

A homiletical reflection on religious tendencies in empirical research among South African youth

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ABSTRACT

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The results of an empirical research amongst high school learners in Grade 11 show that there is a plurality of images of Jesus amongst them. The homiletical question is: How does one preach an authentic sermon to people with a plurality of understandings on crucial faith issues? The article seeks the answer in authentic preaching that is open for discussion that is directed at responsible renewal of our beliefs.

1 INTRODUCTION

The new dispensation since 1994 in our country presents a historical opportunity to monitor by means of empirical research the development of the formation of shared beliefs and values by young people at our now integrated schools. I involved professor J A van der Ven of Nijmegen in this project, together with my empirically able young colleague in practical theology, Jaco Dreyer, now associate professor in our department. We were interested in the socialisation at home and amongst peer groups of these high school learners in their religious beliefs, their own religious beliefs, and the influence of all these on their attitudes, inter alia, on democracy and human rights. We decided on a longitudinal quantitative research project with surveys at intervals of five years, if possible. We conducted the first survey in 1995/1996 and in 2000/2001 we did the second survey at schools in the Pretoria-Johannesburg area. The results of this research with the tendencies it shows, posed several challenges to various theories in theology. Regarding homiletics I deem the views on different images of Jesus, on God and on salvation, of these senior pupils at the high schools as a problem and a challenge for preaching in the Reformed tradition.

The goal of this article is to reflect homiletically on the results of the images of Jesus amongst our research population. To be able

to do that I will go about as follows: the theoretical frame of my approach to homiletics (2); a description of the research project, the theological concepts regarding attitudes towards Jesus that we operationalised in the questionnaire, and the results of the respondents' images of Jesus (3); a description of the homiletical problem that we are dealing with (4); a theoretical frame to communicate the gospel by preaching in such a way that the Word of God can be heard by contemporary listeners (5); and a conclusion (6).

2 APPROACH TO HOMILETICS

In general terms preaching in the Reformed tradition is seen as the communication of the Word of God as we hear it in the Biblical text for our own situation by means of a speech act. This preaching happens in the midst of the congregation as part of the liturgy with the preaching by a theologically trained minister who is called and installed by the church, and the faith community (congregation) as active listeners - participants. In the light of our understanding of preaching, the study and the action of preaching call for theories of communication, of understanding, of language and meaning, of speech and communication, of rhetorics and communication (see for instance Bohren 1974; Keck 1978; Schütz 1981; Craddock 1981; Long 1989; Dingemans 1991; Wilson 1995; Vos 1995, 1996; Immink 1997).

In my work in homiletics I always searched for theories that can be helpful to a preaching in which the congregation can hear a word from God in the Biblical text for the sermon in a topical way, in the terminology of their own situation and in an event that has a changing effect in their lives. I looked for it in the New Hermeneutic of Ebeling (Pieterse 1979) based on the philosophical tradition of the late Heidegger and Gadamer - especially their philosophy of language. I later realised through the criticism of Habermas that it is still conceived in the tradition of romantic hermeneutics. In Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach I saw a way forward within critical hermeneutics that still contain some of the profits gained by Gadamer (Pieterse 2001, cf also Jonker 1998). Of late I am revisiting my thinking again and got interested in the language act by means of which we communicate the Word of God in preaching. Indeed, speech and communication have everything to do with human discourse and textual meaning (Immink 2001a:1).

being probably emphasised the power of language in the footsteps of Gadamer's philosophy of language in the communicative event too strongly and his project of word and faith to address the *Fremdsprachlichkeit* of faith in our times was probably too optimistic and divinistic, but it pushed me in a direction I wanted to go. It pointed to the creative power of language. Communication in language is not just the sharing of information. It has a transformational effect. We cannot live without language and we express our understanding of the world and our position in it through language. Language creates new possibilities of living, it refers to reality and it creates new realities. It seems necessary to me to view general interpersonal communication theory from the vantage point of language.

To think of human communication as well as to understanding it in linguistic terms is a known approach in practical theology (cf De Jong 1990; Grözinger 1991; Heitink 1999:141). Ricoeur plays a major role in integrating insights from the hermeneutical tradition and the analytical orientated philosophy of language regarding language and meaning and the understanding of the meaning of a text in our own context. His point of departure is the usage of language. Usage of language is an event. His distinction between semiotics and semantics helps us to move a step further in understanding discourse of which we make use when we preach (Ricoeur 1976a:6). "The object of semiotics - the sign - is merely virtual. Only the sentence is actual as the very event of speaking ... A sentence is made up of signs, but is not itself a sign" (Ricoeur 1976a:7). The description of communication in speech in linguistic categories from the vantage point of semiotics helped me to understand communication theory for preaching in language categories. But, of course, one must see the speech act from a semantics point of view in order to understand speech and communication in preaching as discourse as Ricoeur teaches us. We need to understand and translate (*vertolk*) the *meaning* of the Biblical text for preaching and we need to communicate *meaning* to our listeners in the sermon. Meaning is transmitted through discourse.

As a *theoretical frame* I would think of a general interpersonal communication theory as the broad framework to provide scope for the study of the different aspects of the language of preaching as communication. In this communication theory viewed from the vantage point of language the *pragmatics* side of it opens up possibilities so that we can speak of preaching that is rhetorically thought

through, that is hermeneutically appropriate (the textual hermeneutics of Ricoeur is appropriate here, cf Vaessen 1997), and that is effective, - the performative power of speech when we preach the word of God as we discover it in Scripture under the guidance of the Spirit (the speech actions theories are appropriate here). Within this broad theoretical frame I think we can develop homiletic theories on the questions of language and meaning, on hermeneutics, on rhetorics, and on the transformative effect when we speak of God in preaching. South Africa came out of its isolation and the influence of modernity and late modernity (postmodernity) is strong. The insights of the speech actions-theories (cf Austin 1976; Searle 1969, 2000; Leech 1983) are helpful in a context of modernity and late modernity that provide a view of life according to which many members of the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* are orientating themselves.

To understand “meaning” is crucial for our understanding of the language of faith that we communicate in preaching. The meaning of an utterance does not concur with the locutionary act of speech but is established on the level of the *illocutionary* act of speech (Immink 1997:481). Ricoeur also calls it propositional content (Ricoeur 1976a:16-17). Ricoeur works with the dialectic between event and meaning (Ricoeur 1976a:11-22). Speech as an event happens as a moment in time, but the illocutionary load stays and is understood as meaning (Immink 1997:482). A speech act in a moment in time is not lost, but the meaning of it stays as propositional content. The same speech act could be repeated in the same or in other words, it can be translated into other tongues, but through all this it retains its identity, its propositional content - therefore, as an illocutionary act we understand it as meaning. The intention of the speaker or author comes from an idea in the mind, or an experience, or feelings, or convictions which she/he wants to communicate in language. The speaker conveys something to others and what is conveyed is not the experience, but the meaning of it. “The experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public” (Ricoeur 1976a:16). Meaning, therefore, has a noetic content (Immink 1997:483).

But utterances in language also have a *referential* content (Immink 1997:484). The intention of the author comes out in the issue that is addressed in language, the ‘what’ and the ‘what about’ of an utterance - and that is a statement about reality. The meaning of an utterance lies in its referential function. There is a referential tie

between the language we use and the real world, also the divine world when we preach. In an ontological sense our language of faith refers to the world as we know it, but also to God's world of meaning. In preaching we proclaim God's salvific work performed in Jesus Christ (Immink 2001a:2). Language also has a *representative* function. It can refer as present to something that is absent – speaking of table Mountain in Pretoria and seeing it in the mind's eye.

We preach in the church, in the midst of the community of faith, who are in communication, in dialogue with each other and with their Lord (Pieterse 1987; Long 1989). Homiletics is a theological discipline with the aim to serve the praxis of preaching in the church. In the human act of speech and communication in the liturgy and the sermon we proclaim God's saving acts in Jesus Christ. We present Jesus Christ through the performative power of the language of faith by proclaiming the meaning of the Biblical text through the creative work of the Spirit. We believe that the risen Christ is present through the Word and the Spirit in our liturgy and preaching. When the congregation hear the word of God in the words of the text that we communicate in our speech acts, transformation and change are possible. The referential nature of language presents the divine world of meaning. "We name the divine world such that we see it in our mind's eye" (Immink 2001a:3). Words disclose *performative* power. The words of the preacher bring about an event, an effect in the lives of the listeners. Indeed, it is the effect of the sermon which confirms its meaning (Engemann 2001:8). Therefore, new perspectives and alternative ways of seeing the world are opened to the listeners of the sermon through the creativity of the Spirit whom we confess is active in our speech acts as witnesses of Christ. Human beings have the ability of imagination. "When matters of faith are put to words our language points beyond the empirical and physical world" (Immink 2001a:3). The language of our preaching is able to see through the lenses of the Biblical texts God's alternative world, God's counter-world breaking into our world and opens up the future for us (cf Müller 2002:207). Imagination that is able to see God's alternative world plays a major role in the vision of faith.

The insights of the speech-actions theories are fruitful for understanding the language of the sermon that can *refer* to and *represent* God's alternative world and his work, and that can *do* something (cf Luther 1983; Grözinger 1991:197-209) - a language that has transformational effect in the lives of our hearers, the

salvational effect that comes to pass when we hear the word of God in the sermon.

Empirical research and our experience inform us that the congregation expects to hear a word from God in the sermon (Daiber 1980). The preacher reads the texts of the Bible with a view to preaching (cf Van der Laan 1990). We read the Biblical texts in order to find God's words and deeds in them. We need to respond creatively on the exegesis in order to preach in such a way that our words have transformative effect (cf Jonker 1998). We presuppose God's Spirit is a creative Spirit. Hence the content of our preaching has to be the living words of God, the father of Jesus Christ, and the promises based on the evangelical truth of Jesus's salvific deeds. Our preaching is therefore intimately related to the performative presence of Christ (Immink 2001a:2). To hear a word of God in the sermon does not happen automatically. Through the performative power of the words of the preacher, in the performative presence of the living Christ through his Word and Spirit, in a context of the faithful and prayerful expectation of the faith community based on God's promises in Scripture (cf Immink 1995:521-528), we trust that an event of an encounter with God will take place in the liturgy, the sermon and the ministry of the sacraments.

All the aspects of the preacher and the community of faith in this homiletical theory can be researched empirically, because such a theory provides us with the conceptualisation that is needed for empirical research, for instance in sermon analyses.

3 THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH PROJECT

The general research question that directs the whole research programme is the following: What are the religious and moral values, changes in them and their influence on the public and private belief systems among this youth group in South Africa in this period of transition towards a non-racial, democratic South Africa based on the declaration of human rights? During the research process the focus moved more sharply to the influence of the religious and political socialisation of the respondents and the relationships between their religious and moral attitudes and their attitudes on human rights.

3.1 Images of Jesus

Out of the massive empirical information on tendencies in the religious belief amongst the youth in our sample on various themes (God, the church, salvation, their personal religious practice, the degree of secularisation, the influence of their faith on their decisions of various kinds, etc.) I have chosen for the purpose of this article the images of Jesus that they can identify with. The reasons for this choice are that an intensive discussion is going on in our midst about the interpretation of the historical Jesus and the proclaimed Christ; the changed view of Jesus through the perspective of South African liberation theology (Pieterse 1995); and the influences of secularisation, modernity and late modernity, as well as intercultural contact, on South African Christians' images of God (Van der Ven, Dreyer & Pieterse 2001). All this give rise to the general question investigated in this instance: Are there different images of Jesus in the consciousness of South African youth?

With this question in mind we shall look at a few images of Jesus. From this conceptualisation we derived the questions in 24 items that we submitted to the respondents who see themselves as Christians. In the Anglican and Catholic private schools (English speaking schools) the sample consists of 538 respondents in 1995 and 495 in 2000. In the state schools (Afrikaans speaking schools in our sample) the sample consists of 238 respondents in 1996 and 607 in 2001.

We drew up six groups of items. The first group covers the two natures of Jesus; the second group the liberal-theological attitude towards Jesus; the third group the secular-theological attitude; the fourth group the liberation-theological attitude; the fifth group covers the perspective that Jesus is the personal revelation of God and the personal sign and instrument of God's love for people; and the last group the dialectical-theological attitude towards Jesus.

Because of the lack of space in this article I shall refer very briefly to the theological conceptualisation of the six images of Jesus that we put before the respondents.

3.1.1 The two natures of Jesus Christ

By 325 and finally at Chalcedon in 451 the early church came to a christological consensus of the divine nature of Jesus as 'of one substance' with God (McGrath 1994:18). Christianity still confess

this view in the Apostles' Creed. Chalcedon stated about Jesus that he is one person but with two distinct natures – perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity, with a human body and soul.

In our questionnaire a typical item expressing this traditional and neo-orthodox attitude towards Jesus read: “God has sent Jesus, his son, to earth”.

3.1.2 The liberal-theological attitude towards Jesus

The principal exponent of this view of Jesus, as we understand it, was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Christianity owes its origin and continuation to the person Jesus of Nazareth (Schleiermacher 1980 (1):61). Schleiermacher (1980 (2):23) presents Jesus to all Christians as a fact, the original fact of Christianity as a whole. Jesus is a human being with a consciousness of God which is utterly powerful, utterly dependent on God, which precludes all sin, and which is posited together with his self-consciousness. In all this Jesus is the *Urbild*, the archetypal image, the original source, the original fact of all Christianity, and the model (*Vorbild*) of pious self-consciousness for all Christians (Schleiermacher 1980 (2);19-26).

A typical item in our questionnaire that expresses such an attitude towards Jesus is the following: “Jesus Christ has shown us through his life how we can believe in God and in people”.

3.1.3 The dialectical-theological attitude towards Jesus

The exponent of this interpretation, and attitude towards Jesus, is Karl Barth. Barth's theology is also known as a crisis theology. It contrasts God's justice with human justice, and opposes all anthropocentric experiential theology and natural theology, all subjectivism, psychologism and historicism (Berkhouwer 1954:120). In Jesus, who as God's son was also God's Word, the Word of God placed all humans under divine judgement with his 'no' to human self-righteousness and human religious attempts to understand God (Barth 1964:142-146; 1960:117,121).

Barth replaces the static orthodox doctrine of Jesus' true divinity and true humanity with a dynamic approach. He sees the unity of God and humankind as a movement in history. The person and work of Christ are inseparably unified in the event of the reconciliation between God and humans effected in the man Jesus. He inter-relates the two phases of Jesus' life and work (the stages of humiliation and exaltation) dialectically, so that Christ participates simul-

taneously in both humiliation and exaltation. Barth sees the history of reconciliation as *Geschichte* in the sense of an event that retains its relevance for all time. That is how he can visualise the humiliation and the exaltation as a single event.

A typical item expressing this attitude towards Jesus is: “In Jesus Christ, God faces us with a radical decision: for or against Him”.

3.1.4 The secular-theological attitude towards Jesus

This interpretation of Jesus’ life and work is an attempt to clarify his significance for modern secularised society. The transcendent dimension is gone: Jesus’ life and work functions on a wholly horizontal plane. Proponents of this approach fully embrace the secularised thought of contemporary times. A prominent representative of this attitude towards Jesus is Paul van Buren (1963). According to Van Buren Jesus was someone who lived and acted in complete freedom, the exponent or model of a good human being. As such he is our prime example of how to live a Christian life. “When a Christian says that Jesus was a man, that is historical language. When he says he is ‘true man’, he is indicating that Jesus is, for him, the measure of all men, and this leads already to the other side” (Van Buren 1963:168). The “other side” is the state in which Jesus regulates and moulds Christians’ thinking and the way they see the world, and act in it, in such a way that they become “free for ... (their) neighbour” (Van Buren 1963:169). Christians are freed to consort lovingly with other people.

Van Buren’s interpretation of Jesus represents a secular-theological attitude towards Jesus, expressed in the following typical item in our questionnaire: “Jesus Christ is the pre-eminent example of caring for our neighbour”.

3.1.5 The liberation-theological attitude towards Jesus

Liberation theology regards faith not so much as a private, individual, inner world but as something that pertains to the entire reality of human life. By the same token sin is not regarded “as individual, private, or merely interior reality ... which does not challenge the order in which we live” (Gutiérrez 1974:175). Therefore, Jesus is interpreted as supporting the oppressed masses in their struggle for liberation.

We find the same idea in South African liberation theology, for instance in the message of Desmond Tutu (Pieterse 1995:49-50). Jesus, the Son of God, also takes up the cause of the poor and the oppressed, and identifies himself with their interests and their political struggle. A typical item in our questionnaire is: “Jesus supports the oppressed by liberating them from injustice”.

3.1.6 The Jesuological attitude towards Jesus

This approach is expounded by Edward Schillebeeckx working in a modernistic framework. He claims that it is futile today to defend the divinity of Jesus as someone who came from outside of our human reality. We are living in a world where many people have long ago bidden God farewell (Schillebeeckx 1974:546). In answering the question “Who is Jesus of Nazareth?” Schillebeeckx’s point of departure is the historical person Jesus. But our knowledge about the historical Jesus is interpreted history, because our sources are the New Testament writings which reach us via the movement Jesus himself called forth. In his loving concern for people his followers experienced his words and deeds as salvation worked by God. Jesus is the palpable manifestation of God’s compassion with humankind (Schillebeeckx 1974:152-159,166).

Jesus interpreted as the Christ, is the personal revelation of God himself. He is also the personal instrument and sign of God’s love for humans (Schillebeeckx 1974:146,543). A typical item in our questionnaire of this attitude towards Jesus is: “In Jesus’ life and works the love of God for people is operative”.

3.2 Empirical analysis of the images of Jesus

Our study of the history of theological thinking on christology revealed six different attitudes towards Jesus. After processing our data statistically by means of factor analysis we were able to answer the question that we posed above: Are there different images of Jesus in the consciousness of this group of South African youth? After the theological overview on this issue we were able to refine it as follows: Does the empirical reality of the attitudes of the students in our sample display the same six attitudes, or are there other combinations of these attitudes?

The factor analysis confirmed three attitudes towards Jesus – the two natures, the dialectical and the liberation-theological attitudes. An interesting finding, however, was a combination of the

liberal-theological, the secular-theological and the Jesuological attitudes in one factor, into a single image of Jesus which we can call: Jesus as a model of true humanity. What could be the reason for this? Viewed theologically it is a fact that, despite differences between the three attitudes, there is a common denominator: They all proceed from the humanity of Jesus.

Table 1 shows the **average** scores on the different images of Jesus. The scales run from 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive). We interpret scores 1,00 to 1,79 as very negative, 1,80 to 2,59 as negative, 2,60 to 3,39 as semi-negative/semi-positive (ambivalent), 3,40 to 4,19 as positive, and 4,20 to 5,00 as very positive.

Table 1 Valuation of the images of Jesus

	Private Schools		State Schools	
	1995	2000	1996	2001
dialectical	3,54	3,36	4,08	3,99
liberation	3,72	3,70	3,84	3,93
two natures	4,03	3,94	4,23	4,18
humanity	4,17	4,21	4,44	4,46

As may be seen from this table, the young respondents in our population are positive to very positive about all four of these images of Jesus, although the classes of 2000 in the private schools are ambivalent about the dialectical-theological image (3,36). The respondents of all schools are most positive in both surveys about the attitudes which emphasises Jesus' humanity. The Afrikaans speaking respondents of the state schools (of whom the majority are of the Reformed tradition) are even more positive about the humanity images (4,44 and 4,46 – very positive) than the respondents of the private schools (4,17 and 4,21 – positive and very positive). But they are also positive, and the classes of 1996 in the state schools even very positive, about the attitude of the two natures of Jesus. Theologically these two interpretations of Jesus disagree.

While the tendencies in our findings indicate that our respondents show a preference for the view that emphasises Jesus' humanity, they also accommodate the various images in their minds, appa-

rently without strain, or maybe because of a discord in their minds. This trend is also observable in the findings on their images of God and salvation. In a world of modernity and late modernity with the process of globalising on its way, the communication networks of internet, television, music, and the contact with others in a multicultural and multireligious context which is South Africa, Christians are overwhelmed with a pluralistic *collage* of ideas and beliefs (cf Castells 1996; Beck et al. 1996; Witvliet 1999). When one preaches in a Reformed church which is a confessional church, this situation poses a problem. The empirical situation challenges our confessional tradition.

4 A HOMILETICAL PROBLEM

From our experience of the situation of our church members and this empirical confirmation of our hunches, the preacher is confronted with an audience with a plurality of images of Jesus, of God, and a difference in views and standpoints on many issues of our faith. How should we approach this situation with the message from the Biblical text for next Sunday that we are convinced is the word of God for this congregation? I do not see the preacher as the authoritative person in the congregation but as a minister of the Word, as a servant amongst the members of the congregation and of the Word as we understand it in our confessional tradition with his/her context, social, political, economical and specific theological perspective.

Shall we supply the congregation with a spectrum of views on our faith in one sermon without coming up for one of the views that we believe in - which means that there is no room for the preacher's understanding of the text and her/his confessional conviction? Or shall we proclaim the one view this Sunday, the next one next Sunday, etc., with the hope that church members will take out of our cafeteria supply the views that suit them? The concept of proclamation in preaching does not fit in with such an approach. Shall we arrange several worship services on a Sunday in the same congregation for different spiritualities and persuasions, and also special services for youth apart from "traditional" services? And can one preacher with her/his faith conviction preach to all of them? Is narrative preaching the absolute answer in such a situation? If we go the way of the so called New Homiletic in the USA the problem that Immink pointed out in this stream is the inclination to name in preaching the experiences that are already present in humans as a given fact. The

experience that the listeners have during the sermon is therefore not always Word-directed, but something that is a given in human existence itself (Immink 2001b:385-386). This tendency is moreover intensified by the emphasis on the privatised faith experiences of the individual. That does not mean that narrative preaching is not a good mode of communication. On the contrary, it is excellent in giving the listeners the opportunity to come to their own decisions on the message of Scripture in the narrative sermon (Pieterse 1987). But is there no room anymore for any external standard of truth – understood as mediated truth? Is there no room for the preacher as theologian-in-residence for a faith conviction that we communicate in the sermon as we understand the text(s) that we preach on? The question is: How shall we go about to preach the word of God in the context of the congregation in a situation of pluralism regarding issues of faith?

In order to find a way in which we can preach a word of God from the text in the context of the congregation that will start a dialogue with the text and with each other in the congregation, I shall try to find a theoretical frame that will allow us to think dialectically where such a *collage* of ideas on our faith are evident in a congregation. The goal will be to preach the word of God as we understand it using our expertise as theologically trained ministers, and then engage the congregation in a conversation on the understanding of our faith as Ephesians 3:17 says: “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ”.

5 A THEORETICAL FRAME TO COMMUNICATE THE GOSPEL IN PREACHING IN A SITUATION OF DISCORD (PLURALISM AND THE RENEWAL OF TRADITION)

5.1 Ideology, utopia and faith

Ricoeur sketches the outline of a theory of cultural imagination as it pertains to faith in which he develops the dialectic in the polarity between ideology and utopia (Ricoeur 1976b:21-28). He does that by combining Geertz’s concept of “symbolic action” and Mannheim’s concept of “non-congruent” modes of thought in conceiving a theory of cultural imagination. “The task of such a theory would be to give an account, first, of the polarity between utopia and ideology and, second, of the ambiguity which pertains to each term. Each of

them covers a set of expressions ranging from wholesome to pathological forms, from *constitutive* to *distorting* roles. Further, the constitutive and distorting expressions of the one are entangled in the constitutive and distorting forms of the other. This labyrinth of relationships *is* cultural imagination” (Ricoeur 1976b:21). There are pseudo-concepts of both (ideology and utopia) where some ideas are labelled as utopian by the representatives of dominant groups who hold these ideas to be absolutely impossible, whereas they are unrealisable only within the given system of order, while some ideas are labelled as ideological by the representatives of ascendant groups who hold all supposedly independent thought to be an expression of non-recognised or non-acknowledged interests. Ricoeur therefore sees the task of a hermeneutics of cultural imagination as to inquire into the conditions of meaningfulness of these pseudo-concepts by a kind of regressive analysis starting from the surface awareness and aiming at the depth structure of action symbolically structured (Ricoeur 1976b:22).

His regressive analysis provides not only a non-evaluative concept of **ideology** but the reason for its connection with utopia. At its three levels of distortion, legitimation and symbolisation, ideology has one fundamental function. It is the function to pattern, to consolidate and to provide order to the course of action. This function expresses one of the dimensions of imagination which is to duplicate reality with portraits, *replicas*, images by which the group’s identity is reasserted by being pictured and staged. Ideology has a function of conservation, in both a good and a bad sense of the word. The good side of it is to preserve the identity of the group and its members against external or internal disturbances. The bad side of it is when the conservation leads to stagnation - that is distortion (Ricoeur 1976b:23). Ideology critique is always needed. A system of symbols allows ideology to connect a world-view and an ethos and this is an ideology in the positive sense (Ricoeur 1976b:27).

The regressive analysis of the utopian mentality shows that **utopia** addresses itself to the same enigmas of power, of authority and domination as ideology does by opposing alternative ways of power, if not to power as such. Utopia shatters the order that ideology attempts to consolidate. This subversive function of utopia expresses a general capacity to oppose other modes of existence, action and thought to the given order of things. This search for otherness belongs to the same layer of symbolic action as the positive concept of

ideology. The bad side of utopia is that it can emigrate into the nowhere (Ricoeur 1976b:23).

It is the task of a hermeneutics of cultural imagination, according to Ricoeur, to articulate the *integrative* function of ideology and the *eccentric* function of utopia in the depth structure of symbolic action. “It seems to be that imagination as such implies the twofold function of reasserting reality by construing *replicas* of the established order, and of emigrating into the nowhere. These two functions of imagination are both necessary to constitute what Mannheim called ‘non-congruence’ with reality” (Ricoeur 1976b:24). In the dialectical tension between ideology and utopia, utopia will be critical to ideology and ideology will be critical to utopia.

Ricoeur applies this theory to the Christian faith in showing that the established order of the church with its confessions, belief and praxis has an integrative, a conservation function when it is good (ideology). But it is in dialectic tension with faith as utopia with the members of the community who have alternative ideas that challenge the accepted order, especially in times of crisis or stagnation. He points, as an example, to the tension between Luther and Thomas Münzer. With Münzer a branch of repressed Christianity emerges in history as an utopian force (Ricoeur 1976a:27). Regarding the problem I am addressing it is necessary that this dialectic tension between accepted confessional understanding in the Reformed church that I am a member of (ideology) and the alternative ideas among some members of the church (utopia) should be maintained, and even stimulated by means of discourse (cf De Roest 1998). In the process of the clarification of a common identity by means of reasoning the communication between church members will be in this field of tension as described by Ricoeur.

5.2 Preaching and a common identity

From a practical theological point of view a congregation is a community in communication - with their Lord, with each other and with society. Consequently they are always in dialogue on their faith and what it means for their lives in the community of faith and in society. In this dialogue the sermon plays a major role. It links up with the ongoing dialogue amongst the church members and stimulates it. Often such discussions are prompted by events or controversies in church and society. The sermon can start a dialogue, or it can wrap it up in the end, always casting the light of the Biblical message on the

topic in a manner that is instructive, healing and inspiring. Preaching must therefore be encompassed by dialogue - before the sermon, during the sermon as build-in dialogue, and after the sermon (Pietse 1987:133; 2001:21). The congregation should therefore be structured in such a way that opportunities for discussion between all members on issues of our faith could be possible. Discourse must be institutionalised in the church following the conditions De Roest (1998:358-380) spells out. This kind of discourse in the context of a church is complicated and it has to negotiate many obstacles (cf De Roest 1998:320-325). But sooner or later we must practice in one or other way something of it in order to be true to the ideal of constant reformation in a Reformed church.

I am not thinking of round table preaching (cf Rose 1997; Dingemans 2000:276-292) in the first place. The preacher is theologically trained and is called by the congregation to use his/her expertise to dig in the minefields of the Bible in order to find the "gold" they need for their faith and present it to them in the sermon as Dingemans stated in his book on preaching (Dingemans 1991). The preacher must preach her/his existential experience with the text and the truth of the word of God that is hermeneutically dug out of the text. Although there are a multiplicity of theological views in the Bible, the development of Israel's religion took place in that in each situation a decision, a certain view was taken and defended (cf Brueggemann 1997:63). And Dingemans' view on the meaning of Jesus' salvational work is important: The authenticity of the witness of the authors of the gospels and the letters in the New Testament does not lie in the historical reliability of their image of Jesus, but in the persuasive power of their witness. They wrote about the impression that the appearance and actions of Jesus made on them (Dingemans 2001:449). According to the perspective on preaching above (2.2) in which the congregation can hear the word of God in as far as the text functions in the sermon making sense in the context of the congregation, in the faith expectation of the preacher and the congregation that the Spirit accompanies the preaching of the Word and that the living Christ is present in his Word, we can preach with confidence using the language of the sermon in its referential and performative power. This will happen not only in preaching as proclamation, but also in preaching as instruction in the content, the implication and the meaning of the gospel (cf Immink 1995:128). *After* the sermon, in structured occasions for conversation and discussion

on the issue that is addressed in the sermon, the members of the congregation should be invited to participate. There are good rules for this kind of discourse (cf Pieterse 1990:237; De Roest 1998:223-267). The minister or an able person in the congregation can facilitate the discussion, or when necessary, a practical theologian can be invited to direct the process (De Roest 1998). In this process we must be sensitive to those who find it difficult to express their views. We need to listen to everyone and create space for them to express their views. As I understand Ricoeur's theory of the tension between ideology and utopia in this regard, and as De Roest explains Habermas' idea of theoretical discourse, truth cannot be established once and for all, and therefore hermeneutical discourse will continue to go on (cf De Roest 1998:267). The goal of the discussion pertaining to the problem I am addressing is to strive for a mutual understanding and a collective identity, although it could be a discordant concordance (dynamic identity) - and this may be found somewhere on the line of tension between ideology and utopia. In this perspective I think that we can retain the insights of Gadamer's idea of "application" in that hermeneutical understanding is linked with an action-orienting self-understanding and Habermas' idea of the "performative attitude" of one who participates in a process of mutual understanding (cf Bernstein 1983:182).

6 CONCLUSION

Empirical research can help us to understand the situation of our contemporary church members, their views and attitudes, and the issues that are problematic for them. It can help us to do practice analysis, to ascertain how our theories function in practice, and what the nature of our praxis is. It can also help us to formulate the problems we are studying more concrete and precise. We need appropriate theological conceptualisation in order to be able to do empirical research that will help us in our mediating task as practical theologians. Empirical research, however, must be limited to its proper place in practical theological reflection, namely *one* of the sources that inform us about the contemporary situation, on perspectives on faith and on our ecclesial and societal praxis. Our task is to critically work with theological theories that will direct the church's practice according to what we believe in our theological tradition - in such a way that there is room for responsible renewal. In this process empirical research is of great help.

The preacher must preach his/her understanding of the message of the Biblical text. Only then can his preaching be authentic. But then there must be room for discussion where the various understandings of the message can be discussed in order to move towards a communal understanding of the message.

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