Orthodoxy and other-worldliness of the church: Johannine perspectives on Christianity in a new South Africa

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ABSTRACT

It is argued in this article that the Johannine portrayal of Jesus and his relationship to the Johannine communities is reliable and requires adherence. In this manner the orthodoxy and other-worldliness of the church is manifested.

There are two states of life ... that are known to the Church, whereof the one is in faith, the other in sight; one is the temporal sojourn in a foreign land, the other in the eternity of the (heavenly) abode; ... one on the way, the other in the fatherland; ... The one was signified by the Apostle Peter, the other by John. (Augustinus Tract 124)

1 ‘PROLOGUE’

I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution on what can be called the ‘church’, the institution of Christianity. To participate in a discussion on some aspects of the church gives me great pleasure. Such a discussion is also quite appropriate in a Festschrift for my ex-colleague in the Department of New Testament at Unisa, professor Johnnie Roberts. I hold Johnnie Roberts in high esteem and deeply appreciate him as an academic, colleague and friend. He has, especially since 1975, meaningfully contributed to my own development as an academic. I shall cherish his input forever.

During his entire career Professor Roberts has devoted his intellectual powers and spirit to a thorough consideration of the church. This can be seen, inter alia, in his study on the Letter to the Ephesians. He has also devoted his energy to the church and its activities in the new South Africa by his continued involvement. My contribution, dealing with Johannine perspectives on the church, is therefore quite appropriate.

Since it is assumed that the Johannine religious community’s way of thinking (considered as orthodoxy) and its style of behaviour (considered as other-worldliness) can be detected between the lines of the fourth gospel’s narrative, I would like to join my research with that of Roberts (cf in this regard Lombard 1987; 1989; Lombard & Oliver 1991).

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Since the completion of these three studies the social-scientific approach has provided further insights on the Johannine religious community. Consequently, reference is made to cultural-anthropological aspects, such as the nature, structure, social and religio-ethical value systems, that were operative in communities around the Mediterranean during the initial stages of the Common Era.

In comparison to a literary critical and narratological approach to the fourth gospel, the social-scientific approach has made significant progression. Where the former regards the text as a mirror, reflecting via the text-world a community that can be depicted as the implied or intended readers, a social-scientific approach is concerned with the real historical readers of a religious community. It looks at the way they thought, spoke, behaved and acted in terms of their value-systems. Where narrative criticism investigates issues relating to the readers with literary critical insights, a social-scientific procedure researches and analyses the world of Christianity in general and the Johannine community in particular at the time of their origins. This is done by scrutinising all available sources that might be relevant, including the documents of the Old and New Testament.

2 THE JOHANNINE COMMUNITY—WHO WERE ITS MEMBERS?

I propose that the implied readers in the textual world be seen as in referential correlation to the first historical readers of the fourth gospel (and mutatis mutandis of the three general letters under John’s name). Judging from indicators contained by the Johannine text, the identity of these readers was of an ambivalent nature consisting of a mixture of both Jewish and Hellenistic elements. This has already been argued in 1987 (cf. Lombard 1987:305, 406f; also Olsson 1987:43; Brown 1979:7).

Despite the need to continuously assess its validity, the argument concerning a referential correlation between implied readers and historical readers functions as a working hypothesis for this essay. It boils down to the assertion that the referential correlation between the textual world (with its implied/intended readers) and the real world (with its first historical readers) runs from the real world outside the textual world to the textual world of the implied readers, and not vice versa (Lombard 1987:410; on the identity of the community cf also Robinson & Koester 1971, Meeks 1972, Cullmann 1975, Kysar 1975, Culpepper 1975, Smith 1975, Martyn 1979, Brown 1979, Segovia 1982). It is with this research in mind that social-scientific studies—with the aid of sociolinguistics—can take us further (cf Malina 1994; Botha 1996).

These studies give expression to the insight that language usage closely relate to and reflect the community (understood comprehensively: social, cultural and religious aspects included) within which the language functions. This means that language is an effective and descriptive kind of social interaction. Hence, it is possible to construct a socio-historical context from the way in which people in a
specific social location at a particular point of time in history used language (cf Botha 1996:257). The assumption is that any literary text, such as John’s gospel, reflects or displays an authentic hard core image of the spirit, face and dealings of the community it represents and endeavours to serve. This means that, in terms of the dynamics of language and its use as a creative social event for intelligible communication, sociolinguistics justify the following observation. The social structures and groupings, value systems, preferences in life, and profound credal sentiments or convictions which direct and guide the conduct of everyday life, are demonstrably apparent in ancient and modern literary documents. These social dimensions are usually expressed in the form and idiosyncrasies (semantical idiom) best suited for successful communication with a particular community.

Considering these statements it becomes clear that the credal and spiritual thoughts of the Johannine community, as well as its non-negotiable commitment to actualise these in everyday life, are disclosed in a distinctive way in the ancient text of John’s gospel. This text describes why and how the members of this particular historical community thought as they did, behaved and lived as they did in their multi-cultural environment. This world comprised the cultures of the Jews, the Greeks and the Romans; as such it was a heterogeneous world of mixed religious convictions. Moreover, at that particular time this world was hostile towards Jesus Christ.

Amidst this scenario John’s distinctive religious group was formed. The Johannine religious community had to cope with all these factors current in its world; it also had to function as a protective environment for the cause set by its primary founder, Jesus. Compromises exist in various degrees. Would a too radical compromise not have been detrimental to the cause of the dynamics and imperatives inherent in the Christian movement? This is the dilemma in which the Johannine community found itself.

Social-scientific enquiries on group formation assist us in finding a better understanding of interreligious movements in antiquity. Malina (1994:178, 181; see also Petersen 1993:3, Onuki 1984:26) indicates that John uses anti-language (that is, apologetic jargon) to identify his community as an antisecular group (cf also Lombard 1995:260ff). Such a group can be seen as an alternative community (an ‘alternate society’), because it has been embedded in a larger society designated as ‘this world of the Judeans’. The Johannine community came into existence as a specific articulation within Christianity and as such gives an indication of the multi-faceted Mediterranean world (see Botha 1996:267f).

The formation of groups within the ranks of Christianity went through various phases. Examples of these groups are the ‘Q-community’ (early subscribers to Jesus logia relating to the alleged Q-document), a ‘pillars in Jerusalem’ group adhering to Jesus as a teacher with unique authority; a ‘Jesus-family’ group who maintained close family ties with Jesus and concentrated on his teachings, also
groups who focused on the miracles of Jesus and those who were in conflict with the synagogues in Hellenistic areas. There were also other groups further northwards in Syria, Asia-Minor and Greece. All these formed part of a kaleidoscope of Christian groupings with varying and differing interpretations of the words and deeds of Jesus (see Botha 1996:258ff).

Such groups can be classified in the following classes: 'groups', 'gangs', 'factions', 'sects'. Further configurations can be made and one can talk about 'cliques', 'action sects', and it would even be possible to expand the boundaries to a 'new religion' such as Christianity in the fourth century during the time of Emperor Constantine the Great.

The Johannine community can be classified as a 'gang'. Although this may sound strange, it simply means that the followers of John could be seen as an anti-societal community, different from the other associations in the first century Mediterranean world. To put it differently: 'John' wrote his gospel from and to an alternative community of people who lived and struggled with the rest of the society with whom they and their founder were at loggerheads (cf also Lombard 1995 260ff, 1997:13ff). Consequently, a consensus on what could constitute a Christian credo must have been a later development.

A further observation is that John's version of the comprehensive Jesus story and his specific high christological understanding of it gradually moved from a position of suspicion on the periphery of Christianity into the mainstream. This is clear by the letter and spirit of the formulation of the first proper ecumenical credo on christology, namely the Credo of Nicea in 325 CE. Recent studies, such as that by Drane (1993:8, 11), confirm this state of affairs. Another very important study supporting this observation with regard to the formation of the Credo of Nicea is that by Wilson (1984) entitled, Jesus, the evidence, an investigation of the Jesus-event undertaken for the British television in the prestigious 'Major TV Documentary Series'. Wilson describes the story of the life, actions and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and the development of the Jesus-movement, and its further evolution into the beginning of the Middle Ages.

Viewed from this perspective it can be postulated that the Johannine circle of believers constituted but one of various groupings within early Christianity, all of which were deployed in the vast area around the eastern and north-eastern parts of the Mediterranean world.

3 THEOLOGY AND RELIGION WITHIN THE JOHANNINE CHURCH

Jesus formed the heart of the convictions and sentiments of this community. Jesus was for 'John' and for the believers of the Johannine community most certainly not to be perceived in docetic terms as if he were no real human person (contra
Kasemann and others). On the contrary, its christology was truly anti-docetic as being embedded in the concept and event of the incarnation of the Son of God (see Schnelle 1992:71ff). In the prologue and first chapters of John 1:1-3:36 this Jesus/Son-of-God is witnessed to as the μονογενής θεός, that is, the unique one who is God, and the one who ἐγένεσατο God, that is, he communicates divine things to humankind (see Lombard 1997:17f). Furthermore, he is the logos/wisdom of God (λόγος and σοφία) who was and is from eternity from God and by God as being God himself. He is the one who brings with him from the heavenly abodes God's true omniscient wisdom and reveals it to human, thereby becoming the Revealer. He is even more unique than Moses and Abraham and has been there acon before them. This true God and truly human person is the type of figure who functions and who plays the unique role in the symbolic world of the founder and members of the Johannine church.

As far as the members’ relationship with Jesus was concerned, they were ‘disciples’ of the Lord who lived under the imperatives of the ‘new covenant’ and the ‘new law’ as children of father Abraham. They were committed to loving each other and living together as brothers and sisters of God’s household on earth. They were destined to be God’s ‘holy ones’ on earth who had to fulfil God’s high calling to live as sanctified persons amidst the people of this world, the Jews, Greeks and Romans. But, also persons who hesitantly joined their ranks, but regrettably went astra in their thoughts on Jesus, and in their way of living as quasi-christians!

4 JOHANNINE PERSPECTIVES AND THE CHURCH IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

We now need to ask what has happened to the thrust of John’s narrative about Jesus as he has told it in his gospel, and what its impact on societies during almost two millennia of its Wirkungsgeschichte was. What was the literary and ideological influence the Johannine community exerted via several readings and usages? Linked to these is the question what have exegetes made of this gospel vi-a-vis the life and calling of the church.

In this respect a critical survey of modern theologians’ contributions makes some very important observations. These insights may serve as guidelines for the church en route to the year 2000 and beyond, since they serve as equipment with the armour provided by John’s gospel and the inspired example set by the Johannine church.

In the above-mentioned study of Drane (1993:8f) on Jesus, he observes that by the nineties of this century most of the Jesus followers no longer live in the so-called ‘Christian West’. A survey done by his Institute in Scotland (at the Stirling University) shows that 60% of all Christians are non-white, non-western! He
strongly emphasises a difference in approach to what believers do with Jesus and his message. It boils down to the phenomenon that whereas traditional western Christianity, has generally imprisoned Jesus in the straitjacket of what happens in church buildings on Sunday mornings, these people (non-westerners—Lombard) have taken his teaching at face value, and applied it to the whole of life (8). I can only support this statement.

However, the pluralistic environment in which Christianity finds itself as a result of its expansion among non-western peoples, has compelled western exegetes to explore new ways of understanding and reading the texts of the New Testament. It also compelled them to pay specific attention to who Jesus was, what his saving activities and work entailed, as well as the effects of his preaching on every believer. This approach has, furthermore, led to scholars asking sociological and psychological questions via social-scientific and sociolinguistic procedures. These were the effects of a renewed realisation of the adoration for and significance of Jesus for the everyday life of believers in a world opposing the Jesus-religion and even the Johannine version of this religion. This appreciation even extends to circles of devoted Muslims and Hindus who share this respect and appreciation for Jesus. In the New Age Movement the influence of Jesus can also be seen. The investigation of Drane testifies to this widespread, modern significance of Jesus. He (1993:11) writes: 'This one unique individual has had such a profound impact not only in his own day, but on the whole history of civilisation'. It seems that the profound significance this individual had necessitates a reconsideration of his life and the insights the Johannine church displayed.

Since Drane's publication others also emphasise an understanding of especially John's gospel as relevant for our context and time. In Culpepper's (1994) study on John the Zebedee, attention is paid to the nature, function and Wirkungsgeschichte of legends or traditions relating to John and his gospel narrative. The study by Stibbe (1992) on John as storyteller epitomises a multi-disciplinary reading, using insights from narrative criticism and the social-scientific approach. Gospel stories must be subjected to a multi-disciplinary reading, says Stibbe, because they are multi-narratives. For such a comprehensive methodology Stibbe requires historical, sociological and literary techniques. Each text should be read on at least three levels, namely that of the text, the context (historical and sociological), and the pre-text or co-text, (historical frame of reference of the text and its story). All these components must receive proper attention, since stones (such as John's gospel) have a functional structure and nature and they are social discourse oriented to an historical audience (1992:12).

Petersen (1993), in his study on the language and characterisation of the fourth gospel, also worked within the social-scientific paradigm. Petersen's concern is the type of language used to convey the message about Jesus to the original audience of John's gospel. He concludes that the language use of John is a blend of
everyday, ordinary language and a “special language” suitable to the Johannine community. This “special language” transforms the ordinary language in a way that makes it into an anti-language. The oppositional character of the language, then, functioned socially to distinguish the Johannine believers from their opponents.

Regensburger (1989) also deals with the socio-political undertones in John’s gospel, which are vital to a proper interpretation.

The final contribution which needs to be mentioned is that of Maluleke (1997). Maluleke’s contribution is important because it comes from the church in the South African context and it links up with the observations by Drane concerning the present face of Christianity.

Maluleke reveals some basic perceptions and experiences pertaining to Jesus. He talks about the ‘re-imaging and appropriation of Jesus Christ... (as) one of the deepest barometers of Christian contextualisation’ (1997:188). This re-imaging of Jesus should be compared to the image of Jesus as conveyed to the peoples of Africa by the mainline missionary churches. Such a Jesus ought to keep in line with the current issues and needs of Africa’s people. For example: all the constituents of Jesus’ image through the centuries, namely race, class, attributes and moral character, have changed from context to context (189). In the process of re-modelling the image of Jesus as ‘the lamb of God’, the term ‘lamb’ is transformed into the African mahamba, which bears the semantic connotation of recipience—that which one receives from the traditional healer or from one’s ancestor and which is crucial to one’s health and well-being (190). This could be medicine, rituals and taboos, and/or a combination of some of them. In this view mahamba is something one is existentially involved with as something one receives, what one does in giving something to the gods/ancestors, and something that one becomes. It is a re-interpretation of the image of the lamb that makes profound sense to an African person. In this vein of thinking about the Jesus figure a repertoire of many songs and poems came into existence. In all of these Jesus is depicted as one who does not expect from his followers what worldly leaders expect from theirs. Jesus is honoured and praised for the freedom and ‘free-ness’ (no cost involved) of Jesus’ love, care and healing. In this regard a song from Mozambique during the Renamo-Frelimo war goes:

We have found a free life (healing) in Jesus.
We live for free; We live for free in the gospel.
When the little devil troubles us, we only need to kneel down and pray.
All troubles will then disappear into nothing.
Because of the gospel (Maluleke 1997:196)

And another one expressing absolute faith and confidence in Jesus:

I will hold onto Jesus as he hangs on the cross.
Till I get my crown. (1997:196)
The fate bestowed by African believers, artists and theologians on Jesus and his image according to Maluleke is clear from this small glimpse behind the curtains of the African heart. Suffice to summarise a few trends in this regard.

In this culture Jesus becomes an 'other'—someone who dances and sings, people speak through him and he through them. He is not a far-away removed king who sits on the clouds, nor is he one who is obsessed with the sins of sinners. He is a healer par excellence, that is, he makes people better. Jesus is also one who screams from the cross, and through the throats of people in Africa he also screams from the pulpits, in streets and in squatter-camps! And finally, Jesus, in the eyes and minds of people from Africa, also smiles—on the cross the ironic smile of defiance casting away the pain of the cross (:200).

Maluleke postulates that Africans are taking Jesus by the hand, teaching him a few African 'moves' (that is, steps on the dancing floor of life—Lombard), and sensitising him to local issues and conditions (:200f). Perhaps this might re-affirm the classical saying of the Roman historian Pliny (23-79CE) who said: 'ex Africa semper aliquid novi', which he deemed to be somehow, 'unde etiam vulgare Graeciae dictum...adferre', translated as 'whence it is commonly said among the Greeks that “Africa always offers something new”' (Plin NHII 2.8.42).

Is this a valid form of re-imagining (re-contextualisation and re-interpretation) which would be in line with the letter and spirit of the perceptions about Jesus in John's gospel? Is this the kind of Jesus that functioned and operated within the symbolic worlds, within the ranks and lives of John and the Johannine church?

Before we can answer this vital question, attention should briefly be given to another contribution, namely that of Botha (1997). His contribution is a social-scientific analysis of five basic social value systems, considerations that determine one's mode of thinking, conduct and behaviour, as they appear in the cultures of the Mediterranean world, in modern-day West, and in African lives. These five value systems are:

* principal mode of human activity: focus on being, or on doing
* relationships of human beings to one another: individualism, or collectivism/group orientation
* temporal focus in life: future, or on the present
* relationship to nature: mastering/ruling it, or subjection/subjugation to it in its service
* assessment of the status of human nature: essentially good, or a mixture of good and evil (Botha 1997:166ff).

Botha comes to the conclusion that modern day western social and value systems, as a result of its traditional nature, reflect the first series of values: a focus on being, individualistic, future oriented, mastering nature, and maintaining an optimistic view on itself as being basically good. The orientation and perception of the ancient Mediterranean world are different and comprise the second component
of possibilities. The dissimilarity with the modern-day western system is to be noted. All the others maintain a basic focus on the present, on group favouring collectivistic social relationships (which for Africans is expressed by the notion of *ubuntu*), live and behave in subjugation to nature and deem the status of human nature to be a mixture of good and evil. The structure of socio-ethical systems of the Mediterranean world correlates with African culture(s).

I have some reservations with regard to Botha's presentation of these systems. The author himself admits certain possible pitfalls (Botha 1996:163). Yet, there is a positive contribution which deserves full acknowledgement: the world of the Bible is probably closer to that of the world of Africa's people than to the modern-day West.

In this sense there is a marked complementarity to Maluleke's study. In fact, a major insight follows by juxtaposing these two investigations. It becomes possible to see the response—the mode and content of— the African mind to Jesus a positive development (although some aspects of Jesus' work have been decontextualised and have consequently been overemphasised).

5 GUIDANCE FROM THE JOHANNINE CHURCH

My presentation is built on the assumption that the text of John's gospel reflects a frame of mind as well as a style of behaviour and way of living current within the historical Johannine church. The relevance of this assumption seems, for me, to lie in the correspondence between the multi-cultural nature of the Johannine church's environment, and that which is current in the new South Africa.

The very first guideline that presents itself is that a compromise in the form of a fusion with perceptions and convictions of surrounding cultures is out of the question. This relates directly to the basic truths about the nature, status, role and significance of Jesus as the Son of God and as the unique saviour of the world. As a matter of fact, this Jesus, the eternal λόγος is also the unique divine One who is God, and who reveals divine matters to humankind. He is the One who is more than Abraham and Moses. He is the only door that gives access to the heavenly abodes of the Father in heaven; yes, he is the Good Shepherd who gave his life as a sacrifice to take full possession (ownership) of his sheep, and was constituted as the only saviour for the flock of the Lord (Jn 10). John witnessed to the members of his church that Jesus came to the world in all these capacities and that Jesus himself postulated that he is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14). These things are authentically true since Jesus is the Revealer of the Father, but is at the same time also his authentic revelation to humankind. This signal came from—and still comes from—John's church that will and should forever be acknowledged by every believing member of the church.

The *Sitz im Leben* of these observations is one of apologetics. A situation of
conflict necessitates that a case be made against heterodox views and behaviour (see Lombard 1995:260f; 1997:7, 13ff; also Malina 1985:15f, Petersen 1993:5). The implication is that John's gospel can be seen as explicit guidance to the people of his time on how they ought to perceive Jesus and how they should behave towards him. This guidance was prescriptive, identifying and opposing all other views and attitudes of contemporaries within their multi-cultural environment of widely-differing perceptions. Everyone has to be accommodated, but exclusively in and through Jesus the Christ and Saviour. The other side of the coin is that all members of the community must love one another and bear with one another, also with respect to the other's deepest convictions of religion and faith.

This attitude of forbearance was required, however, only with respect to Christians' disposition of honour and respect towards the dignity of other peoples as such, and did not at all entail any negotiations and syncretistic compromises with the content of other peoples' religious convictions. To put it differently: John made, and still makes no provision whatsoever for any, even the slightest, form of a syncretistic inter-religious sub-culture.

Within the Johannine church in the first century of the Common Era, true believers had the calling to work for the spiritual upliftment of the secular society by virtue of promoting their own sui generis ethos for life at large (see Jn 20:30-31). The terms of content of this ethos which John implanted in his followers, claimed to be the authentic words and deeds of Jesus as known and conveyed to him. This was the only fundamental viewpoint and the basic attitude within the ranks of the Johannine church; this perception developed in the course of the history of Christian religion and its credos into the mainline of orthodox Christianity.

To my mind the crucial question at this point in the development of Christianity in its context of the world history is: Are we in the new South Africa entitled to make modifications and adaptations in the form of post-modernistic re-interpretations of the Johannine version of ecclesiology as grounded in its essential connectedness to Jesus according to the fourth gospel? In other words, what are the non-negotiable basics in Christian religion and theology and their functions with respect to secular and heterogeneous humankind? An unavoidable complication is that every sub-culture, developing from the main culture, remains subordinated to the dominant culture in which it was formed.

To know ultimately who and what Jesus was and still is, and what his programme constitutes for humankind are voiced by his first witnesses, such as John. They clearly testify that Jesus Christ came to the world as the unique Saviour to give eternal life to people and that they should live a daily life of uprightness, love, peace and integrity. In this regard Jesus has no substitute and no successor!

By imitation Christian believers can make their own lives meaningful, but will also be part of a universal improvement of their environment. However, in order to do so Christian believers will have to consistently refrain from compromises...
with other sentiments which are anti-Christian, will have to refrain from over-liberating codes of conduct inherent in Christian ethics, and from losing and betraying their true-to-Jesus Christ identity.

The message from the Johannine church, as I see it, is: live as believing Christians—disciples, followers, lovers of Jesus Christ—in this world among all the prevailing cultures and sub-cultures. Never stop recognising Jesus as the Master of one’s faith and the Bestower of eternal life. Moreover, it is not necessary to ‘upgrade’ and ‘finish’ the message of Christ, to tamper with the terms of his task and calling. Those who did this in John’s time, and all of those who have done this through the ages of church went far astray and ended up almost without any achievements to display on their *curriculum vitae* of Christian life.

**WORKS CONSULTED**


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