The anthropological turn in New Testament interpretation: Dialogue as negotiation and cultural critique

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ABSTRACT
A description of the anthropological turn in New Testament studies is followed by an argument that New Testament studies beyond the anthropological turn can be reconceptualised as a historical anthropological enterprise in which dialogue rules supreme. Dialogue is understood in the double sense of cultural negotiation and cultural critique. Defined in this way, a number of aspects are discussed pertaining to the teaching of biblical studies in South Africa. Finally some objections to New Testament studies defined as a historical anthropological enterprise are discussed.

1 INTRODUCTION
The anthropologist Evans-Pritchard not only endorsed the dictum by Maitland that ‘anthropology must choose between being history and being nothing’, but he also turned it around: ‘history must choose between being social anthropology or being nothing’ (1961:20). New Testament studies, in my view, should become an historical anthropological enterprise or remain nothing. That is to say, New Testament scholars will have to take the anthropological turn if they wish to escape the solipsistic engagement in ethnocentric readings of documents from an alien culture and distant past and if they wish to conduct true contextual interpretations. That is exactly what I have been arguing in a number of studies on the social-scientific interpretation of the New Testament in which it is explained what social-scientific interpretation of the New Testament comprises (see 1991, 1992), how it can be done (see 1994, 1995a, 1995b) and why it should be done (see 1995c).

The one issue hovering in the background of all these studies is what the implications of this approach for New Testament studies are. Put differently, in which direction is the anthropological turn pushing the interpretation and teaching of the New Testament?

Today, round about a decade after my first introduction to the social-scientific interpretation of the New Testament, the time has come for introspection and self-reflection on this academic journey. Therefore, in keeping to the turn metaphor, I shall explain what is meant by the anthropological
The anthropological turn, why I took that road, what it is like and finally give a tentative view of the scenery and possible destination ahead. Attention will be paid to some of the implications and consequences of the anthropological turn for the future of New Testament studies in South Africa.

In advocating the anthropological turn, part of my aim is to convert the uninitiated and bring the outsiders to the light of academic salvation and joy in anthropology-land. Therefore, the style will be provocative, for some inimical, but in the end it should contribute to dialogue in New Testament scholarship. In contrast to evangelistic zeal in most other instances, it is accepted that I might be wrong. In fact, the difference between a fundamentalist belief in the truth and the conviction of being right, is the acceptance of the possibility of being wrong. That means that despite the best arguments and reasons available to me, I am in principle a candidate for conversion. That is, conversion understood in the sense of resocialisation: it can only happen on the basis of well-founded arguments. Since the reasons for being on this road will be presented, zealots of any other persuasion will at least have to refute the strong points in my argument. You may, however, disagree and remain in the darkness of the domains of literary, rhetorical, or fundamentalist analysis. Otherwise you may take the anthropological turn and end up with the joys (and hardships) of historical-anthropology-land.

2 NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION BEYOND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL TURN

What is the anthropological turn, how does one go about on that road and why should one take it? These are the questions to be addressed briefly in this section.

2.1 What is the anthropological turn?

The anthropological turn is the product of at least two related insights which forced themselves with great vigour onto the scene of New Testament studies. The first is the recognition of not only the historical but especially the cultural alienness of the New Testament documents. The second is the admission that language has meaning within a social system. This has been a conviction in anthropology for a long time. Words, sentences and documents do not simply mean, but have meaning within a specific cultural system. In the words of Comaroff and Comaroff: ‘In order to construe the gestures of others, their words and winks and more besides, we have to situate them within the systems of signs and relations, of power and meaning, that animate them’ (1992:10-11).
The anthropological turn takes both these insights seriously and therefore converts New Testament interpretation into a cross-cultural endeavour—something it should have been all along. The anthropological turn gave birth to what is today known as the social-scientific approach to the New Testament. That is the case, at least, in some definitions of the approach. In my definition it is an interdisciplinary venture which aims at reducing ethnocentrism and anachronism by way of consistent historical and descriptive holistic interpretations. That is to say, by acting as historical anthropologists, New Testament scholars address both the temporal and cultural gaps which separate them from the documents and they do so by making use of the insights and models from the social sciences, especially anthropology. With this definition at least two aspects are covered: a definite aim of interpretation and a particular procedure in going about the anthropological turn.

2.1.1 Reducing ethnocentrism and anachronism

Historical anthropology aims at the reduction of ethnocentrism and anachronism when reading documents from an alien culture by consciously dealing with the cultural-historical gap. There should be no doubt that many so-called social-scientific readings, in the disguise of social science jargon, are just as ethnocentric and anachronistic as traditional interpretations; a social science model can just as easily function as a die which shapes the document to fit the theory. Therefore, the distinction between different approaches is not so much marked by the origin of the models (be it theological, dogmatic, literary or social-scientific) they use, but by the aim of interpretation pursued.

The objections to the tradition of ethnocentric readings of the New Testament documents are twofold. The first has to do with the disregard for the cultural system of meaning from which those texts originate. As Petrey quite correctly remarks: ‘Words do things because a collectivity agrees on what they will do and the conditions under which they will do it’ (1985:44). Apart from the cultural system within which people organise themselves, ‘speech is not active performance but inactive noise’ (Petrey 1985:60); separated from the set of codes which govern inferences about meaning and context, the words on a page remain mute (see Graff 1990:166).

The second has to do with the way in which background information is applied to improve an interpretation or the way in which some of the cultural beliefs and practices are smuggled in through a back door. Documents should not be interpreted against a background, but in terms of a background (cultural system); cultural elements cannot be added to improve an interpretation, an interpretation is done in terms of the construed cultural
system within which the documents originated. In this regard MacIntyre reminds us that the

crude notion that one can first learn a language and then secondly and separately go on to understand the social life of those who speak it can only flourish where the languages studied are those of peoples whose social life is so largely the same as our own, so that we do not notice the understanding of social life embodied in our grasp of the language; but attempts to learn the alien language of an alien culture soon dispose of it (1971:226).

There can be little doubt that the anthropological turn strikes at the very heart of traditional New Testament studies since it questions the ethnocentric way in which scholars go about in assigning meaning to the Greek words of those documents without taking into account the cultural and historical gaps between reader and documents. Not even the recent Louw-Nida dictionary escapes the accusation of ethnocentric imposition (see Vorster 1991). Only a superficial glance at the meaning of biblical social values within their Mediterranean context (see Pilch & Malina 1993) suggests that the anthropological turn in a fundamental sense challenges the acquired meaning of New Testament words and sentences, beliefs and practices available in the (ethnocentric) dictionaries, grammars, lexica and commentaries on the market. Situated within a first-century Mediterranean cultural system, biblical words and practices attract totally different meanings.

2.1.2 Historical anthropology as a response to the anthropological turn

Without suggesting that historical anthropology is a monolithic and clearly defined discipline, theoretically its main feature is the recognition of the fundamental unity between historical and anthropological research. Echoing the words of Evans-Pritchard quoted at the beginning of this study, Comaroff and Comaroff state that

there ought to be no “relationship” between history and anthropology, since there should be no division to begin with. A theory of society which is not also a theory of history, or vice versa, is hardly a theory at all (1992:13).

Burke adds five features which characterise this rapprochement between the disciplines (see 1987:3-5). Historical anthropology (1) is deliberately qualitative and concentrates on specific cases, (2) is deliberately microscopic and focuses on small communities, (3) concentrates on what is often called thick description, in other words, the interpretation of social interaction in a society in terms of that society’s norms and categories, (4) tries to show how apparent trivial routines and rituals contribute to enforcing a certain worldview, (5) is explicitly informed by social theories. Anthropology con-
tributes to the historical enterprise by showing up and comprehending the cultural otherness of the past (see Burke 1990:270).

In New Testament studies, when defined as a historical-anthropological enterprise, models and insights from the social sciences, especially anthropology, are consciously employed in creating first-century scenarios. Doing historical anthropology is what Eilberg-Schwartz (see 1990:238) calls a sort of reconstructive art. It is an attempt, on the basis of ideas about certain cultures and how they work, to imagine what the culture of a specific people might have been like. Cultural anthropological studies provide the scenarios by means of which appropriate frameworks can be built for comparing and describing. This task is like that of the detective: the more exposure one gets to different historical cultures the better one is equipped for identifying the traces in a particular case. That is exactly what cultural anthropology offers the historical anthropologist and also the New Testament historical anthropologist: a range of scenarios which are different from the interpreter’s taken for granted ones. It can expose home blindness while helping to bridge the cultural distance and capturing otherness by placing it in a comparative context (see Burke 1990:270).

The first task of cross-cultural interpretation remains a grasp of the otherness in its strongest possible light. However, an adequate cross-cultural interpretation can never stop at that point since interpretation is by definition comparative in that understanding has to take place in two worlds at once—that of the interpreter and that of the subjects. An adequate cross-cultural interpretation in my view consists of at least three distinct tasks: grasping the subjects’ cultural system in the strongest possible light, secondly paying attention to the interpreter’s cultural system, and finally, by way of contrast, conducting cross-cultural comparison. The anthropological turn therefore provides a framework for doing contextual interpretation in a dual sense: doing justice to the context of the New Testament documents while simultaneously paying full attention to the context(s) of the interpreter. Assessment and comparison inevitably follow from this.

While the ancients are no longer available to contribute to our grasp of the rules by means of which they insulted, acted politely, worshipped or reproduced, the only controls in historical-anthropological interpretation over flights of imagination are ‘sensitive readings of ancient texts, attention to archaeological evidence, and a familiarity with religious cultures in other times and other places’ (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990:238).

2.2 Why take the anthropological turn?
New Testament scholars can either take the anthropological turn and search for help in anthropology-land, or they can ignore it and continue in self satis-
faction with ethnocentric interpretations. The first consists of reading the New Testament documents by means of constructed first-century Mediterranean cultural scenarios, the second of construing them in terms of the interpreter's taken for granted cultural scenarios (which are also constructed) or any other (also constructed) cultural scenario that might be lying around. In my view there are a number of reasons for taking the anthropological turn when confronted with these alternatives.

The first reason is the rather self-evident fact that the New Testament documents originated in, for us, an alien and distant culture. Why go through all the trouble of interpretation if those documents are simply used for confirming established viewpoints (if reading becomes a form of ventriloquism) or if their voices are quietened? It is suggested that no responsible interpretation of the New Testament is possible without taking into account, and in a responsible way dealing with, the cultural gap which separates us from them.

Secondly, the ethical dimension of interpretation carries with it the responsibility to rule out misrepresentations. The claim that not all interpretations are valid remains an important value—everything does not go in interpretation. But that remark is meaningless unless backed by the best available reasons for claiming validity. One cannot contend to have avoided misrepresentations (or that everything does not go) unless it is possible to argue what valid interpretations consist of. Therefore, the ethical responsibility which most interpreters share, requires cross-cultural interpreters to take the anthropological turn.

Thirdly, the nature of interpretation carries the ethical responsibility that interpretation discloses the others' points of view and does not merely use them for possibilities relative to the interpreter's purposes. One cannot genuinely hear another voice unless the other is allowed its own ground; interpretation cannot be dialogic unless the voice of the other is allowed to participate. With Bohman I am suggesting that 'moral responsibility demands that interpretive dialogue with others be disclosures of their point of view, not the imposition of purposes or norms upon them' (1991:152 n 35).

In conclusion it should be emphasised that the anthropological turn sails under the flag of fallibilism (see Bernstein 1991:327, 336). That is the viewpoint that any interpretation is tentative and always subject to further interpretation and criticism. Therefore, it does not claim final interpretations, only less anachronistic and ethnocentric ones; it does not strive towards neutral and objective interpretations, but strives merely to avoid obvious ethnocentric misrepresentations of documents from an alien cultural system.
3 RECONCEPTUALISING NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES AS A DIALOGUE—AS CULTURAL NEGOTIATION AND CULTURAL CRITIQUE

It has been suggested that New Testament studies subsequent to the anthropological turn is being pushed into totally new directions. It not only strikes at the heart of traditional scholarship's tendency for treating those documents in an ethnocentric way, but redefines it as a cross-cultural enterprise. This has important implications not only for defining it but also for teaching it.

3.1 Redefining New Testament studies

New Testament studies conceived as historical anthropological studies opens new vistas and puts forward new challenges to all participants. It not only receives a facelift but is redefined as a different kind of activity. Therefore, while several of the received issues become either extinct or are altered, New Testament interpretation takes on the character of cultural dialogue.

In order to understand the other, it is necessary to engage the other in dialogue where its voice is heard in its otherness and strangeness if necessary. In order to understand the New Testament documents, it becomes necessary to engage them in cross-cultural conversation. In this activity of understanding the other the demand is raised that we understand ourselves better as well.

Amidst the many voices which nowadays recommend dialogue or conversation as a model for interpretation (see, for example Tracy 1987; Lee 1988:43ff), it is important to be more specific about the kind of cultural conversation that is implied by the anthropological turn. It has already been suggested that the single process of cross-cultural interpretation comprises at least three distinct tasks: grasping the subjects' cultural system in the strongest possible light, paying attention to the interpreter's cultural system, and by way of contrast conducting cross-cultural comparison (see Craffert 1995b for detail). Conducting these tasks, I suggest that dialogue be understood in at least two ways: dialogue as cultural negotiation and dialogue as cultural critique.

3.1.1 Dialogue as cultural negotiation

It is a fallacy to think that the other can always be heard in a friendly dialogue (see Bernstein 1991:52). One has to admit that since the structure of social relations differs between different cultures, it often happens that words do not exist to refer to alien cultures and concepts are often absent to grasp
the significance of alien beliefs and practices. Since dialogue presupposes a shared language and conceptual system the temptation of understanding alien beliefs and practices in terms of one’s own ready made concepts and categories can be avoided by the process of contrast. That is to say, by a process of negotiating differences between cultural systems. By way of contrasting not only beliefs and practices but also cultural systems at large, it becomes possible to identify commonalities in terms of which cultural understanding becomes possible. That is, commonalities which are the essentials of being human and being rational. Dialogue as cultural negotiation therefore is the process of contrast where grasping alien and homemade beliefs and practices in the most effective possible ways takes place. It will often be the case that an interpreter will have to extend her/his language game in order to achieve this. Cultural negotiation therefore confronts us with alternative ways of being human and alternative modes of rationality and force us into a process of trying to do justice to both.

It should be apparent that with the recognition of the cultural alienness of New Testament documents, they are in the first instance no longer treated as sacred or canonical texts but first and foremost as alien cultural documents. Therefore, questions such as what they have to say to us, are subordinate to the question what they did or could possibly have said in their own cultural setting. What the text says to us as well as a number of so-called contextual and dogmatic readings (to mention only a few), are blown out of the water by the anthropological turn. What the text says to us becomes a matter of cross-cultural negotiation while contextual readings become truly dialogic activities. Contextual readings which focus either on the historical context or on the context of the reader as the provider of meaning of a text, are abandoned in favour of a dialogic or conversational approach. Really respecting our ancestors demands that we engage them in cultural dialogue.

3.1.2 Dialogue as cultural critique

Instead of only focusing on the uniqueness of a cultural pattern, cultural criticism of the New Testament documents draws attention to the insight that we and they live in culturally constructed, non-natural worlds (see Marcus & Fischer 1986:138). Once this fundamental unity between cultural systems is recognised, the basis for exploring substantial differences is established; also the basis for cultural criticism.

From a description of the emerging styles of cultural critique, Marcus and Fischer indicate that it ‘must include an account of the positioning of the critic in relation to that which is critiqued, and secondly, the critic must be able to pose alternatives to the conditions he is criticizing’ (1986:115). The contribution of anthropology to this practice of cultural critique is that by
making use of its cross-cultural perspective it becomes possible to conduct criticism in both situations—the domestic and the alien. Add to this the potential of the cultural critic to be a reader of cultural criticisms and New Testament studies are confronted with a brand new agenda.

It is a fallacy to think that all forms of otherness and difference are to be celebrated (see Bernstein 1991:313). It is equally a fallacy to think that one can return home the same after an encounter with otherness; dialogue does not leave one untouched; 'Once I have been receptive to otherness, I can never come home the same', Lee (see 1988:46) says. Therefore, dialogue as cultural critique runs in at least two directions: it subjects the other to assessment and evaluation and it questions the cultural beliefs and practices in the interpreter's home.

On the one hand New Testament studies therefore includes assessment and criticism of the beliefs and practices that are encountered in the pages of those documents. It is with new lenses that, instead of seeing early Christian beliefs and practices as unique and pure, it becomes apparent that what has always been seen as savage or primitive religious practices, is a shadowy version of ourselves in the earliest Christian documents. A fresh set of questions can be used for understanding Israel's and early Christianity's totemism and ancestrism, their views on copulation, reproduction, digestion and excretion. The symbolic distinctions in such aspects reflect and represent the experience of their bodies which was part of their religious culture (see Eilberg-Schwartz 1990:237). If we want to understand their view on God, views on salvation and needs for salvation, to mention only a few aspects, we will have to understand their religious culture in more detail.

Assuming that others, like ourselves, act according to social rules and codes does not imply that these should be applied mechanically. The discovery of a variety of modes of accommodation and resistance by individuals and groups to their social order, protects us from dealing with these issues in a simplistic way (see Marcus & Fischer 1986:133). But even when such codes and rules are turned upside down in a particular instance, we and they need to know what is turned upside down. Therefore, the idea of rules and codes remains a useful one (see Burke 1987:6). In the end, engagement in other peoples' cultural world is even more tricky than in our own.

Given the two legs of dialogue (as negotiation and as cultural criticism), it is in conclusion worth listening to what Murray has to say about dialogue.

Barbarism...threatens when men cease to talk together according to reasonable laws. There are laws of argument, the observance of which is imperative if discourse is to be civilized. Argument ceases to be civil when it is dominated by passion and prejudice; when its vocabulary becomes solipsist, premised on the theory that my insight is mine alone and cannot be shared; when dialogue gives way to
series of monologues; when the parties to the conversation cease to listen to one another, or hear only what they want to hear, or see the other’s argument only through the screen of their own categories.... When things like this happen, men cannot be locked together in argument. Conversation becomes merely quarrelsome or querulous. Civility dies with the death of dialogue (quoted by Bernstein 1991:339).

When the cultural otherness of the New Testament documents is denied, New Testament scholarship by and large deprives itself from true dialogue with the other. However, New Testament studies subsequent to the anthropological turn have the potential of contributing not only to theological discourse, but also to general intellectual questions in society. A better understanding of the self and of others leads to a celebration of civility. Who is better positioned than New Testament scholars to address, in a cross-cultural perspective, the sacred canopies which cover the cultural systems in our country?

3.2 Teaching the New Testament after the anthropological turn

The impact of the anthropological turn on the teaching of Biblical studies raises a number of issues.

Firstly, New Testament studies reconceptualised as historical-anthropological studies has far reaching consequences for the relationship between Biblical studies and Biblical Archaeology. They become co-partners in a cross-cultural enterprise. The reading of ancient texts and the interpretation of archaeological evidence are both subject to cross-cultural interpretation.

Secondly, New Testament studies refigured as historical-anthropological studies become stake holders in the larger interdisciplinary movement. What is going on in the interdisciplinary movement is not only a redrawing of the cultural map, that is, redrawing the lines between disciplines, but the alteration of the principles of mapping is at stake (see Geertz 1980:166). New Testament studies redefined as cross-cultural dialogue is re-situated in the intellectual debate. Especially in its function of cultural critique, it becomes part of the mainstream of the social and human science tradition of a self-conscious criticism (see Marcus & Fischer 1986:113).

True dialogue brings into the open the strangeness not only of the other, but also of the self. Therefore, amongst others, the anthropological turn allows us to discover the savage in first-century Christian documents, but also the savage in ourselves—be that in the garment of Third world or First world cultures. As historical-anthropologists New Testament scholars will become students not only of the first-century Mediterranean cultural system, but also of the cultural systems of the newly discovered tribes, the Nacirfa.
*Htuos.* They are the people who occupy the land of Acirfa Htuos (or South Africa if you read it from the backside). This idea of turning the anthropological lens onto the domestic scene comes from Miner (1956). Can we afford to turn a blind eye to the contributions from interdisciplinary sources?

Thirdly, the anthropological turn provides a framework for dealing with the *Africanising* of Biblical studies. From the demand that not only the cultural system of the readers but also that of the documents should be taken into account, a possible way of dealing with the Africanising of Biblical studies emerges.

The four components of Africanising discussed by Moulder (see 1991:115-116), can be taken as an indication of what is implied by the Africanising of our universities. It is about changing:

1. the composition of students, academics and administrators,
2. the syllabus, ‘die leerplan’, the content of what is taught,
3. the curriculum, the whole way in which learning and teaching is organised,
4. the criteria that determine what an excellent research programme is.

If this is a fair presentation of the case of Africanisation, it should be realised that it is based on at least two fundamental assumptions. The first is that there are significant differences between the educational demands of African and European South Africans. The Africanising of syllabi is based on the insight that too much of the content of courses addresses Eurocentric issues and need to become Afrocentric. Secondly, a significant function of education is acculturation—that is, socialisation into a cultural system which includes addressing the problems of that system. Instead of emphasising these differences to a point of opposites, the anthropological turn equips interpreters to address all of them in more or less interesting ways.

Politicians and ideologues may wish to escape or deny the reality of cultural differences and otherness in our country. Scholars and intellectuals cannot do so and instead have to deal with it as one of the major problems in society. They need to educate people to move beyond racism and blatant ethnocentrism and to live in a plural reality in which more than one rationality and truth may exist. Whether we describe these differences as First world versus Third world components (see Moulder 1991:121) or as Eurocentric- and Afrocentric world views (see Sono 1994:xvii), educators are faced with the existence of a diversity of educational demands. It would be difficult to conceive those people opposing the hegemony of an Euro-centric education, simply replacing it with the hegemony of an Afro-centric one. Instead, ways should be explored for reconciling both into something new. There is no bet-
ter way available for dealing with culture-sensitive education than the anthropological turn. In being exposed to different kinds of case and cultural scenarios available in anthropological research, the social-scientific approach provides interpreters with conceptual tools for understanding alien cultures as well as their own culture in a more adequate way.

If academic excellence is measured not in terms of the problems tackled but by the way it is done (see Moulder 1991:116), then the anthropological turn provides us with direct access to the problem since it aims at cultural dialogue where the reader’s or student’s cultural system is just as much part of the interpretive process as that of the New Testament documents. In fact, it is by way of cultural dialogue that a sensitivity for the problems in the African soil will become apparent. The same applies to the development of syllabi and curricula. A sensitivity towards the student corpus and their needs and problems is much easier to identify once one embarks on a journey which consciously and explicitly advocates for the student’s cultural system to be included in the interpretive process.

It should, however, be realised that higher education consists of more than acculturation—it also consists of the broadening of the horizons set by acculturation. King and Bella distinguishes between the acquisition of knowledge, the development of intellectual or critical skills and the enlarging of understanding or contextual thinking (see 1987:7). Dialogue as cultural criticism is perfectly situated in developing intellectual skills while dialogue as cultural negotiation enlarges understanding. Cross-cultural comparison also contributes to the development of skills in identifying links within and between webs of significance.

Being introduced to what lies behind the horizon of one’s own cultural system (the opportunities that other cultures provide) is not only enriching but necessary in our country. Not only does the anthropological turn help students to understand the New Testament and their own cultural system in a more appropriate way, it equips them to deal with cultural differences in their everyday lives in an adequate way. Someone who has learned to respect other cultures, to get involved in dialogue in its dual sense of negotiation and cultural critique, can do so also in everyday life. In a world where ‘people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth, and power, and yet contained in a world where, tumbled as they are into endless connection, it is increasingly difficult to get out of each other’s way’ (Geertz 1988:147), we can work towards a way of living with these differences harmoniously.
4 ANTICIPATED OBJECTIONS

One can immediately anticipate a number of objections, especially from the side of traditional New Testament scholarship, to this development.

4.1 We are not trained as anthropologists and can for that reason, not take the anthropological turn.

As it is, it is difficult enough to understand the New Testament and now the demand for including ourselves and our cultural systems into the interpretive process, adds just more obstacles. That is true, and the demands are even more serious than anticipated before starting on the anthropological turn. Perhaps we should have thought about that long before we ventured into the study of documents from an alien and distant culture. The point of my argument is that unless these documents are understood in terms of their (alien) cultural system, they are simply (in an ethnocentric way) created according to the image of the interpreter's own culture. But despair is not the only reaction possible in this situation.

Perhaps the time has come to abandon the idea of the individual genius who can control the whole field of research. The future of excellence in human and social research (as the natural sciences have long since discovered) most probably lies in research based on collaboration. No single researcher can master all the literature, grasp all the problems and explore all the opportunities any more—especially not in an interdisciplinary venture. Perhaps the strong individually orientated researchers who still think academic salvation lies in the individual genius, can learn a lot from the community orientation in African cultures. Research should become 'community projects' and research excellence the product of collaborative efforts.

4.2 The theological dimension is abandoned in favour of social and cultural dimensions

The objection reads that this approach abandons any concern with what the texts say to us. On the contrary. This argument does not imply an abandonment of the 'theological message' of New Testament documents but relocates the source of that 'message' in a first-century meaning system. The historical-anthropological study of the New Testament assumes that the Christian tradition from its very inception should be seen not as revealed religion which had fallen from the sky, but one that has developed historically and has absorbed many ideas from its cultural neighbours. It is only after the anthropological turn that it becomes possible to really understand the so-called theological viewpoints and insights of those people. The anthropologi-
cal turn not only focuses on socio-cultural aspects, but claims that every human activity, idea, thought and practice is embedded in a particular cultural system. In order to understand the single manifestation, one has to understand the overall cultural system within which it originated and operated.

4.3 The anthropological turn advocates a monism of methods and disregards the plurality of approaches available today

One of the buzzwords nowadays is plurality and with it comes the advocates for a plurality of methods. In this paper I have argued for the plurality of voices and therefore it is understandable that some scholars may object to the apparent monism of methods implied in the anthropological turn.

There should be no misunderstanding. The anthropological turn is based on two assumptions: the recognition of the cultural alienness and therefore cultural particularity of the New Testament documents and the insight that words and deeds have meaning within a cultural system. Therefore, the social-scientific approach defined as a historical-anthropological approach does not ascribe to a particular method but is the generic term for a specific kind of approach, namely, a cross-cultural approach to the New Testament documents. Many tools (such as rhetorical, literary, or social science tools) can and should be used in order to conduct cross-cultural interpretations. Some approaches undoubtedly, are ill equipped for dealing with material from an alien and distant cultural system.

4.4 It is an overestimation to claim that social-scientific interpretations can represent other cultural systems—they merely provide constructions which have no special privilege

There can hardly be any objection left to the insight that all we have are humanly constructed versions of reality. Reality is socially constructed, the sociologists of knowledge teach us, but reality is also socially interpreted. The stronger one insists on the social construction of reality, the more one will have to acknowledge that others also construct their realities and the only access to such constructions is via socially interpreted reality. The stronger one's insistence on socially constructed reality, the stronger the commitment should be towards understanding others' beliefs and practices within the framework of their socially constructed cultural systems.

Therefore, while it has to be admitted that the only thing a social-scientific approach can present us is constructions, we have to add that that is all we have. One's self-perception as father or mother, as citizen or intellec-
tual is based on social constructions but that does not prevent one from acting as father, mother, citizen or intellectual.

4.5 Only African South Africans can Africanise the content of courses

The ability to recognise cultural differences suggests the ability to escape one's own framework and enter the confines of another. The anthropological turn is based on the argument that it is possible for modern researchers to understand the alien and distant cultural system of the first-century Mediterranean people. It is possible to learn to participate in certain practices and to act according to specific rules without having to become a member of a group. In short, one need not share a cultural system in order to understand it. If this is true with regard to the first-century Mediterranean cultural system, it is true of all contemporary cultures. One need not be an African South African in order to present a course on an African reading of the New Testament, like one need not be a European in order to understand the essentials of the modern western scientific culture. Should one have to concede that African scholars are better equipped to understand African culture by virtue of simply being African, the whole purpose of learning and research would be denied. On the basis of that argument psychological research would be superfluous due to people being psychological beings and so would sociological research due to humans being social animals.

Instead of wasting resources in trying to exclude one another, the time has come for a multi-cultural design of Biblical studies courses. In such a design a major norm would be solid cross-cultural dialogue. The anthropological turn equips us for this venture. Above all, the anthropological turn fosters a sensitivity for those aspects which constitute peoples' deepest convictions and views of reality—their cultural system or meaning system. New Testament studies can contribute towards the creation of a culture of respect for those aspects side by side with the study of the New Testament documents as meaningful and culturally significant texts in our society.

WORKS CONSULTED


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