

CHAPTER 10 Conclusion

10.1 Methodology

It may seem strange in a set of questions designed to elicit a writer's use of the Bible that the questions about the Bible are sub-questions rather buried amongst the others. In my view this arrangement is justifiable. It is true that my questions could be described rather as about epistemology than hermeneutics; however I would argue that the approach of Higher Criticism, for example, has not looked sufficiently widely. I would wish to maintain that locating the Bible as one of the participants in the conversation gives it its correct place. However high a status Christians wish to accord to the Bible, it must be recognised that the Bible points away from itself and towards God. This I would argue is the way in which the aporia in the Bible function. The gaps and inconsistencies in the Bible prevent us from being able or content to stop at the text, but force us to continue beyond it. But God, by entrusting himself and his work to human beings points back towards us. This gives us a dynamic relationship between the different elements of the conversation – but also an understanding that these different elements belong together, and cannot be taken separately.

Seeing the Bible as one of the participants in a conversation allows us to deal with the point which Mosala¹ makes about the Bible's own political ideology. I would not wish to go as far as Mosala who seems prepared effectively to jettison those parts of Scripture which do not promote the voices of oppressed and exploited people. Certainly it must be right to discern and uncover the ideologies of the different voices present – and this is something which is possible if the Bible is one of the participants. Its status is not “the Word of the Lord” in the way which Mosala criticises as leading only to obedience. The hidden agendas can be exposed; you can read between the lines. But there must remain the possibility that the voices of the powerful have something to say to us – *a word from the Lord*, if not *the Word of the Lord*. Cyrus is, uncomfortably, part of God's providence; Abraham and Moses are powerful men; Jesus, though servant, is Lord and Master. The difficult fact must be that the Bible does not offer a single voice, or even a coherent harmony. (And seeing it as part of the conversation endorses the Bible as multi-vocal.) There are words of discomfort for all. Mosala is in danger of missing this, impressive and useful as his work is.

¹ Mosala: Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa (Eerdmans, Michigan 1989) pp 15 – 30

It would be hard to conceive of two mainstream writers who are further apart politically and ecclesiological and stylistically than Cone and Novak – yet through the model of conversation and questioning, I have been able to analyse them both. A question has been asked – is their conversation with the Bible adequate? – and answered from within their own terms. The method can be used to balance and amend, rather than to exclude.

My questions set hermeneutics within a wide context. They acknowledge that a person's thinking is connected with that person's background story and commitments. They effectively require theologians and biblical scholars to be responsible to the academy, Christian communities (their own and others) and the world. They recognise that theology is relational. As Hope says:

“As soon as we start thinking in relational, rather than in doctrinal terms to describe the dynamic between the church and the community, two things happen. One is that the boundaries between church and community start to disappear, at least in our minds – what we are talking about is people being friends, seeing ‘with’ and ‘for’ each other. The second thing is that we are compelled to pay serious attention to what it is to be church in a way which gives credence and authenticity to the things which we most deeply believe, including credal statements and theological doctrines.”²

Several things follow from that wider setting I propose. First, it is a reflection of the point that the Bible does not contain everything with which to do theology. Other fields of knowledge and thought, an analysis of society, reflection within the Christian community – these are all other necessary inputs for Christian theology. Second, those who innovate are (perhaps necessarily) passionate about their work. Dangers for them seem to be alienation from their own communities, as members of those communities react in different ways to their proposals, and also a narrowness of vision which can obstruct even helpful compromise. The wider setting I suggest implies a responsibility of mutual support between theologians and their communities.

² Susan Hope : “Sanctuary” in ed Peter Sedgwick : *God in the City* (Mowbray 1995) pp 191-198

Finally, my questions have a rigorous foundation. This deals with at least two criticisms of a method such as this: that of some post-modernists, who in denying the existence of any meta-narrative appear to relativise everything; and that of those contextual theologians who would deny the right of anyone not sharing their defining experience to question their work. It can be used at several levels – from a parish Bible Study group to a University Theology Faculty. Conversations are part of everybody’s experience, and everyone has learnt (and can learn more) about the art of listening. My suggestion of models of use is also part of this breadth of accessibility. At the same time it has, as I have shown, been capable of analysing Cone’s and Novak’s use of the Bible – and indeed their writing generally – at a level which (as we have seen in Chapter 9) matches other academic critiques of their work. Of course, my critique needed supplementing with the insights of others in the extended conversation. However, this is precisely the point about the model of a conversation, that it looks beyond itself.

10.2 The Church and Political Theology

Both Novak and Cone can be seen as responding to the marginalisation of Christianity. Its marginalisation is a result of its irrelevance – Cone sees this regarding young blacks, Novak regarding America’s businessmen. Ironically, their work does not improve the situation, because each is still vulnerable to the weaknesses perceived by the other: Cone may be economically naïve; Novak is blind to racism. There are also difficulties between the truth-claims and self-perception of Christianity and the pluralism at the heart of post-Christian, post-modern societies.

Yet there are constructive things to say. The first is about the possibility of theology being political at all.³ Some Christian traditions, some churches, and some theologians have maintained that they are attempting apolitical theology. Cone would attack this stance, pointing out that a theology which does not address the political questions of its time is one which supports the status quo – in itself a

³ see Brueggemann: *A Social Reading of the Old Testament* (Fortress, Minneapolis 1994) pp 200-201 on “vested interest interpretations” Brueggemann offers useful further references

political position. Novak would also attack this stance – from a slightly different angle. He might say that the structures of any state, written or unwritten, give a place to a dimension which should be addressed by the theological/philosophical. Theologies which do not play their part in these structures are failing their people. In other words, both Cone and Novak’s believe that Christianity can and must offer a critique of the world.

The second is about incompleteness. I have already pointed out that the Bible does not contain all that is necessary to look at political theology. Political theology must therefore look elsewhere for some of its sources. Both Cone and Novak do this, looking back to their roots – Cone to the spirituals and blues and Black history, Novak to the values of Catholicism and America and the aspirations of his immigrant grandparents. Both also look further afield: Cone to left wing political thinking, and to the exponents of Black Power; Novak to Adam Smith, *laissez faire* free market economics, the Founding Fathers, and right wing political thinking.⁴ Cone and Novak would see a self-reinforcing circle of thinking: the Bible, their own experience, their roots, authentic Christian tradition. All the same, there is need to distinguish between what is of God and what is not:⁵ the Church has in the past lent its support to regimes and ways of thinking which can only give rise to shame. Another aspect of incompleteness, as Long warns,⁶ is that the thinking of political theology is itself limited. This may seem a rather trivial statement, but it must serve as a bound to the aspirations of political theologians, and also to the questioning of its critics.

Third, if Cone and Novak and other political theologians are to avoid accusations of naivety and blindness, they will need to listen to each other. They will need to persevere in the wider conversation I propose, not only with their own communities, nor even with the wider Christian community, but with the world. They will also need to avoid the temptation of giving simple answers to complex questions; this is another limit for political theologians.

4 Some might question the use of these sources which are not distinctively Christian. Actually both Cone and Novak would reply that their roots and sources are Christian – in fact truly Christian, especially as compared with what they oppose.

5 The Deuteronomist’s story of the conflict between Jeremiah and Hannaniah is about precisely this.: Jeremiah ch 28 see Carroll: From Chaos to Covenant (SCM 1981) pp 183 – 189

6 “A theological economics cannot assume its task is to rule the world. A single univocal catholic economy cannot be put forward without subordinating truth, goodness and beauty to power.” Long : Divine Economy (Routledge, London 2000) pp 265-268

We need to celebrate the role and achievement of political theologies. They elaborate language and vocabulary for political thinking. Cone and Novak provide examples of this: the idea of “black”ness is developed by Cone; ideas of creativity, and of democratic capitalism by Novak. Others are doing this as well, of course, for language and ideas do not form in a vacuum, but the theologians are part of the process.

This provision of language is important to politicians. Mrs Thatcher, in her famous speeches on the steps of 10, Downing Street and on the Mound (in Edinburgh, to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland) appropriated religious language. She used it because it (ostensibly) legitimated her political agenda. She must also have hoped that it would resonate in the hearts and minds of the electorate. In other words, through it, she hoped to change attitudes – and this is the second point about the provision of language. Political thinkers express themselves in the hope that they may persuade. A particular feature of the language of political theology is that it does resonate in peoples’ minds; who could not say “yes” to ideas of liberty and liberation, of creativity, or of beauty? Religious language is poetry, it does speak to people on the deepest levels. Language is then all important and the language of theology and religion has a unique power.

A different feature of this unique power is seen in Cone’s work, and also in Rastafariansim⁷, and in the stories of Winstanley and Muenzer⁸: it is the power to resist, especially the power to resist oppression. A particular danger for those who are oppressed is that they are robbed of the possibility of thinking differently. This is of course the point of Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four: that independent thought became nearly impossible because of the re-writing of history and language.⁹ Slaves were denied their own languages, preserving them with difficulty, and imperfectly. They, and others, found in the Bible a language which could support and encourage them and enable them to think “against the grain.”

7 see above Chapter 2 section 2.1.5

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See Christopher Rowland: Radical Christianity (Polity Press 1988) pp 89 ff and passim

9 (e.g. the Ministries of Truth, Love, Peace – and the official language itself: Newspeak).
George Orwell: Nineteen Eighty-Four (numerous editions since 1949 eg: Martin Secker and Warburg 1976)

10.3 The way ahead

Certainly my questions could be refined. I said at the outset that there would need to be a sense of shaping them to the material I examined, and I think that particularly the aspects of responsibility to the Bible need to be applied less mechanically than I did when looking at Novak. By this I mean that, for example, the division into sub-parts of Question 3) c) is perhaps rather artificial; rather the question could be asked as a whole, and care taken to see that the sub-parts were covered.

It would be interesting to see the questions work at different levels – for example in a parish Bible Study group. I have done this on one occasion in one parish, and the members found it helpful, but a more extended trial would be needed.

Theological thinking about Politics and Political Economy is still an important issue nationally, not just for the Churches.¹⁰ In what directions, then should Political Theology go? With Black Theology,¹¹ I would like to see more thinking about racism and sexism, in order to challenge these and other barriers and divisions between human beings. Theology, with its distinctive insights into human nature, should have important contributions to make here. With Novak, I would like to see a celebration of enterprise and creativity and daily life and work. I would like to see more thinking about theologies of resistance, so that there were more strategies available for Christians against a creeping accommodation to the world. Perhaps all these could come together in what one might call ordinary theology – that is a political theology of liberation and celebration for ordinary people.¹²

10 The recent American Presidential elections, and the British May / June 2001 General Election have shown this.

11 John Bennett : The Radical Imperative (Westminster Press, 1975) p 126

12 See Oliver O'Donovan : "Political theology, tradition and modernity" in ed C Rowland : The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology (CUP 1999) pp 235 – 247 : "The oppression experienced by a daily commuter in a large Northern conurbation, or a checkout assistant in a supermarket, or a democratic politician hoping to avoid de-selection by his/her party have attracted astonishingly little notice from the political theologians of our generation." p 246