

CHAPTER 6

RESUMÉ

6.1 THE PROBLEM ADDRESSED

The purpose of this study was to investigate the way in which the earliest followers of Jesus experienced baptism and the Eucharist. I argued that these two rites of the earliest Jesus-followers can be understood as symbols. Beattie (1968:69-70) demonstrated that symbols exhibit three characteristics: there is a *reason* why a symbol is important, it adds *value* to people's lives, and it is *meaningful*. I applied these characteristics of symbols to baptism and the Eucharist, and examined them according to the schema I referred to as: "show"—"tell"—"re-enact".

Experiencing alternate states of consciousness, Jesus "showed" his contemporaries what it meant to come in contact with the presence of God in their lives. The earliest Jesus-followers "told" others what Jesus "showed", and did so by means of anti-language, since "ordinary language" is not a medium through which experiences of alternate states of consciousness can be expressed. Early Jesus-groups "re-enacted" these alternate states of consciousness in rites, such as baptism and the Eucharist.

Rites consist of rituals and ceremonies. In this study the earliest baptism is described as a *ritual* of initiation and status transformation, while the Eucharist is termed a *ceremony* of integration. Baptism symbolized the symbolic crossing of a boundary – by being baptized a person became part of a new group. At the same time such a person experienced a transformation of status – he or she became a "new" person with new rights and responsibilities. Once a person was part of this new group, regular participation in the ceremony of the Eucharist served as confirmation of the person's new role as well as integrating him or her into the group.

In chapter 1, I explained that the *reason* why the earliest followers of Jesus participated in these rites could be that Jesus' example (expressed by his words and enacted by his deeds) demonstrated that it is *meaningful* to live in an unbrokered relation with God. Previously the only way in which an Israelite could experience a relationship with God, was by means of participating in the sacrificial rituals in the temple. Once the earliest Jesus-followers became part of this new group, *value* was added to their lives, because, in contrast to the ordinary society of their time, every person who became a member of this non-hierarchical group was treated in the same manner. This group was structured on the basis of a fictive kinship. Slaves, women, cultically unclean people – people who were excluded from full participation in the customs of the broader society – were all welcomed and treated in the same respectful manner. Since all of this occurred in a period where they experienced themselves as being marginalized, it gave *meaning* to their lives to be part of a community where the resurrected Christ was “present” and where the neighborly living together and the renunciation of status constituted prime values. In the entire process, I contend, alternate states of consciousness played an important role.

Yet, I argued that a serious objection to my hypothesis consists in the fact that, since an alternate state of consciousness is an individual, psychological phenomenon, it is very difficult to determine today, two thousand years later, what the earliest Jesus-followers actually experienced during their alternate states of consciousness. In other words, without empirical evidence of what an individual has really experienced during such a state, the findings of research may be jeopardized, because of the impossibility of ascertaining the religious meaning and value attributed to a specific alternate state of consciousness experience.

In chapter 2, I therefore described the phenomenon “alternate states of consciousness”. I indicated that we can be quite sure that Jesus as well as his earliest followers *did* experience alternate states of consciousness, since these

were part and parcel of first-century Mediterranean culture. John J Pilch¹ carried out extensive research on many instances of such experiences encountered in the Bible, and as a result thus opened our eyes to the importance of these states in the lives of first-century Mediterranean people.

I would not have been able to conduct this study solely on the *assumption* that people experienced alternate states of consciousness in the first-century Mediterranean world. Yet, because of the influence of these states on people's lives, it was documented. We find evidence for the existence of alternate states of consciousness in early texts, as well as in archeological and paleontological discoveries of artifacts from a period long before the New Testament was written. Since the first-century Mediterranean world exhibited "high context" culture, as I have indicated, the characteristics of these states are not explicitly expressed. Nevertheless I proposed that these states can be inferred from *texts* recording the experiences of the earliest Jesus-followers. A model for such references is available in a linguistic phenomenon that Halliday (1976:570-584; 1986:164-182) termed "anti-language". In other words, the method I employed for tracing alternate state of consciousness experiences in the rites of the earliest Jesus-followers was that of anti-language.

Anti-language constitutes the language of an anti-society, which in turn can be described as a conscious alternative to another society. In chapter 3, I argued that the earliest Jesus-followers formed an anti-society because they were marginalized by the institutions that controlled their world, namely the hierarchical Israelite temple tradition as well as the Roman Empire. I also described the important function which the two rites of baptism and the Eucharist fulfilled in the formation of this anti-society. Because the earliest Jesus-followers experienced themselves as marginalized, they longed for a better world. This gave way to an apocalyptic mindset, which made it possible for them to experience the kingdom of God as a present reality, in contrast to their experience of the kingdom of

Caesar. Their “new” experience was manifested ritually by means of participation in the Eucharist.

Since apocalypticism has to do with the revelation of God’s alternative world in the real world, it can be perceived as an alternate state of consciousness phenomenon. The earliest followers of Jesus projected a better future promised by God – a promise that functioned in their present circumstances as a kind of coping mechanism.

Thus, for them to be able to experience the kingdom of God as a present reality, amidst oppressive circumstances, alternate states of consciousness were required. I argued in my study that these alternate states were expressed by means of language patterns that are characteristic of rituals and ceremonies when they are collectively experienced by individuals in a group. In chapter 4, I described the origin of the earliest baptism, as well as the reason, value and meaning in terms of which the followers of Jesus participated in this ritual. In chapter 5, I likewise considered the earliest Eucharist. I indicated the probable instances of anti-language regarding these two rites in the early texts that we have at our disposal and emphasized the apparent reference to alternate states of consciousness in these texts.

The baptism and Eucharist of the earliest Jesus-movement may consequently be understood as rites that re-enacted alternate states of consciousness. Although this kind of state is an individual psychological affair, it can be transformed into words by perceiving such a consciousness in terms of a symbol. In other words, that which was witnessed to by the early Jesus-followers, the *kerygma*, was cast into words. That is, a “psychological” state was transformed into a “real” state. An alternate state of consciousness became a symbol in words.

Another possible way of indicating that alternate states of consciousness played an important role in rituals and ceremonies is by investigating the Greco-Roman

mystery religions. In these religions alternate states of consciousness are easily recognizable. A comparison between the earliest baptism and Eucharist and the mystery religions identifies similarities (which I considered in chapters 4 and 5). These similarities might aid us to recognize the presence of alternate states of consciousness in baptism and the Eucharist as well.

Meyer (1987:6-8) has illustrated how early agrarian or fertility festivals developed into mysteries. For this to be able to happen, the worshippers had to be convinced that the cycle of nature related directly to human life. They believed that plants, animals, and human beings participated in a cycle of life and death. Death came to all the divine forces of nature, but in the end life was victorious. If humans could therefore assimilate the power that made life triumphant in the world of nature, they too might live in a more complete way. How the initiates appropriated this power we do not know, but they may have understood themselves to have experienced an immediate or mystical encounter with the divine. As I have reasoned, it was precisely the close relation that Jesus of Nazareth apparently enjoyed with God that was imitated by his followers.

Sometimes the experiences in mystery religions seem to have entailed an approach to death and a return to life. Initiates even sometimes underwent rituals of dark and death and emerged afterwards in new light and life, or they were declared to have been reborn. This situation was also the case in the earliest baptism. Usually the initiates partook of food and drink in the ceremonial celebrations of the mystery religions, and sometimes they even became one with the divine by participating in a sacramental meal. This in turn is analogous with the earliest Eucharist (cf Reitzenstein 1978:77-78, 336).

Some of the mystery religions held lively public celebrations that preceded the secret ceremonies, while others included rites of purification such as fasting, abstaining from certain foods (such as meat or wine), refraining from sexual intercourse, and submitting to cleansings and lustrations before the initiation took

place. Prayers and sacrifices were also offered to the deities (Meyer 1987:9-10). Afterwards the devotees assembled at a sacred place for the ritual of initiation. In chapters 4 and 5, I outlined an argument that similar practices were associated with the earliest baptism and Eucharist. In this regard, Meyer (1987:12-13) asserts:

Initiation was not classroom education, but an eye-opening experience that transcended earthly realities and mundane learning. Just as any mystical experience ultimately cannot be put into words or described adequately in books, so also the blessed *mystai* heard, saw, and performed the ineffable. They claimed to have tasted death and life and to have been touched by the divine. United with one or another of the deities of the mystery religions – including, some scholars would say, Christ – they beheld the light, and their lives were renewed.

Shamanism comprises another phenomenon that is closely related to the study of alternate states of consciousness. In this study I have suggested that Jesus could be described as a shaman-like figure, or in Israelite terminology, a “holy man”. One of the main characteristics displayed by shamans is the experience of alternate states of consciousness. Jesus was no exception. We possess evidence in cave paintings and rock engravings that alternate states of consciousness constituted an important part of the lives of shamans (see Dowson 1992; Lewis-Williams 2001). Jesus’ alternate state of consciousness experiences began at his baptism and continued through his life. The result of these states can perhaps best be seen in his healings, exorcisms and all-inclusive table fellowship.

It would not have been possible to arrive at this conclusion by merely asking historical questions. The cultural plausibility of alternate states of consciousness needs to be taken into consideration as well.

Craffert and Botha (2005:31-32) maintain that questions of historicity in Jesus research have mostly been answered within a fixed structural pattern which can be described as:

...the linear model of peeling off the inauthentic additions in order to arrive at the historical kernel. It focuses only on the one side of the coin namely verifying of evidence that something could have happened. What anthropological research and reflection about cross-cultural interpretation suggest is that the other side of the coin, namely, what was culturally plausible, must be part of the question.

They aver that criteria for authenticity in historical Jesus research tend to assume a simple measure of reality – that utilized by the contemporary Western world. Such “methodological” aspects are fully interrelated with culturally determined aspects: “What is ‘real’, ‘authentic’ and ‘historical’ can only be indicated with regard to specific cultural experiences and assumptions.” Craffert and Botha contend that the historical questions under consideration cannot be answered merely by reducing the data to “reliable” evidence, but rather by finding new ways of looking at the data.

In this study I have attempted to discover these “new” ways of perceiving the data.

6.2 THE PAY-OFF

In chapter 1, I expressed the hope that in the end this study might assist us to understand what kind of value baptism and the Eucharist could add to our lives today. Institutionalized churches are entering a phase of deinstitutionalization (cf Fox 1990:15-18; Van Aarde 1995b; Dreyer 2004:920, 929-932) and rites such as baptism and the Eucharist were developed before formative Christianity became an institution.

Although these rites still play an important part in the liturgy of most Christian churches today, it seems as if the spiritual dimension that played such an important part in the first century is lacking in institutionalized churches within a Eurocentric context. From a first-century perspective, to be baptized implied that a person needed to take on the roles and responsibilities associated with “Christianity”. To a great extent baptism today is performed as a custom. It is no longer viewed as an “initiation” into the kingdom of God. The Eucharist symbolized an all-inclusive ethical lifestyle, while today people are excluded from the Eucharist on the grounds of not having fulfilled all the necessary “liturgical requirements”. A Eucharist where “Jew” and “Greek”, “slave” and “free”, “male” and “female” cannot share in the body and blood of Christ on an equal footing, has the opposite effect to the original intention of the Eucharist.

The historical era where we live at the moment can be described as “post-ecclesial”. In this regard, Hancock (2005:267-268) asserts: “Rather than treating the eucharist as a measure of power or exclusivity, a qualification of who’s in and who’s out, the Church should begin to understand the eucharist as the very thing that shatters the boundaries between inside and outside.” As postmodern believers we should try to understand the meaning originally attached to baptism and the Eucharist, which could assist us to realize the possible value of baptism and the Eucharist today, without the tag of “formalism” being associated with them.

Hancock (2005:271-272) suggests that we can compare watching a film today with a rite: “The narrative worlds generated by literature and film grab hold of us, transport us from the ordinary into the extraordinary.” It takes place in a designated space. Everybody behaves appropriately and upon completion of the “rite” all the participants return to the “real” world. According to Hancock, although everybody gazes at the screen in a cinema, in reality *nothing* lies behind the screen.

Hancock (2005:271-272; first emphasis mine) describes this phenomenon as follows:

What we perceive as we gaze upon this projection is the illusion of the movement of life, the illusion of real people involved in real situations, expressing real emotions, etc, when in fact our perception is being *altered* as our gaze is doubly manipulated by the lens, first of the camera recording the activity and then of the projector reproducing and amplifying it on the screen....Our perception is...tricked as we regard the on-screen images as actually taking place, as if the frame of the screen were actually a window into some parallel universe – the plot unfolds in real time, but at the end, the film is rewound onto its reel and projected again for the next congregation, again as if for the first time. In this way, the illusion that we are coerced, by the medium itself, into believing is only as real as we perceive it and as we submit to its mythic power. If we view a film with the constant awareness that what we perceive is *false* – in other words, if we fail to willingly suspend our tendency to doubt – the effect is ruined, and the film cannot carry out its illusion. Even more simply, if we close our eyes (and plug our ears), refusing to receive the visual (and aural) input from the movie which seeks to transport us into this elusive, illusory space, the film’s illusion loses its efficacy, and hence ceases to be real.

In similar fashion to a film that transports viewers to “another world”, alternate states of consciousness – through the medium of anti-language – transported the earliest Jesus-followers into the realm of the “kingdom of God”. This could occur again for believers today if they are “open” to it, and do not “close their eyes and plug their ears”.

6.3 IN CONCLUSION

In this study I have indicated that baptism as a ritual of initiation and the Eucharist as a ceremony of participation can be understood anew if one takes

the contemporary knowledge of alternate states of consciousness into consideration. Because of the “institutionalization” of the alternate states of consciousness experienced by the earliest Jesus-followers, an alternative community was formed. Although it is difficult to study alternate states of consciousness because of their psychological individuality, the result of experiencing them – the formation of an alternative community – can be studied much easier because of its empirical nature and witnessed evidence.

Baptism and the Eucharist represent the symbolic “re-enactment” of that which Jesus “showed”. Each is the re-experiencing of an alternative state. By one’s participating in baptism and the Eucharist, the “ordinary” world is interrupted by something out of the ordinary. That which Jesus experienced in his alternate states of consciousness, can also be experienced in these rites, namely that the kingdom of God is immanent, that it differs from the ordinary world, and that people can share in it, in an inclusive manner. As I commented in chapter 1, this was the case in Jesus’ time and it could still be the case today. Yet, we need to attach a similar meaning to baptism and the Eucharist to that which the earliest Jesus-followers attributed to these rites.

By way of summary it can be suggested that:

- Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed an alternative lifestyle;
- he advocated this alternative lifestyle by means of his experience of alternate states of consciousness;
- alternate states of consciousness formed a common part of first-century Mediterranean people’s lives;
- in contrast to this, contemporary Eurocentric people usually feel skeptical about these states;
- the earliest Jesus-followers participated in Jesus’ alternative lifestyle;
- to be able to continue to live in the way Jesus did after his death, his earliest followers founded a new group on the grounds of a fictive kinship model;

- to be able to become a member of this group, a person was required to undergo the initiation rite of baptism;
- at the same time baptism also constituted a status transformation rite, because in the new “family” everybody took on new roles and responsibilities;
- for this status transformation to take place, an alternate state of consciousness was needed;
- once part of the new group, members regularly participated in the integration ceremony called the Eucharist;
- this was a symbolic, ceremonial meal based on the all-inclusive meals that Jesus hosted;
- these meals were an expression of their alternative lifestyle;
- which implied a valuable and meaningful way of living despite oppressive circumstances (marginalization by the Israelite temple tradition as well as by the Roman Empire);
- which was made possible because of their apocalyptic frame of mind and alternate states of consciousness;
- in contrast to this, in a Eurocentric world we have interpreted baptism and the Eucharist as cognitive dogmatic constructs;
- the significance and relevance of this research are to be found in the enhancement of social inclusivity within an ecclesiastical context as an ideal in the present day.

ENDNOTES: CHAPTER 6

¹ See Pilch 1981; 1988; 1993; 1995a; 1995b; 1995c; 1996a; 1996b; 1996c; 1997a; 1997b; 1997c; 1997d; 1998a; 1998b; 1998c; 1999a; 1999b; 1999c; 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2002d; 2002e; 2003a; 2003b; 2004 for examples and explanations of alternate state of consciousness experiences in the Bible and the first-century Mediterranean world, as well as related issues.