in Africa and in training programmes and in education, has been neglected.

5 NARRATIVES AS POPULARISING METHOD

Willem Vorster emphasised that a significant part of the Bible consists of narratives. He especially emphasised the narratological character of the gospels. ‘The gospels are narratives about the life and work of Jesus. A narrative such as the gospel involves a narrator’s choice. Even if it reports actual events it involves the narrator’s choice. By definition it requires a story and a storyteller’ (Vorster 1983:91). In nonformal theological education the narrative nature of the Bible must be emphasised. It may be a fact that Europeans do have problems regarding stories and especially the truth in stories, but this is
not the case in Africa. Therefore, nonformal theological education will not have to address the problems of truth from a European perspective.

Christianity primarily follows the example of Jesus. ‘Was Jesus not a storyteller, and were the early Christians not committed to promote their beliefs by telling all sort of stories?’ Vorster (1986b:52) asked. He gave the answer: ‘Jesus was a storyteller and so were many of the early Christians’ (1985:27). ‘There can be little doubt that Jesus was a storyteller and that early Christians transmitted and established their newly found convictions by retelling the story and stories of Jesus. This was a very powerful, but also natural way of promoting the ideas of the new religion’ (Vorster 1986b:57). It is interesting that he initially asked the question, answered it and then came to some conclusions on the value of this method of conveying a message. I would like to go a step further. If this worked in the first century, why would it not work today? Without drawing a direct line from there to here, which is not permissible, I would like to state that the communities in Africa today still place high emphasis on the oral transmission of norms and values by means of stories. Therefore stories are important elements in their culture. If they are inherent in their society as they had been in the society of the first century, then it is to my mind permissible to say that the same methods may be used. The church leaders are storytellers and African Christians can transmit their convictions by retelling the story and stories of Jesus and of the Bible as a whole. This would make theological education and training accessible to all and would not discriminate against the non-literate.

Vorster (1985:60-61) referred to the fact that narrators create a ‘new’ world or a narrative world:

The crux of the problem lies in the nature of narrative itself. Narrative is the remaking of reality (= creating a narrative world) through characterisation, plot, and other narrative devices. The storyteller creates a world of his own making with its own time, space, characters, and plot, one which is called a “narrative world”.

This is certainly not only the case as far as ‘biblical’ storytellers are concerned, but is also true for present day storytellers. Stories create a world of escape, but more, an idealistic world; a dream world. However, if this dream world is a world that can be achieved, it becomes part of a world towards which the storyteller and listener strive. Stories can persuade the readers to do something to materialise this ‘dream’ world.

It must create a community which is capable of remembering the stories of Israel and Jesus and the early church. This remembrance gives guidance to the community and to one’s individual lives. The very life of the community is that life that is led by remembering the past. In this light Scripture is to be viewed above all from the perspective of being a narrative (Hartin 1991:8).
Vorster's remark: '...reading is an interactive process between a text and a reader. It is furthermore assumed that texts do not have meaning. Meaning is arrived at by the dialectical process between a text, which evokes a response from the reader, and the reader who assigns meaning to the text, or responds to the text' (1991c:1099), can be applied to the hearing and retelling of stories as well. Stories create an interactive process between the story (or storyteller) and the listener(s). Furthermore, 'the right to tell one's own story is a weapon of the marginalized in the struggle against identity in a world of uniformity' (Fackre 1983:341).

After his visit to the All Africa Council of Churches conference in Harare, he emphasised that narrative theology should be the way to a new African theology. Stories can be the very base of nonformal theological education programmes. Why base a programme on paper, on books, on assignments and written essays and examination that are foreign to the people? The same effect can be obtained by stories. Can there be a better method of teaching the content, the message or the story of the Bible than by means of stories? Africans are master storytellers and have the ability of remembering and retelling stories exceptionally well. This they do in a gripping, lively and dramatic way. This method is applicable not only for the retelling of the Biblical narratives, but can also be used to teach ethical norms. Stories are also the best way to teach church history. Stories are persuasive as one can argue with almost anything but stories. Stories have the ability of taking the listener with them, pulling the listener into the story. In this way the listener becomes part of the story, especially by identifying with one of the characters. In this way the story 'argues' with the listener persuading the listener to the goal of the story. Stories are thus powerful means of persuading people to a certain point of view. Careful attention must therefore be given to the goal of the stories as well as to the contextualisation thereof.

Stories can, however, only have impact if they are relevant. They must have something to say and must address specific problems or questions of the day and the situation. If that is not the case, they become fairy tales that do not have any impact. Irrelevant stories will fade away. Contextualisation is of utmost importance. The listeners can only be addressed if what they hear is relevant to them.

It is an unfortunate fact that the theology of the African church is still foreign. Protestants have traditionally taken a dim view of contextualisation and of culture. The vertical relation with God has been emphasised to such an extent that the horizontal relationships have been neglected. Catholics use the word enculturation and view culture as the primary carrier of God's message. Due to the proclamation of Christianity in Africa in bygone years, many Africans have been taught that their culture is sinful or that Christianity has
nothing to do with their culture. ‘Many Africans disregard Christianity as unAfrican’ (Regier 1994:29). The problems of Africa need to be addressed. In this regard it is of the utmost importance that the real issues should be addressed and not supposed problems or even problems European Christians see and experience as problems. There is a need and necessity for Africans to identify and formulate these problems. However, it must not be a one way traffic of the African stating the problem and the Europeans giving the answers, but it must be a totally integrated effort from the beginning to the end.

One of the serious problems facing education is accessibility. In nonformal education accessibility does refer to a number of aspects, *inter alia* the form, language and contents. As far as the latter is concerned, course content must be presented in such a way that the learner can understand it. It should be presented in a simple understandable way. The same principle applies to language. Here another factor of importance is mother language. In Africa we find a strange ambivalence. Many prefer their mother tongue for communication and learning up to a certain level. The more advanced the learning, the more important English becomes. The norm for nonformal theological education will have to be initial training in the mother tongue, then moving into English.

### 6 ACCESSIBILITY OF NONFORMAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Nonformal theological education programmes are not accessible to many. In this regard one can refer to external factors that exclude people, such as violence, which makes it impossible for people to attend such programmes, and to the fact that women are frequently excluded from these programmes. Non-literate learners are often excluded. This is particularly the case where the programmes are based on written material. If a programme is based on a prescribed book or written material where the presentations centre around the discussion of the written material and it is expected from students to write, it is obvious that the non-literate person would be excluded. Taking into account the great number of non-literate people in Africa and even the number of non-literate church leaders, who are people of stature, leaders in their own right, and who are doing extremely important and influential work, influencing not only others’ lives but also the direction of churches, it is understandable that the exclusion of non-literate people from programmes is a serious problem. It is just not the right thing to do. To try and solve the problem by presenting literacy programmes is not the best solution. They create the impression that the person is treated like an infant or that literacy is the only door to training and leadership and as such undermines the authority of the non-literate. Serious attention must be given to the development of programmes of high standard that do not require literary skills. This may seem strange or even unacceptable to Europeans, but is to my mind not necessarily the case. Employing tradi-
tional African educational methods, such as narratives, imitation, repetition, dramatisation, songs, etcetera may open the door to training for these people. Traditionally non-literates had been treated as unintelligent, as handicapped or people with a certain disability. This must not be the case. Without lowering standards, the programmes can be presented in new ways employing new (for us, traditional for others) methods.

'Another aspect of this inner world is that African traditional learning is normally communal' (Regier 1994:38). Traditional European learning is individualistic and it is expected from each student to do his/her own work and not to work with others. Serious steps are taken against students who hand in assignments done together. Little attention has yet been given to this communal aspect and it will be important to take a closer look at it in the future.

7 THE RELEVANCE OF THEOLOGY

At the Human Sciences Research Council conference on The relevance of theology for the 1990s in which he played a major role right from the initial planning stage, Willem Vorster read a very important paper on The relevance of Jesus research for the 'new' South Africa (1994). In this paper he analysed the Jesus research in South Africa and the implications thereof for the future. He also gave some clear directions and, to my mind made some important remarks regarding popularisation.

Willem Vorster took the lead in the historical Jesus research in South Africa. From his involvement in this research, the way in which he did it and what he said, one can come to a number of very important conclusions as to how theology should be popularised and what the norms should be for non-formal theological education programmes.

He was whole-heartedly involved in the historical Jesus research because it was the basis of his faith and the foundation of his life. He was convinced that theology should not be an ivory tower task of theologians that does not have any relevance for everyday life, but should be done to benefit the church, believers and society at large. He was aware of the fact that there were different opinions and different schools of thought. He did not ever plead for uniformity, but he did plead for understanding and development. 'My conviction is that theologians in South Africa are obliged, for the sake of the church, Christian faith, and the morality of science to come to grips with the current polarisation between "traditional" and "contextual" theology' (Vorster 1994:619). As Hartin (1991:7) said: 'The Scriptures aim not to describe the world and reality, but to change the world in which we live'. Auerbach (1968:48) argues:

Scripture is not meant...merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours; it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel our-
selves to be elements in its structure of universal history....Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world...must be filled as an ingredient of the divine plan.

Traditionally a distinction has been made between the task of theologians training ministers whose task it is to convey the Biblical message to the people. In practice, however, the theological training and contents seldom reached the laity, resulting in a gap between theology and church. This is an unacceptable situation. By means of nonformal theological education and other ways of popularising, this gap must be bridged, as the laity have the right to be theologically informed. It must assist the man in the street to find meaning in life in a responsible and accountable way as ‘religion should not be a dividing factor in community, it should be the very factor which makes life meaningful’ (Vorster 1994:631).

He was aware of the fact that there are differences between scholars on the historical Jesus question. In his life he frequently put ‘new cards’ on the table, opening new avenues. He sometimes had to stand all on his own. He had the courage to put his case and to argue this point of view with others. To differ was to him part of life and especially part of academic endeavour. He was an enquiring man, always putting himself and his belief to the test. ‘The fact that there are so many views on the historical Jesus need not disturb us. What should disturb us is the unwillingness of people to put their beliefs to the test’ (Vorster 1994:629), is typical of his way of thinking. I am of the opinion that this is very important for popularising theology. Much of the criticism against popularising as such comes from the fact that some fear that their followers may hear something that is not in line with what they are teaching. But even worse, people avoid popularised theology as they feel that it will in some way be faith shocking. It must be an integral part of any popularised programme to be selfcritical. Development can only follow if one is willing to put one’s belief to the test.

Apart from self-criticism, humility and tolerance were very important to Willem Vorster. These three were to his mind closely linked. This led him to say: ‘This also means that in the new South Africa we will have to tolerate differences of opinion and even different christological views, but with the willingness to subject our beliefs to scrutiny’ (Vorster 1994:630) and ‘I do not think that the study of the historical Jesus will afford us answers to all our daily problems in the new South Africa. The one thing it will, however, do is to make us a little more humble in our claims of having answers to difficult questions’ (Vorster 1994:631). Many who crossed his path thought that he was intolerant and severely critical. This was to a certain extent true. He could not tolerate substandard work or opinions not properly thought through, especially
if they were presented without humility. He was critical towards others as he was towards himself. If this principle is applied in non-formal theological education programmes and other popularised programmes, these can only benefit. For too long the general feeling was that popularised materials should be of lesser quality, based on substandard research or prepared in a haphazard way. Such a *laissez-faire* approach is totally unacceptable. Popularised theology should actually be the showcase of theological research and only the best should be exhibited.

8 CONCLUSION

With reference to the historical Jesus research, Vorster said: ‘It seems to me the duty of Christian theologians, if they hold onto the importance of the Bible and the New Testament as source of theology, to sit down (together) and take the New Testament seriously...’ (1994:629). Two aspects are of importance: co-operation and the basis of co-operation. Popularisation and especially non-formal theological education, should be a joint effort. The days are gone when everyone could do ‘his own thing’. Co-operation between the various parties involved is of the utmost importance. But then this co-operation should be based on the same foundation or basic source, namely the Bible. ‘Let us take up the challenge of theology in the new South Africa and work on what we have in common’ (Vorster 1994:631).

His prophetic statement that this “new” South Africa will also be new as far as theology is concerned. It is possible that both traditional and Black theology will collapse....If this happens, theologians will have the duty to re-address christology’ (Vorster 1994:629) may in future be one of his most important statements. For this prophecy to be fulfilled, theologians and Christian leaders will have to come together, bringing their full ‘baggages’ of traditions, convictions, and religious practices with them, acknowledging that none have the absolute knowledge or wisdom, being willing to listen to the others’ stories to make room for one another and to be enriched by the others.

A reconstruction and development programme of theological thought, non-formal theological education programmes and other popularised programmes needs to be put on the table, if we may use the recent popular slogan in our country in this way. Reconstructing the heritages of all, building up what had been lost or never recognised and using that as a basis for developing a new and truly South African theology is vital. This must not be a theological debate, but must closely link up with reality and be popularised from the very beginning. This must reflect the living relationship between the people of South Africa and the living Lord in the South Africa of the 1990s.
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Prof F A Swanepoel, C B Powell Bible Centre, University of South Africa, P O Box 392, PRETORIA, 0001 Republic of South Africa.