

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Some say that he was a legend,
The dream of slaves and beggars,
Or hippy poet so charged
With music of the spheres
That stones sang beneath his naked feet.
I care not if he lived
Or uttered a single word
Or healed a single leper.
I know only that his name
Reveals that gift of pain
That only love can bear
And having borne still cry
“I love.”

(Pauli Murray, in Caldbeck, 2002:61-62)

2.1 Postmodernism

In my introduction, I referred to a postmodern worldview. I will briefly explain what I mean by postmodernism and a Postmodern Theology.

2.1.1 Postmodern Thought and Theology

The Modernist mechanical and dualist view of the world has been useful, but it turns out, inadequate. Developments in physics, biology and philosophy have shown the limitations of the modernist worldview to describe our reality. Whereas modernism has seen the idea of God as superfluous, it can no longer be scientifically or philosophically maintained that we live in a self-contained world. It is clear that modernism has failed to provide a basis for morality and society, but instead its optimism regarding scientific progress has been tarnished, and the assumption that scientific knowledge is inherently good has become suspect (Burnham, 1989:x; Heelas, 1998:2-9; Herholdt, 1998b:459; Miller, 1989:3-5).

The postmodern worldview holds that the world is instead evolutionary and relative. James Miller (1989:10) explains that:

The world has come to be seen not as a system of independent atomic parts linked together by external mechanical relations but, instead, as a dynamic nexus of internal relations, actual and potential.

This new, postmodern worldview has far reaching consequences for both philosophy and theology.

2.1.1.1 Deconstruction

Jacques Derrida formulated the approach of deconstruction for literary study. According to him, certain traditions or discourses dominate Western thought to the extent that it impedes other possible ideas and alternatives. Deconstruction seeks to undo (and not destroy) these dominant traditions in order to bring the alternatives to the fore (Lechte, 1994:107-109).

Deconstructionism holds that we know reality only in language, but that this is an “unreal reality” like a game that is played, not against the background of a fixed, stable reality, but rather a field of freeplay and infinite substitutions. It differs from structuralism in the sense that it does not view the text as an independent unit that influences the subject, but views both the subject and the text as part of an intertextual world (Heelas, 1998:8; Herholdt, 1998b:453-454).

Kotzé & Kotzé (1997:8) explains that one of Derrida's central methodological devices to accomplish this feat hinges on the notion of placing a term under erasure (*sous rature*). A word is literally first written and then erased, keeping both the erased word and the word

itself simultaneously. The erasing is a strategy to accentuate that the term is both needed and not needed at the same time. They explain:

This strategy of sous rature is used to employ the familiar and commonly known, to deconstruct the familiar and known. The word under erasure is used to reveal its status as useful, necessary and at the same time wrong and not useful. X is at the same time X and its opposite, not-X. Words being used are therefore necessary in order to understand, while they are at the same time inaccurate. Within the meaning of any possible text there is also its opposite text.

In short, words are necessary in order to represent (or defer) meaning. But at the same time these words are inaccurate as they obstruct the difference between the word and the intended meaning (Lechte, 1994:107).

It follows that if words can obstruct true meaning, so too can our discourses. Deconstruction is then to take apart the interpretive assumptions of a system of meaning that you are examining in order to reveal the assumption on which the model is based. As these are revealed, you open up space for alternative understanding (Wolfe, 1998:58-59; Kotzé & Kotzé, 1997:8).

Deconstruction can be applied more universally. In analysing gaps, silences and ambiguities, it also exposes ethno- and androcentrism, as well as prejudices of class, race and religion. Deconstruction aims to expose this aspect of reality, deconstructing dominating ideas and highlighting other options. It provides " ... a corrective moment, a safeguard against dogmatism, a displacement, to keep it in process, to continuously demystify the realities we create" (Kotzé & Kotzé, 1997:7-8).

2.1.1.2 Relationships

Postmodernism is all about relationships. Quantum physics, and especially Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, observed that at a quantum level all things, including space and time, are integrally linked. The world is not mechanistic as modernism believes, but instead relational. Reality is no longer substance, but function (Dill & Kotzé, 1997:9; Herholdt, 1998b:466).

This discovery has far reaching implications for the way we study and understand our reality. A postmodern theologian will not, for example, approach the Bible as if it contains some body of truth that needs to be discovered. Truth lies rather in the relationship of the reader with the text (Burden, 1990:193; Heelas, 1998:8; Herholdt, 1998b:467).

Herholdt (1998b:467) explains that: "Truth is therefore not prefabricated, but dynamic and co-determined by the needs, presuppositions, religious background and cultural heritage that the person brings to the Bible".

This does not imply relativism. A postmodern, relational truth must give meaning, make sense and be useful in the specific relation. Not all models are simply equally acceptable (Herholdt, 1998b:467).

2.1.1.3 Self-organisation

Postmodern theology is influenced by the notion of self-organisation. This concept points to an intrinsic quality of all entities to generate order and to form patterns by means of the flow of energy through a system – the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Since Ilya

Prigogine's work on the thermodynamics of systems far from equilibrium, the philosophical implications of the fact that order and chaos can serve as a source for self-organisation and an ensuing new order, has had a far-reaching influence. It has challenged the concept of determinism to the extent that randomness and unpredictability have gained a positive meaning as mechanisms necessary for creativity and novelty (Cupitt, 1998:220; Dill & Kotzé, 1997:9; Herholdt, 1998a:217; Milbank, 1997:270).

It seems that people are beginning to believe that we live on the edge of chaos, and that the intrinsic dialectic of order and chaos is offering new insights into the meaning of freedom. Thus, the will of God is not a predetermined decision that Christians need to discover in a passive mode of obedience, but instead, Christians are afforded the right to some human input that co-determines the 'plan' for their lives (Herholdt, 1998a:217; Milbank, 1997:267).

Many choices are possible, but in the variety of options we are guided by God as creative participants in our own lives. So too, humans need not plug into a blueprint that renders their own efforts and creative potential sterile, but are co-creators (Herholdt, 1998a:217).

Postmodernism is, in this sense, a rediscovery of the value of human participation, a quest for wholeness and meaning, a perspective on the continuity between all levels of a multi-levelled reality. Postmodernism aspires to provide an alternative approach to reality in such a way that it could yield a significantly new and improved way of understanding the world. Postmodern Theology ... aims to provide fresh insights, answer existing anomalies, and provide new meaning by moving beyond modernism. This cannot be accomplished by an escape to the inside of the self ... or even a denial of the valuable results offered by the more critical scientific method. Limited subjective input is combined with limited objective reference to result in a balance between both extremes. ... the human mind cannot construct reality completely, nor can the human mind know reality fully.

(Herholdt, 1998a:218)

2.1.1.4 Participation

The physicist Niels Bohr stated in his principle of complementarity that the scientist is always an actor in his or her study, and never simply a spectator. It follows that a postmodern study of theology calls for a commitment to participation. Believers need to include their relationship with God in the process of their theological reflection. In this sense, postmodern theologians discover truths about God by participating in a relationship with God – they discover and create truth at the same time. The way we model God by means of metaphors bears reference to our spiritual experience and is therefore not groundless (Dill & Kotzé, 1997:9; Herholdt, 1998a:224).

... the believer is not called upon to master abstract truth, rather he or she is challenged to make sense of the world by participating in the creation of a new world in terms of which the self can be defined. Faith is therefore my own experience and theology the story or account of my life.

(Herholdt, 1998a:225)

2.1.1.5 Truth, meaning and coherence

Like Bohr, Werner Heisenberg found that a scientist can not be detached, objective observer. With his uncertainty principle he mathematically measured the involvement of the scientist, and showed that in scientific work there are always a number of possible, valid results which are only actualised through the choices of the scientists (Capra, 1988:18-19; Dill & Kotzé, 1997:9).

This principle is reflected in postmodern philosophy. According to postmodernism, the test for Christian theological models is their success in providing meaning in terms of how the world is experienced in relation to the Christian belief in a benevolent God. This can be accomplished by the designing of a comprehensive metaphysical scheme in which faith

can be fitted into the framework of how we actually experience the world on many different levels. Factors like human experience, the dominant metaphors of faith, recent scientific insights into the complexity of material reality and the deduction of reality and pragmatically useful epistemologies all blend into a coherent scheme to form the basis for Postmodern Theology (Herholdt, 1998a:218-219).

According to Herholdt (1998a:220), “This means that truth is no longer regarded as something with eternal, unchanging, authoritative and objective, absolute status. Truth is relative to a particular social context and personal presuppositions of the theologian”. The task of Postmodern Theology is not to discover or uphold an eternal, supernatural truth, but rather to provide a personal account of faith in order to increase meaning (Miller, 1989:12; Herholdt, 1998a:228).

The search for meaning demands a sense of coherence. Postmodern Theology points to a coherence between our experience of God and the way we experience the world both physically and morally. Thus, every generation must discover a coherent meaning for themselves (Herholdt, 1998a:224).

2.1.1.6 Metaphors

Despite the Christian belief in divine revelation, God remains elusive within the subject/object scheme. There exists no “otherworldly” language to describe God on an intellectual or theological level. Fortunately, metaphors are quite useful to describe and explain the unknown in terms of the known. Metaphors form a bridge between the direct experience of God by faith, or intuitive knowledge, and the intelligibility of that experience (Burden 1990:191-192; Herholdt, 1998a:225).

Don Cupitt (1998:221) explains:

Our philosophy cannot claim to be any more than what the world itself is – a dance of metaphors, pouring out and passing away. We aim only to supplying unifying metaphors that can help people to see what we are, what our life is, how we should live, and how we can be completely happy with things as they are.

Postmodernism moves beyond the subject/object scheme and the mere descriptive phase of language. Thus, the scientist wants to depict reality in terms of tentative models. This means that reality is created on a mental level with the use of analogical language (Herholdt, 1998a:226).

Postmodern hermeneutics makes use of this metaphorical understanding of reality. This means that when Christians describe God, their descriptions are no more than metaphors. The metaphors highlight some aspect or experience of God, yet God is sometimes obscured or at other times reduced or limited by these metaphors. He remains much more than any metaphor can express (Cupitt, 1998:221; Herholdt, 1998b:463).

The metaphorical understanding of reality has obvious implications for theologians. It emphasises the human role in comprehending God's revelation. Humans judge or describe God in terms of their experiences of God. So too, reality is no longer equated with the truth parallel to the relation between an object and its mirror image. God is only approximately known, in a real sense remains a mystery. "No metaphor can exhaust Him" (Burden, 1990:192; Herholdt, 1998b:464).

Thus we can also question the relevance of certain metaphors for our day and age, and replace irrelevant or outdated metaphors. We can call God our "Friend" in the light of feminist theology, instead of "Father" (Herholdt, 1998b:464). We need not pretend that we

understand God ontologically, but simply functionally, in his relationships, acts and creation (Gous, 1993:178-180; Herholdt, 1998b:464; Vosloo, 2004:140).

2.1.1.7 Poetic

According to Don Cupitt (1998:226-227), a dogmatic theology serves only to include or exclude persons from a religion. The dogma is in essence no more than a membership law. He writes cynically:

To see dogma as law in this way is, then, to see why so few religious dogmas are actually philosophically true. They don't need to be true. If your real purpose is to create badges of membership that will differentiate your community from every other community, straightforward philosophical truth is quite useless, because it is too easy. Most of it is staring every single human being in the face already. It is blindingly simply and obvious. But what the religious group needs is esoteric truth hidden from the rest of humankind and revealed to the chosen few only. So it must deny the obvious, and instead postulate a state of affairs in which all of humanity are stuck in sin and darkness, unable to save themselves. To us, to us alone there has been granted a special revelation of saving truth. It is colourful, paradoxical stuff, but in joining us and accepting our discipline you'll come to believe it, and by that you'll prove that you really are one of us.

(1998:227)

Postmodern theology moves away from the dogmatic and tends to be more poetical.

Cupitt (1998:226) suggests that we should see: "the Bible, and indeed the whole system of Christian doctrine, as epic, narrative poetry".

2.1.1.8 Cosmology

A Postmodern Theology moves away from a dualist view of reality, to a view that reality is a multi-layered process where continuity exists between all things. Likewise, a postmodern spirituality does not contrast spirit and matter, but sees both as aspects of reality (Herholdt, 1998a:227).

The effect of sin on the world is also reconsidered. The classical notion that the Fall is the cause of suffering and death is replaced by a view that suffering and death are natural phenomena. The tragedy of sin is not that it caused death per se, but that it qualifies death as a moral dilemma (Herholdt, 1998a:227).

2.1.1.9 Interdisciplinary dialogue

Because of the conviction that reality is multi-layered, different objects of study are seen as complementary aspects of one holistically integrated reality. This serves as a basis for the different sciences to work closer together. This also means that theology can no longer claim a privileged status, but is placed on an equal footing with other disciplines to the mutual enrichment of both theology and natural science (Heelas, 1998:7; Herholdt, 1998a:228).

2.1.1.10 Tentative

Postmodern theology constructs tentative models that can be used until better ones are found. "Hence postmodernism is in line with the conviction that we are progressively moving closer to the truth, but not by an accumulation of doctrinal knowledge, but by the constant switching of paradigms as determined by the spirit of the time in order to remain relevant" (Herholdt, 1998a:228).

2.1.1.11 Can a theology be postmodern?

It should probably be asked whether the postmodern worldview is a valid worldview and more importantly, whether theology can be done from a postmodern perspective. This will depend on a number of questions.

Firstly, the basis for this philosophy should be considered. It seems that postmodern philosophy is grounded in accepted science. I purposely referred to the work of the physicists to show that the postmodern worldview appears to reflect the best science available. It is simply more responsible and honest to proceed from the best scientific basis possible.

Of course the postmodern philosophy is not shared by all – especially not in South Africa where people have widely diverging worldviews. This should be kept in mind as a qualification on my use of postmodernism. Still, this qualification would be true for any chosen departure point in a heterogeneous world.

Secondly, can a theology be postmodern? Theology deals with God, with the Ultimate, while postmodern theory rejects any notions of ultimate and abstract truths. A postmodern theology would certainly call into question many traditional Christian ideas, and challenge traditional beliefs. On the other hand, it could stimulate new and different ways of speaking and thinking about God.

It is important to note that while postmodern theology does not accept abstract truths, it is not relativistic, as some theologians fear. Although truth is thought to be relative, this

qualification does not mean that there are no truths, but it rather attributes truth to a statement in a given context or relation (Lowe, 1999:21; Knitter, 1985:219-220).

A number of Christian theologians have managed to come up with enriching postmodern theologies. Dirkie Smit (2002:119) admits that he is not yet quite convinced of the concept of “postmodern theology” but nevertheless espouses the postmodern perspectives in saying that truth is never absolute, but rather relative, historical and tentative. He even calls for anamnestic solidarity – to listen to the voices of the previously unheard – which comes close to the approach of deconstruction (2002:102-105, 108).

Jaap Durand writes that his mindset changed from believing in eternal truths to coming to value contextualised metaphors as a way to express the inexpressible. He holds that theology is historical, contextual and metaphorical (2002:64, 69).

I agree with Johan Dill (1996:228-229) that although some theologians see postmodernism as a threat, postmodern philosophy and deconstruction presents a promising challenge to theologians and stimulates constructive dialogue.

A postmodern theology is especially useful for Missiology and Religious Studies. Both Missiology and postmodernism are interested in the contexts of people and the differences between contexts. A postmodern approach also allows and supposes the insights and critical scrutiny of Religious Studies as it is interdisciplinary and reflexive-critical.

2.2 Postmodernist approach to Religious Studies

Within the Religious Studies community, a number of burning issues are presently being debated. A postmodern approach to Religious Studies determines my views on these.

2.2.1 A Comparative Religious Study

Scientists have in the past questioned the whole enterprise of comparative religious study. Jonathan Z Smith launched a “deconstructive attack” (Patton & Ray, 2000:3) on comparative studies in his 1982 essay, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells”, and called the whole study of religious comparison into question. According to Smith, the easily constructed and magically appreciated religious comparisons of EB Tylor and JG Frazer, and even the romantic interpretations of Mircea Eliade, failed scientifically. In their effort to discover contiguity, the early comparative religious scientists disregarded the differences between religions. “The issue of difference has been all but forgotten” (Smith, 2000:26).

In his analysis of comparative studies, Smith confirmed the sentiments of the postmodern philosophers Derrida and Jean-Francois Lyotard, who questioned the “white mythology” and “totalising narratives” employed by modernism. Postmodernists argue that:

...modernist metanarratives, in order to accommodate widely diverging local histories and traditions, abstract the meaning of those traditions, by way of a ‘translation’ into the terms of the master code, which leaves the specific tradition simply unrecognisable. Such metanarratives also become coercive and normative: they systematically control and distort the local under the sign of the universal. Such a drive to totality cannot respect the specificities of the genuinely heterogeneous traditions.

(White, 2000:48-49)

Thus the new postmodern emphasis on difference mistrusted the magical comparisons of the past.

Since then, students of religion have tried to answer the postmodern attack on comparative study, and recently, a number of them have made a compelling case for the legitimacy of comparative religious study. Patton and Ray claimed that comparison does not claim to be scientific but rather a “magical” and creative art: “... comparison is an indeterminate scholarly procedure that is best taken as an intellectual creative enterprise, not as a science but as an art – an imaginative and critical act of mediation and redescription in the service of knowledge” (2000:3).

David White added that comparative studies investigate insights, aspects and relations rather than “things”. He quotes Smith in another essay as saying that (2000:53):

Comparison does not necessarily tell us how things ‘are’. ... Like models and metaphors, comparison tells us how things might be conceived, how they might be ‘redescribed’. ... A comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge,... an active, at times even a playful, enterprise of deconstruction and reconstruction which, kaleidoscope-like, gives the scholar a shifting set of characteristics with which to negotiate the relationship between his or her theoretical interests and data stipulated as exemplary.

The very fact that any form of language and linguistic signs is arbitrary, as stated by Antoine Meillet seventy years ago, makes comparison possible (White, 2000:50).

I agree with Doniger that while the first wave of postmodernism and postcolonialism (in expounding the *différance*) denied any attempt at comparison, the second wave of postmodern philosophers and especially deconstructionism’s investigation into language “broke open the text in new ways that were particularly useful for scholars interested in using multiple variants...and finding multiple meanings in them” (2000:70).

Deconstructionism promoted the concepts of multivocality and multiple interpretations that are essential to the comparative method.

Thus, while not forgetting the postmodernist caution against totalising narratives, I do believe that a postmodern comparison of religions is both possible and useful, if it eschews grand theories and is instead artful and playful, recognises both the local (*différent*) and total (universal), and focuses and investigates ideas, relations and aspects rather than things (Doniger, 2000:70).

2.2.2 The Insider/Outsider Problem

Scholars disagree on how easy or even possible it is to bridge the gap between the subject under study (in this case African religion) and the researcher who studies it. How can the researcher enter into the experiences and meanings of another, access the private moments of human perception, bridge the gulf between subject and object? (McCutcheon, 1999:3)

This problem has been answered in at least four different ways. Following the nineteenth century distinction between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*, the *first* effort focussed on the human spirit – human desires, hopes, fears; human meanings and intentions as a possible bridge between the subject and the object. The phenomenological research method empathetically described human behaviour in an (rather optimistic) attempt to understand and interpret others' experiences (McCutcheon, 1999:3).

A *second* option considered the scholar's ability to get inside the subject as virtually impossible and instead concentrated on developing theories capable of explaining the

complex patterns of human behaviour. Coinciding with the development of psychoanalysis, this reductionist approach is based on studying only that which can be observed empirically. The goal is to determine the causes and regularities of human actions and beliefs, which may differ from the explanations that the insiders themselves supply for their actions (McCutcheon, 1999:4).

Where the focus on only studying private experiences seems to validate the claims of the insider all too quickly, and where the emphasis on developing explanatory theories can all too easily dismiss insiders claims, the *third* option attempted to remain neutral when it comes to questions of truth and value but emphasised issues of accurate description and comparison at the expense of drawing value judgements. The methodological agnosticism simply described the diversity, similarity and utter complexity of human behaviours and beliefs but avoids asking all questions concerning the truth of someone's claims (McCutcheon, 1999:6-8).

In addition to these three positions (empathetic, explanatory, agnostic), there is a *fourth* approach to the insider/outsider problem. It agrees in part with the first option: it is indeed important to study the inner states and experiences of free, creative human beings. However, it also agrees in part with the second: there is a significant gap between the researcher and the subject. Finally, it differs significantly from the third in that the researcher and the subject alike are both seen to be enmeshed in the human situation, making this much sought after neutrality a mere illusion. "The conclusion in this case is that the experiences that we as scholars are able to study *are none other than our own.*" (McCutcheon, 1999:8)

This option bridges the gulf between subject and object by projecting the researcher's own experiences onto the other. The reflexive stance is largely dependent on postmodern thought – a way of looking at the world which:

... emphasizes playfulness and differences over rules and sameness; it stresses the metaphorical and slippery nature of language over the modernist, objective, factual understandings of how communication proceeds; it addresses the manner in which meaning is not something possessed by a word, an action, or an object as much as it is the product of a series of relationships which comprise the word or the object.

(McCutcheon, 1999:9)

Thus, reflexive scholars are more interested in questions of point of view and the stance of the observer than they are with issues of neutrality, objectivity, and fact (Flood, 1999:35-38; McCutcheon, 1999:10; Jackson, 1999:312, Schneiders, 1989:62).

I am convinced that the reflexive approach to the insider/outsider problem is more honest. According to David Hufford: "Reflexivity is a metaphor from grammar indicating a relationship of identity between subject and object, thus meaning the inclusion of the actor ... [in] the account of the act and/or its outcomes. In this sense reflexivity shows that all knowledge is 'subjective'" (1999:294). This means that if we:

... obtain the appearance of objectivity by leaving ourselves out of our accounts, we simply leave the subjective realities of our work uncontrolled. If we manage to make our facts speak for themselves, those 'facts' cease to be evidence in an argument, and we become ventriloquists instead of actors.

(1999:295).

Having said this, Hufford warns that reflexivity can be either triumphal and self-assured if the researcher takes no account of any other views or realities outside himself or herself, or defeatist if he or she do not realise their own context and position sufficiently, both resulting from an extreme relativism. He also warns against "methodolatry" – a neo-

positivist worship of the right method without reference to its subject results (Hufford, 1999:296). In reporting on her reflexive study, Karen McCarthy Brown similarly stresses the importance of “truth telling and justice” and explains:

... truth telling not only required enough care and persistence to get the facts straight, but also enough self-awareness and self-disclosure to allow readers to see my point of view (another term for bias) and make their judgements about it. ... I (likewise) felt compelled to do justice to Alourdes (the subject of her study) and to her world in my writing.

(McCarthy Brown, 1999:352-353)

Finally, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty makes the case for reflexivity in this kind of study:

... once we enter other people’s heads through their myths, we may find that we cannot get out again; we enter their hearts and their minds too. Their myths become our myths whether we like it or not, particularly when, as often happens, we discover that their myths have always been our myths, though we may not have known it; we recognise ourselves in those myths more vividly than we have ever recognised ourselves in the myths of our own culture.

(Doniger O’Flaherty 1999:336)

2.2.3 Religious naturalism

In dealing with the matters of Chapter Four, I will follow J. S. Krüger’s basic orientation towards religious knowledge in this study, emphasising the human world and experiences rather than the supernatural – an orientation called religious naturalism or religious empiricism. What this concept means is that metaphysical or religious statements must be part of and must follow from concrete, lived experience and not deduced from a priori assumptions (Krüger, 1995:24).

This orientation of religious naturalism seems to me more honest and more sensible and helpful for the aims of this study. Krüger explains:

If all things hang together 'ultimately', we cannot know how they do so. But we can know and say how what we feel, feels like here-now, from where we are, aware not only of the mortality of our feeling, knowing and saying, but also of their morality: they pass away, but are important for a life of value.

(1995:24)

I agree with Krüger that "... the empirical study of religion presupposes and leads to religiophilosophical and eventually in metaphysical and religious questions" (1995:25). In the final chapters of this study I therefore consider these religious questions from a theological (and historically specific, Christian) perspective.

Although I study religions both from the naturalist orientation (in accordance with responsible religious comparison) and the theological perspective (in order to address particular Christian issues and provide usable alternatives to Christians), I do not believe that it is always necessary to interpret naturalist insights theologically. "Religion" and "naturalism" are not mutually exclusive concepts. The whole concept of religious naturalism rejects the notion of two realities, an ordinary one plus another, supernatural one. "'Religion' and the 'divine' point to the radical depth dimension of *this* reality, not to a wholly other reality" (Krüger, 1995:26).

2.3 Definitions and terminology

Following this postmodern approach, I would like to elucidate a few concepts which I will use throughout the study:

2.3.1 Myths and rituals

Myths can mean many things to different researchers. I use the word “myth” to indicate the story or reasoning behind a certain belief and practice. Myth works in a reflexive manner, causing the participant to reflect on his or her way of being in the world, and challenging the participant to examine the present in the light of the past (Karecki, 198:314).

Rituals are the re-enactment of the myths. Rituals describe the physical practice of the idea that is formulated in the myth. Rituals are not always determined by myths, but often precede the myth, giving form and meaning to something which cannot be expressed rationally. Eliade (1969:12) contends that the ritual “comes before language and discursive reason”. Rituals are repetitive and link up with traditional thinking and practice, but are also creative, causing the participants to take a new and fresh look at life (Hay, 1998:135; Karecki, 1998:310-311, 314; Krog, 1998:7).

When African people sacrifice a goat or a chicken to their ancestors and to God, they may do so because according to an African myth, the life force in blood can bring the ancestors into the world of the living. The sacrifice is the ritual.

According to Arbuckle:

All cultures have some form of repeated symbolized behaviour that is tied by explanatory verbalization to their fundamental way of understanding the purpose of human existence. ... [A] myth provides a framework for comprehending phenomena outside ordinary experience; ritual provides a way of participating in it. Myth and ritual give the security of the familiar in the presence of the potential chaos of the unknown.

(in Karecki, 1998:313)

2.3.2 Theology

Following the postmodern perspective, I see theology as an academic discipline from below, although “below” also postulates the “above”. Still, from this perspective it is a scholarly undertaking that focuses more on human experiences of God than on God’s being. Theology is “talking about God”, yet God cannot be made the object of this “talking about God”, for God is non-objectifiable (Derrida, 1998:26-28; Milbank, 1997:266; Veldsman, 1998:55).

To speak of God is only possible if we speak of humanity before God, that is, if out of faith we speak about the relationship between humanity and God. In this sense, faith discloses a new self-understanding of humanity in the world as it exists before God.

(Veldsman, 1998:55)

It is interesting that Calvin, in the introduction to the Institutes, said something similar, namely, that theology comprises the study of God, man and nature, but that it makes no difference in principle whether we begin with God or man or nature, since dealing with or reflecting on the one automatically entails and leads to dealing with and reflecting on the other two. One of the most profound implications of this Calvinist position is that none of the three subjects of theology – God, man and nature – is (strictly) objectifiable (Calvin, 1931:1-4).