

Cultural criticism as an imperative for Christians

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Abstract

In this article cultural criticism is approached from an epistemological perspective, in other words from the viewpoint of a theory of knowledge that includes matters such as the nature of knowledge, its sources, criteria, possibilities, and limits. Seen from this perspective, cultural criticism represents a critical position towards those culturally oriented studies, which advocate a positivist schema in epistemology. A cultural-critical disposition in Christian theology is to question whether meaningful life depends on a Christian's acceptance and conformity to the so-called "orders of creation" as divine imperatives. Since such compliance was biblically legitimated as God's will and wisdom, cultural criticism seeks for another theological validation that can create space for an "alternative wisdom" within a postmodern paradigm. The article aims at showing that dialectical thinking paved the way for applying critical theory in the humanities, theology and biblical exegesis. In the article different critical theories in firstcontinental (Euro-centric) philosophy and Christian theology are discussed. It argues that cultural criticism should be seen as an imperative for Christians because they ought to build their lives on the "cultural wisdom" of Jesus of Nazareth, which pertains to a "cultural-critical" position in his time.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article is about the role culture analysis plays in theology – or rather about the role that "cultural criticism" should play in the lives of Christians who would like to internalize biblical theology done from the perspective of critical theory. It was written during the period of the immediate aftermath of the author's early retirement from a twenty-five year career as university professor. The aim of the article is to articulate concisely what the author, during his career as biblical exegete, theologian, humanist, and teacher, has believed Christian theology's main task should be in the contemporary intellectual environment.

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In our current milieu Christians are overwhelmed by “new” information with regard to biblical exegesis and biblical theology since the emergence of, first, the historical-critical and, then, the postmodern paradigm. While the article does not presume to initiate new knowledge it does aim to make a contribution concerning the relevance of the so-called “new” information for church and society.

Argumentation in this discourse is not qualitatively substantiated in a pro and contra manner by means of various cross-references to different sources. What materializes is rather an internalized belief that has been contended and reasoned through many publications by the author over the last twenty-five years. However, the following library items might be worthwhile mentioning: cultural theories and culture analysis,¹ sociology of religion and the importance of an otherworldly transcendence in everyday social life,² view on Scripture and canon criticism,³ the relationship between politics and religion,⁴ cultural wisdom and biblical theology,⁵ and hermeneutics.⁶

The writing plan of the article consists of firstly an explanation of the concept “culture analysis”, followed by an exploration of the role that “cultural criticism” could fulfil in “firstcontinental” (meaning Euro-centric) philosophical and theological thinking.⁷ This sociologically informed explanation and exploration provide the background for the author’s emphasis on his perspective on what Jesus’ view on “cultural wisdom” might have been with regard to the culture of his day. The “concluding” abridgement is an articulation of what the author considers as an imperative for Christians – a challenge that could also be of meaning for others who, as Christians, seek to make sense of their present-day social life.

¹ Tanner (1997); Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, & Kurzweil (1987).

² Woodhead (with Heelas & Martin) (2001).

³ Van Aarde (2001); Van Aarde (2004).

⁴ Barth ([1935] 1964); Dyson (1998).

⁵ Borg (1994); Borg (1995); Witherington (1994); Schmid (1966); Schmid (1968); Legrand (2000).

⁶ Grondin ([1991] 1994); Palmer (1969); Klemm (1981); Mueller-Vollmer (1992).

⁷ After the completion of the research and writing of this article the author read the “public” letter of Johann Beukes, published in *Die Vrye Afrikaan*, 19 August 2005, pp 3 and 12, in which Beukes similarly argued for the enhancement of a “cultural-critical” disposition by the church (cf also Beukes, C J 2000. Postmoderne redekritiek vir kerk en teologie, PhD dissertation, University of Pretoria).

2. CULTURE ANALYSIS

The work of the authors R Wuthnow and others⁸ illustrates how the phenomenon of culture has been examined from different perspectives in academic circles since World War II. In the neo-Marxist tradition,⁹ from the perspective of historic materialism, culture was seen as little more than an ideological scapegoat. In other circles, from the sociological perspective of structural functionalism, culture is seen in terms of social systems (institutions / structures) in conflicting interaction with one another, continuously seeking equilibrium.¹⁰ Another interest in culture, called the perspective of symbolic interactionism,¹¹ focuses on the meaning-giving function of symbols, myths and rites, in terms of which individuals in society act or are determined.¹² By contrast, social psychology investigates the inner value systems, attitudes and emotions of individuals, and sees the psyche as an expression of culture.¹³ Seen from this perspective, the “self” exists only in relation to social groups.

The study of social institutions is, however, increasingly focusing on the material basis from which collective behaviour emanates, and not as such on the more abstract ideas, values, or legitimisation symbols of groups with conflicting interests. Concerning the formal organising of groups, the emphasis during the period of late-modernity is not placed on the investigation into norms and ideals, but instead on economic forces and the effect of the environment, the role of or lack of support bases, means of empowerment, phases of development, and analyses of life situations. This era of modernity was “one characterised by the struggles of marginal, opposition and suppressed groups and classes against the dominant voices of centralised power.”¹⁴ Globalisation during the present-day postmodern era, however, “suggests a new kind of de-centred society, pluralistic, a hybrid culture of multiple surfaces, ... a rejection of meta-narratives and a movement from a bi-polar to a polycentric world”¹⁵

⁸ Wuthnow, R, Hunter, J D, Bergesen, A & Kurzweil, E (1987).

⁹ See, among others, the chapter “Marxism after Marx”, in Alan Swingewood ([1984] 2000:112-133).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Coser (1964); Coser (1968:232-236); Dahrendorf (1958:170-183); Dahrendorf (1959); Dahrendorf (1965); Dahrendorf (1968a:107-128); Dahrendorf (1968b:151-178).

¹¹ See H Blumer (1969).

¹² See Berger (1967); Berger & Luckmann (1975); Swingewood (2000:161-182).

¹³ See G H Mead (1964).

¹⁴ Allan Swingewood (2000:246).

¹⁵ Allan Swingewood (2000:245).

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Viewed from these different perspectives, it is clear that the question that comprises the study of culture is extremely complex. Is culture mainly the *symbolic* expression of human behaviour? Or is culture the observable *social structures* that shape people? Or does culture concern the symbolic world as well as the social world?

If culture were solely symbolic, then “literary”,¹⁶ ceremonial and ritual acts, ideologies and religion would be seen as the *symbols* in terms of which human behaviour could be described and explained. Seen in this way, the study of culture focuses on the symbolic role that communication, social/religious ceremonies (such as meals/eating customs) and rituals (such as monarchical ceremonies of enthronements, sacrificial banquets, holy communion, and initiations), ideologies and religion play as markers of the identity of groups of people.

If we were to use such a definition of culture, then culture would primarily be concerned with thought, attitude, emotion, values and patterns of life and faith at an abstract level. In other words, culture is then that dimension, which remains after all empirical human behaviour has been suspended – precisely that which in a dialectic manner causes “culture” and from which it emanates! Seen in this way, culture is the dimension consisting of the inner, invisible, theoretical-abstract aspects of human beings – as individuals and as the intersubjective, collective personality, which shares common values with others.

According to this view, aspects such as that which people really do and how they bodily behave, the structures and institutions which shape people and the physical interaction between power and factors such as money or career status, are not regarded as culture! Such a dichotomy is the product of Plato's classical dualism, which sought to separate body and mind from each other and which, during the modern era, caused culture to be confused with religion and be despised by many intellectuals in Europe.¹⁷

Dialectical thinking redirected classical dualism in a revised form so that in the social sciences the world of people is conceived as simultaneously divided and linked as the (objective) observable social world and the (subjective) world of thought and experience. Marx, Weber and Durkheim were proponents of this thinking. Karl Marx (1818-1883) as a “young Hegelian” contested this dualism and still saw culture pejoratively as an aspect of the “superstructure” which should be dialectically distinguished from the observable social “infrastructure” which mediates production and

¹⁶ An “inclusive” term that would refer here to what Germans call *Sprachlichkeit*.

¹⁷ See, among others, Baron d'Holbach, in Dennis C Duling (1979:140). Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) regarded religion, referring to Judaism and Christianity, as a highly “contagious disease”, which originated because of anxiety and was nursed by “tyrants” and “priests” who exploited the “sick imagination” of the masses.

interaction. Max Weber (1864-1920) also contested the classical dichotomy and gave greater positive importance to culture, though he still restricted it to the sphere of “spiritual morality” which should be distinguished from concrete social organising into a class, State and technology. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) emphasises the value of culture as shared values, shaped/misshapen by the “numinous forces” reflected in the power relations in society. Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) was on the same track when he drew a dialectic distinction between the “cultural system” (collective values) and the “social system” (human interaction).

Dialectical thinking is also the persuasion of the author of this article. This leads to the view that every “definition” of the concept “culture” should be seen as relative to a particular period, frame of thought and scientific angle. The point of departure used in this article, is that culture is seen as that uncircumscribed, difficult-to-observe dimension of being human, which concerns thinking, attitude, emotion, values and the patterns of life and faith at an abstract level that emerge in human interaction within the framework of the collective structures of an economic, political, familial and religious nature. Seen thus, culture represents that “determinative” setting which no human being can escape. The “determination” goes beyond the empirical social world in which human beings live, because it is precisely this social world that is dialectically impacted by a sacred canopy that constitutes the symbolical world which influences the life of individuals and their shared environment. Like all people, Christians are also bound to this dialectic causality.

Seen theologically, it is an issue of the “orders of creation” in terms of which people live, and may also be regarded as “nature’s imperative”. Believers and unbelievers are not differently involved in this. The relationship between people and culture is therefore in a certain sense a question of “determination”, or rather a relationship that is bound to everyday situations and life patterns.

A “cultural-critical” disposition in Christian theology is to question whether meaningful life depends on a Christian’s acceptance and conformity to these “orders of creation” as divine imperatives. Since such compliance was biblically legitimated as God’s will and wisdom, cultural criticism seeks for another theological validation that can create space for an “alternative wisdom”. Dialectical thinking paved the way for applying critical theory in the humanities, theology and biblical exegesis.

3. CULTURAL CRITICISM AND THEOLOGY

Cultural criticism is the critical study of culture, which opposes the positivistic object-subject scheme in the social sciences. In positivism, knowing is represented as a one-directional process from the object to the observer.

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Cultural criticism is the product of dialectic and functional thought according to which the object and the subject are engaged in a two-directional schema with each other. Over the past fifty years, cultural criticism has been directed mainly at the literary discourse and the meaning of the hermeneutic process.

With regard to these fields the work of Wuthnow and others (1987) discusses four perspectives in present-day European philosophy: phenomenology, cultural anthropology, structuralism, and critical theory. The names of Mary Douglas,¹⁸ Michel Foucault,¹⁹ Jürgen Habermas,²⁰ and Peter

¹⁸ Mary Douglas (born in 1929) is an exponent of cultural anthropology in the British tradition and is currently the director of an institute for research on culture in New York. In the tradition of Edward Evans-Pritchard's and Edmund Leach's empirical field-studies, Douglas takes a critical stance to the social functions of rituals and makes creative contributions to social taboos, ostracism and the role of symbols, social boundaries as markers and maintainers of identity, and comparative cosmology. She has followed in the tradition of the work of Bronislaw Malinowski and Emile Durkheim on social classification systems and the way in which societies maintain themselves. She has done fieldwork, in particular in Zaire (the previous Belgian Congo). Her well-known works include *Purity and danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (1966), "The meaning of myth" (1967), "The social control of cognition" (1968), "Heathen darkness, modern piety" (1970), "The healing rite" (1970), *Natural symbols* (1970), *The world of goods* (1979; with Baron Isherwood as co-author) and *Risk and culture* (1982; with Aaron Wildavsky as co-author).

¹⁹ Michel Foucault (born in 1926 in Poitiers, France and died in 1984) was as high school student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in the late 1940s influenced by his teacher (*caïman*), the Marxist structuralist Louis Althusser, and by other "Hegelian" philosophers. He became interested in the history of ideas and the history of myths, art and religion. In the 1950s he participated in the "structuralists" circle of Levi-Strauss and Barthes, but since 1961 lost interest in structuralism. In his mature life he was influenced Ludwig Binswanger's psychology, Jean Hyppolite's Hegel studies, Jacques Lacan's psychiatry, George Dumézil's anthropology and linguistics, and Georges Canguilhem's historical studies. He obtained a diploma in psychopathology and was during his career of being director of the institute of philosophy in Clermont, France, interested in the "philosophy of psychology" during the years 1952-1955. In his doctoral dissertation, written during 1960-1961 and published in its English version as *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason*, Foucault moved "beyond" the premises of both psychology and psychiatry. In his career as Professor of "the History of Ideas" at the Collège de France, Foucault became known for his interest in what is called the "Other" (*l'Autrui*) (see C Johann Beukes 1996:233-251). This concern pertains to those aspects of humanity which modernity regards as of little or no interest – that which cannot be known rationally, such as "culture"; the role of language (as both *langue* and *langage*); that which has no utilitarian value, such as the "mentally abnormal", the poor, the disadvantaged. Some of Foucault's earlier works (English translations from the original French) which have consequences for cultural criticism, are for example *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason* (1961), *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences* (1966), *The archaeology of knowledge* (1969), *The birth of the clinic* ([1963] 1972), *Discipline and punish* ([1975] 1977), and the trilogy *History of Sexuality* ([1976] 1978, [1984] 1985, [1984] 1986). His later works concentrate on the phenomenon of power and he is particularly interested in the way the variables of power influence knowledge and the way in which the acquisition of knowledge facilitates and increases the use of power in social structures. A number of his works on this theme have been collected in *Power/Knowledge* (edited by Colin Gordon 1980, New York). [Information provided to the author by Johann Beukes.]

²⁰ Jürgen Habermas (born in 1929 in Gummersbach, Germany) is the son of a minister of religion, has been strongly influenced intellectually since 1945 by the Nuremberg trials, studied philosophy from 1949 to 1954 at the University of Göttingen, lectured in Heidelberg

Berger²¹ can be mentioned as exponents of these perspectives. All four scholars have had an enormous influence on the current theological and hermeneutical debate. Jürgen Habermas, for example, has been particularly interested in making transparent the way in which knowledge in society gives rise to manipulation, exploitation and asymmetrical interaction. His coinage of the phrase “the irrationality of power” (“Die Irrationalität der Herrschaft”)²² speaks volumes in this regard. Habermas’ aim is to create self-consciousness so that people can gain insight into their own social circumstances and, based on self-reflection, begin to change their own circumstances.

Michel Foucault, likewise, has influenced postmodern biblical interpretation.²³ For example, the open-ending of his *L’Archéologie du savoir* (1969), translated by A M Sheridan Smith as *The archaeology of knowledge*,²⁴ articulates a critical perspective on the historical contingency, social relativity, and ever-changing discourse of human beings. A holding on to an “eternal”

and Frankfurt, and is currently employed at the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg. He is an exponent (together with Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse) of the Frankfurt School’s dialectic-critical theory (see H Hoefnagels [1974] 1976). As a student, Habermas took a critical stance toward his professors who continued their lecturing as though there were no world war, he took exception to Heidegger because he had not repudiated Hitler’s ideas and he did not think that the insights of Marx (and Lukács) could be applied to the post-war situation. As a lecturer he became renowned for the theoretical foundation he provided for the student uprising of the 1960s. Initially he applied Freud’s depth psychology and Searle’s communication theory (see D E Klemm 1981). His later work on “communicative action” (see A Wellmer 1976, in J O’Neill (1976:231-263) focuses on matters such as criticism of the “instrumental reason” of the classical object-subject scheme (see also C Johann Beukes 1996:68-87). Habermas replaced this scheme with a “subject-subject” relationship, so that symmetry could be achieved in the social “communicative action”. Some of his works (English translations where the original German was not available to me) which exercised considerable influence, are *Knowledge and human interests* (1968), *Toward a rational society: Student protest, science, and politics* (1968-69), *Legitimation crisis* (1973), *Communication and the evolution of society* (1976), *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns: Handlungsrationality und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung* (2 Bände) (1981), *Moralbewußtsein und kommunikatives Handeln* (1983) and *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (1986).

²¹ Well-known works by Berger are *The noise of solemn assemblies: Christian commitment and the religious establishment* (1961), *The precarious vision: A sociologist looks at social fictions and the Christian faith* (1961), *The social construction of reality* (1967; published with his student Thomas Luckmann as co-author), *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion* (1967), *A rumor of angels: Modern society and the rediscovery of the supernatural* (1970), *The heretical mind* (1979), *The other side of God* (1980), *The desecularization of the world: Resurgent religion and world politics* (1999), *The limits of social cohesion* (1999), *Redeeming laughter: The comic dimension of the human experience* (1997), *Many globalizations: Cultural diversity in the modern world* (2002), and *Questions of faith: A sceptical affirmation of Christianity* (2004).

²² Jürgen Habermas 1972. Knowledge and interest, in D Emmet & A MacIntyre (1972:36-54); cf also Hoefnagels ([1974] 1976:75).

²³ See Mark K George 2000. s v Foucault, in Adam (2000:91-98).

²⁴ Michel Foucault ([1969] 1972:231).

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discourse recounts a disposition of replacing the divine with humanness, of religion with culture. Therefore, an attitude of preserving foundationalism and an uneasiness with uncertainty have “theological relevance” in our postmodern pluralistic times that should not be missed:

I understand the unease of all such people.²⁵ They have probably found it difficult enough to recognize that their history, their economics, their social practices, the language (*langue*) that they speak, the mythology of their ancestors, even the stories that they were told in their childhood, are governed by rules that are not all given to their consciousness ... they prefer to deny that discourse is a complex, differentiated practice, governed by analysable rules and transformations, rather than be deprived of that tender, consoling certainty of being able to change, if not the world, if not life, at least their “meaning”, simply with a fresh word that can come only from themselves, and remain for ever close to the source. So many things have already eluded them in their language (*langage*): they have no wish to see *what they say* go the same way; at all costs, they must preserve that tiny fragment of discourse – whether written or spoken – whose fragile, uncertain existence must perpetuate their lives. They cannot bear (and one cannot but sympathize) to hear someone saying: “Discourse is not life: its time is not your time; in it, you will not be reconciled to death; you may have killed God beneath the weight of all that have said; but don’t imagine that, with all that you are saying, you will make a [hu]man [being] that will live longer than [God].”

(Foucault 1972:232; emphasis by Foucault)

The essence of Foucault’s “cultural criticism” entails an “anti-foundationalistic” viewpoint – a disposition, however, that does not imply inevitably relativism. Johan Mouton & Koos Pauw (1988:177, 185-186) explain *anti-/post-foundationalism* as follows:

[S]/he who believes in foundationalism, believes that knowledge has firm foundations. The theory reassures us both that we have a solid foundation for our knowledge, and that we have a mechanism to construct the rest of the edifice of knowledge on this firm foundation In short, it reassures us that we can answer the sceptic This theory has a long history that can, in modern times, be traced to the period immediately following the Reformation – a fact that is in itself not without significance An obvious response to the anti-foundationalist position, such as outlined above, is to say

²⁵ Foucault (1972:232) referred to people who regard his postmodern discourse as so indifferent to life that it “makes no distinction between my life and my death.”

that it inevitably results in relativism Anti-foundationalism [however] does not preclude certainty – neither in epistemology nor in theology The anti-foundationalist theologian should also have no problem with certainty regarding elements of his [or her] faith. What she/he refuses to do, however, is to situate these certainties at the basis of his/her theology, and attempting to infer the rest of the edifice of theological knowledge from them. Certainty is more or less randomly distributed through the fabric of knowledge, it is not in the basement, because there is no basement! Anti-foundationalism has no hang-ups about a certain foundation because it does not take the possibility of radical scepticism seriously.

The scholar among those whom Wuthnow and others (1987) discussed who deliberately addressed the issue of “cultural criticism” in his analysis of “cultural religion” is Peter Berger,²⁶ born in 1929 in Vienna and currently director of Boston University's Institute on Religion and World Affairs. Berger takes a critical stance toward tradition in that he continues this tradition and simultaneously rejects particular aspects of tradition. In his own words his argument is both “sceptical” and “affirmation”²⁷ – and it does not represent an oxymoron:

My argument is sceptical in that it does not presuppose faith, does not feel bound by any of the traditional authorities in matters of faith – be it an infallible church, an inerrant scripture, or an irresistible personal experience, and takes seriously the historical contingencies that shape all religious traditions. Nevertheless, my argument eventuates in an affirmation of Christian faith, however heterodox.

(Berger 2004:vii-viii)

Berger reflects mainly on ontology (*being* issues) and epistemology (*knowing* issues). He gives special attention to matters such as the highest truth, authentic existence and transcendental *Dasein*, and for this reason is interested in religious sociology, the church and theology. In his *A rumor of angels*, Berger (1970:84-85) makes an appeal for a critical theory that suggests the partaking of the “living, moving restless power” of what Paul Tillich (1948:163) called the “Protestant principle”.

²⁶ See Peter L Berger's (1961), book *The noise of solemn assemblies: Christian commitment and the religious establishment in America*, especially pp 39-57.

²⁷ Peter L Berger 2004. *Questions of faith: A skeptical affirmation of Christianity*.

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The principle underneath this critical perspective, that Tillich (1987:118) referred to as the “courage of Protestantism” (*Mut des Protestantismus*),²⁸ signifies an awareness of what Jean Paul Sartre (1946) called *le malheur de la conscience*.²⁹ It is an anti-essentialist perspective of a subject who became self-conscious about his or her situation, acknowledges the “others around them as similarly situated, and plan[s] definite action” (Mary Ann Tolbert 2000:103).

An essentialist Protestant view would imply being subjected to an “objective revelation from above” without any subjective choice. Sartre called it “bad faith” because it “misrepresent[s] choice as destiny and thus deny the choices actually made” (in Berger 1970:78). To expose religion that is nothing more than an acculturated orientation towards traditions, “*all the traditions*”, according to Peter Berger (1970:82),³⁰ “must be confronted in search of whatever signals of transcendence may have been sedimented in them.”

For Berger (1970:82) it “means an approach grounded in empirical methods of inquiry (most importantly, of course, in the methods of modern historical scholarship) and free of dogmatic a prioris (free, that is, of dogmatic assumptions of the neo-orthodox reaction).” He “would want to revive a deeper motif of what has justly been called the Schleiermacher era – a spirit of patient induction and an attitude of openness to the fullness of human experience, especially as this experience is accessible to historical inquiry.”³¹ It is the spirit of this era that helps us to understand the dialectical tension between culture and religion.

The thread of commonality between Douglas, Habermas, Foucault, and Berger lies not only in their major influence on contemporary theology, but also in their strong focus on culture and simultaneous questioning of the legacy of modern culture. To this we can add that they all moved deeply in the Kantian paradigm, yet at the same time were critical of Immanuel Kant. Indeed, reviving the “Schleiermacher era” requires an appreciation of the Kantian heritage.

As a philosopher, Kant indefatigably endeavoured to order the “starry heaven” and the “human world” so that everything had its respective place. Accordingly, God had a place and so did the church and the State. But people – also church people – were creatures of “two worlds”. Therefore they were free to exercise choices that suited the world, which is distinguished from the

²⁸ Paul Tillich 1987. *Systematische Theologie*, II, p 118, in Jörg Lauster (2004:329).

²⁹ Jean Paul Sartre 1946. *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, in W Banning (1969:155-158).

³⁰ Emphasis by Berger.

³¹ According to Berger (1970:82), it “means an approach grounded in empirical methods of inquiry (most importantly, of course, in the methods of modern historical scholarship) and free of dogmatic a prioris (free, that is, of dogmatic assumptions of the neo-orthodox reaction).”

world subject to “natural necessity”. Like all people, “church people” were also bound to natural necessity, called *culture*. Although the relationship between people and culture is in a certain sense an issue of determination, the “morally good” people have a duty to be free of this servitude. The essence of the church is to facilitate the freedom of people in the faith community so that God can be served *unconditionally*, free from the bonds with the ephemeral. But are human beings really free? The answer is a resounding no!

Consequently Kant made an adjustment. Something not traditionally recognised with Kant, but recognised by the philosophers of our time who follow the Kantian tradition, is this new direction Kant took to find a way of actualising freedom in the use of metaphors. Because being bound to “cultural determinism” causes an obstacle in choosing freedom. Kant therefore emphasises the role of symbolism that fulfils the “good”, from the primacy of the *intelligible world*, in the *sensible world*.

This new direction in Kant's philosophy has a great deal to do with his view of the role of the church. In his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781), Kant rejected logical positivism and had the insight that objects appear to the knowing subject on the basis of the questions the subject himself or herself wants to ask. Kant distinguishes between the scientific (sensory) world and the (non-objective) world to which the “postulates” God and freedom belong. As part of the sensory world, humankind is bound by natural causality and mortality, but human beings are free to do good – not in order (in a mythological sense) to be rewarded here and now, or later in the “immortal dispensation”, but because we have the duty and the freedom to do good for the sake of good. In his *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793), Kant states that human nature (owing to its bondage to mortality) is aimed at maintaining the self and this comes down to self-gratification, not to doing good for the sake of good. Therefore conversion to a “new” human being, who is free to do good unconditionally, is essential. A religion aimed at self-gratification (i.e. at reward) is false and is tantamount to superstition. The faith, which orders human beings to serve God unconditionally, comes with authority from beyond humankind and is based on normative scriptures.

Although Kant was not himself a churchgoer in his adult life, he had the insight that the church consisted of the community of those who were free to serve God unconditionally – a community whose members aided one another with regard to this “categorical imperative”. Human nature, which clings to evil, makes the existence and maintenance of the church essential, so that the church has to reconcile itself to becoming redundant when mortality makes the transition to immortality. He believes that cultic acts should be symbols of the free will that serves God unconditionally. The church is therefore the place where symbols should not bind humankind more strongly to the natural necessity, but should set people free to serve God unconditionally. This

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means that it should be part of the church's self-understanding that the duty to serve God is paradoxically required for believers to be freed from culture and that this freedom in our (sensory) world can only be actualised by means of symbolism.³²

Indeed, Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher read and reread Immanuel Kant.³³ As a continuation of this spirit Karl Barth caused turmoil in the twentieth century with his pronouncements about a believer's bondage to culture and the church's role as facilitator of the freedom human beings need to serve God unconditionally.³⁴

³² Fragments of Carl Friedrich's translation of Kant's (1783) *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*, explains why the relationship between religion and culture should critically be seen as dialectic. "On the one hand, we must not seek to extend beyond all bounds knowledge based on experience, for then nothing but mere [phenomenal] world remains for us to know. On the other hand, we must not seek to transcend the boundaries of experience and to judge things outside experience as things-in-themselves ... We are keeping to this boundary when we limit our judgment to the relation the world may have to a Being whose concept lies outside all that knowledge of which we are capable within this world. In this case we are not attributing to the Supreme Being itself any of the qualities by which we conceive the objects of experience and we are thus avoiding *dogmatic* anthropomorphism. But we do attribute these qualities to the relations of the Supreme Being to the world. We are thereby allowing ourselves a *symbolical* anthropomorphism which, as a matter of fact, only concerns the language and not the object ... When I say that we are impelled to regard the world as *if* it were the work of a supreme will and intellect, I am not really saying more than the following: As a watch, a ship, or a regiment is related to the craftsman, the shipbuilder or the general, so this world of sense, or all that constitutes the basis of this aggregate of phenomena, is related to the unknown, which I conceive, not according to what it is in itself, but according to what it is for me in regard to the world of which I am part ... An insight such as this is gained by *analogy*, not in the usual meaning of an imperfect resemblance of two things, but of a perfect resemblance of two relations between totally dissimilar things Hence, by means of an analogy such as this, I can give a relational concept of things absolutely unknown to me. For instance, as the promotion of the happiness of children is related to the love of parents, so the welfare of the human race is related to the unknown [quality] in God which we term love, not as though this unknown quality had the least resemblance to any human affection, but because we can conceive its relation to the world as similar to the relation that things of the world have to each other. But here the relational concept is a mere category; it is the concept of cause which has nothing to do with sense perception By means of this analogy there remains a conception of the Supreme Being which is adequately defined *for our purposes*, although we have left out everything that could determine this conception generally and *in itself*. For, we define this conception in respect of the world and therefore of ourselves and no more is necessary for us" (Friedrich [1949] 1977:105-106, 106; emphasis by Kant).

³³ See K W Clements (1987:17, 50).

³⁴ Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher was born on 21 November 1768 in Wroclaw and died at the age of sixty-six on 22 February 1834 in Berlin. He began his formal training in theology at the Moravian Seminary at Barby in 1785. Between 1787-1789 he studied at the University of Halle and here, as a result of the influence of the scholars F A Wolff and J S Semler, he was introduced to the Enlightenment. On the basis of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) he began wrestling with the question of how God "could be known scientifically". Between 1796-1802 he was minister in Berlin where he began exercising an enormous influence on the religious and intellectual, art and music community of the Prussian capital.

In his work *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799), Schleiermacher criticised the “scoffers at religion” – also called the “cultured despisers” – among the intelligentsia.³⁵ He became involved in a dialogue with his time – a time in which people were regarded as good, rational and technologically self-sustaining. To Schleiermacher, language was the medium of thought. Although it is an individual who uses language, language presupposes communality, universality. On the one hand, language creates distinctions as a result of individualisation and on the other, language creates universality in so far as it is a language common to others. An essential part of the thought process is the tension created between “objects” and thinking. For this reason, in addition to the “ideal of unity of thought”, contrasts, contradictions, and the position of the “other” are also part of the thought process. *Being*, identity, is “empty” in the thought process and is only determined in “discourse with others”.

According to Schleiermacher, *identity of being* is brought about in discourse. Because discourse always shifts between identity and difference, and because “absolute knowledge” is impossible since absolute identity can never be attained owing to ever-present contradictions, knowledge has an “invincible provisionality”. Dialectics are to Schleiermacher the theory about the “principles of discourse”. Discourse is motivated by the possible “unification” of interlocutors in that differences become neutralised. Communication presupposes replacing alienation with familiarity, in other words ignorance is replaced by *knowledge*. Dialectics do not, however, proceed from the assumption that “absolute knowledge” is the ideal of “unity of thought”, but from an “insoluble relativity”: “everything is relative to everything”. But the denial of “absolute knowledge” need not give rise to scepticism.

Religious language testifies to a *gottgläubige Selbstbewußtsein*. The impossibility of “absolute knowledge” pertains to the limitations of humankind, humankind’s finiteness, humankind’s bondage to history. This limitation, the finite boundaries of the human subject, comes down to the fact that people do not exist eternally and therefore one feels an immediate consciousness of limitation – a feeling of a lack of freedom, being abandoned to history. People are aware of their total dependence. Self-consciousness is the feeling of total dependence.

Consciousness of God (*gottgläubige Selbstbewußtsein*) is a striving for freedom, endlessness, and salvation, though obtaining these lies beyond the

³⁵ In 1805 Schleiermacher published his *Weihnachtsfeier: Ein Gespräch*, dealing with the incarnation of Christ, which contains important guidelines on understanding his most significant dogmatic work, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhänge dargestellt* (1821/2 – a revised edition appeared in 1830).

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being of humanity. In this sense, the word “God” is witness to humankind’s finiteness.³⁶ This is the source of people’s mythic and anthropomorphic discourse about God. The immediate consciousness of the finite self is the consciousness of humankind as a historic object, present only in language and history. Mythic discourse about God is the result of God’s appearing as a “historical object”, whereas language does not provide for putting God, who is no object, into language.³⁷

The word “feeling” (*Gefühl*) commonly appeared in the conversations of the so-called “intellectual scoffers at religion” of the nineteenth century, who wanted to temper “instrumental reason” with aesthetics. This scorning of religion allegedly emanated from an extrapolation of the “transcendental criticism” of Kant – an allegation that does not do justice to the Kantian revolution!³⁸ Schleiermacher distinguishes between the concepts of “feeling” and “emotion”. The latter, evoked by the encounter with objects, is therefore finite, ephemeral and fluctuating. “Feeling”, the consciousness of finiteness, is constant and comes from beyond the ability of the thinking and willing person. “Feeling” is a responsive experience. For Schleiermacher, theology is a reflection on believers’ religious consciousness, the feeling of total dependence, which is not an objective consciousness.³⁹

Karl Barth’s known distinction between “faith” and “religion” owes much to the dialectic between “feeling” and “emotion” in Schleiermacher’s thinking. It is because of this distinction that, according to Barth ([1935:1964:121]),⁴⁰ the church should not be confused with the kingdom of God. Nor is the church the obverse side of the kingdom of God. The church is human, and therefore temporary and spatial. The church is also abandoned to transience. The peculiarity of the church as a “community”, that is a social entity, should be

³⁶ Elna Mouton (1990:352) explains this central idea in Schleiermacher’s anthropology/theology as follows: “The ‘feeling of absolute dependence’ represents that primary moment when we are virtually one with the object in consciousness, the infinite God.”

³⁷ “Von Allem, was vom höchsten Wesen ausgesagt werden können, paßt nichts recht, sondern alles bleibt bildlich”

³⁸ Kant describes the supposed unlimited ability to know God as “dogmatism” and as a result of combining reason and observation, he denies that God can be known through abstract “propositions”. This led to the insight in dialectic theology that God cannot be made an object, and to the opinion held in aesthetics that self-actualisation should be sought in art and music.

³⁹ *Gottgläubige Bewußtsein* is a concept which reflects on both the *finite self* and the *infinite God* and is always localised in a given community of faith. The “feeling of absolute dependence” is a *responsive experience* within the ecclesiastic space where the kerygmatic events take place.

⁴⁰ Karl Barth [1935] 1964. *Credo: Die Hauptprobleme der Dogmatik dar gestellt im Ansschluß an das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis*. 16 Vorlesungen, gehalten an der Universität Utrecht im Februar und März 1935.

seen in comparison with other less voluntary social “organisations, entities and communities” – such as the *communio* of pre-modern marriage arrangements,⁴¹ family, people or State, and with natural (often biological) groupings such as “race, culture and [kinship] class”, as distinguished to premeditated “associations and unions, alliances and fellowships”. However, the assumption that the church stands *against* cultural structures – voluntary or natural – comes down to the church's being the “opponent” of these communities, organisations and natural groupings. And this, according to Barth, is not the case. Members of the church, in other words believers, are naturally part of these cultural structures, and even constitute and form them – as other people do too. What is important, according to Barth, is that the church as *communio sanctorum* does not “stand or fall by the forms or goals of any one of these groupings.” The church is not bound by their boundaries and identity, nor is it involved in their mutual conflicts. The church's boundaries traverse and exceed all their boundaries. Consequently the church's interests do not coincide with the interests that any one of these groupings expresses – the church's interests are wholly and completely different from those of natural communities, and at the same time the church's interests are the identical at all places and at all times (Barth 1964:11). Karl Barth's point of view strikes a chord with Theodor Adorno's ([1967] 1981) words in *Prisms*: “The dialectical critic of culture must both participate in culture and not participate” (cf Davis & Schleifer 1991:218). This does not represent an anti-cultural, or even a counter-cultural, disposition. What such a perspective entails is *integral freedom* – and I am convinced that so was it in the case of Jesus.

4. JESUS' CULTURAL WISDOM

At the beginning of the article, it was pointed out that culture is difficult to define. In the period before modernity, religion and culture were extensions of each other and this could be seen in the Eastern and Western Mediterranean worlds, including Israel and early Christianity. In Israel the temple in Jerusalem was the centre of politics, the economy and religion. It was probably Jesus of Nazareth's redefining of the concept of “kingdom of God” that resulted in a tension between cultural religion and authentic faith in God. Paul continues this tradition. This tension was not really put into words in the Constantinian paradigm. Augustine was an exception. Only after Luther's vision of freedom and the church's place in relation to culture – a reaching

⁴¹ Adrian Thatcher (1999:116) describes marriage in pre-modern times in a few words as follows: “The achievement of the widespread belief that a marriage begins with a wedding was not so much a *religious* or theological, but a *class*, matter” (emphasis by Thatcher).

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back to Jesus, Paul and Augustine – did a change take place.⁴² However, the paradigm of natural science made it very difficult for people to consider this distinction properly, concretise or visualise it. The Kantian revolution caused a breakthrough again. Schleiermacher was the torchbearer for this in the nineteenth century, while in the twentieth century it was dialectical theology's emphasis of an existential understanding of the language of faith.

In the humanities, thinkers such as Peter Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas have prepared the school of thought on cultural criticism with a view to the twenty-first century. Theologians should therefore not allow to be left behind. Kant's vision of *freedom* and the role of the *church* is a classical heritage. Friedrich Schleiermacher could put this into words for his time, as could Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann⁴³ for their time. What about us?

Certain tones of emphasis in postmodern thinking deem the church to be part of the problem of modernism, which should be bid farewell. However, if the church's self-understanding is based on the *wisdom* of Jesus, which should be seen as an alternative to conventional first-century wisdom, the church could proceed into the twenty-first century in a cultural-critical and meaning-giving manner.

Ancient Eastern wisdom literature mentions insight into humankind as a cultural being in relationship with God and fellow human beings as *hokma*. Wisdom means melding harmoniously with God's order of creation. Conventional Wisdom is "respect" for, or "fear" of, God and God's order – an order in which everything and everyone have their place, time and role; an order of honour and disgrace, an order where men, women and children have their respective rights and privileges, an order of ancestry and birth, of Levite and Israelite, of Levite, priest and Samaritan, of the circumcised and the gentile, of holy and unholy, of pure and impure; an order according to which there is reward or punishment in this life (or, as was later apocalyptically thought, after death or on resurrection from death).

This cultural wisdom reveals a developmental trajectory in form and content: from proverbial aphorisms (e.g. the book of Proverbs) to stories (e.g. Job) to discourses of opposing thoughts (e.g. Ecclesiastes); from rules of conduct to personifying language, to an identification with the concept of the "law of God". The latter, called the "torah wisdom", comes to the fore in the

⁴² See Ernst Käsemann 1969. *Jesus means freedom: A polemical survey of the New Testament*.

⁴³ Among Rudolf Bultmann's works, see especially *Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament* (1929).

Wisdom of Jesus, the son of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), the Wisdom of Solomon and lastly in the Rabbinical Pharisaic cultural stratification of people, places and things in respect of a hierarchical classification in terms of holy to less holy, to unholy.

Research, especially by H H Schmid,⁴⁴ shows correspondences in ancient Eastern wisdom literature (Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Israelite) to a specific developmental trajectory. Initially Wisdom was regarded as the “power” and “image” of God in terms of which the world was established and ordered prior to existence. Wisdom became personified later and was deemed to be united with God. Then came the “anthropological” interpretation of Wisdom, in that Wisdom became the principle in socio-religious ethics which distinguished between the “righteous” and the “godless”. This insider-outsider ethics is closely related to the Mediterranean vision of an eye for an eye, a deed-and-consequence connection. In conclusion, Wisdom took the form of “critical wisdom” toward the idea of retribution.⁴⁵

In particular, it was Ben-Sirach (circa 180 BCE) who wanted to maintain conventional wisdom's idea of retribution (although apocalyptically postponed) by means of adherence to the Mosaic law as divine wisdom:⁴⁶ Postmodern historical studies of Jesus⁴⁷ point out that the gist of Jesus' wisdom came down to a “cultural criticism” of the prevailing temple ideology of the Jerusalem authorities and that its socio-historical context was the controversy

⁴⁴ See H H Schmid, *Wezen und Geschichte der Weisheit* (1966); *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung* (1968); “Schöpfung, Gerechtigkeit und Heil” (1973:1-19).

⁴⁵ This trajectory can also be extended by taking into account the wisdom psalms (19, 62, 94, 37, 73, 49; see Crenshaw 1981), the Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), the Wisdom of Solomon; Baruch 3-4 and 1 Ezra 3-5 as well as the New Testament (see Witherington 1994). Lucien Legrand (2000:60) puts it as follows: “The criticism of officially accepted wisdom is not the monopoly of Israelite thought. The parallels to Job and Qoheleth found in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and other literatures show that *human civilizations have always realized their limitations and have continuously entertained a dynamic critical attitude* ... The critical attitude toward culture, inherent in Israelite wisdom, belongs itself to the process of ‘inculturation.’ Both anthropologically and theologically, ‘inculturation’ is critical. But its criticism is meaningful only if it issues from a shared cultural perception” (emphasis by Legrand).

⁴⁶ Ben Witherington (1994:115) points out that, although Proverbs 2:6, Ecclesiasticus 1:9-10, 26; 6:37 and Wisdom of Solomon 7:7; 9:4 see Wisdom as a gift from God, it can still only be obtained through effort in terms of the deed-consequence connection (Proverbs 4:10-27; 6:6; Ecclesiasticus 4:17; 6:18-36 and WisSol 1:5; 7:14). Furthermore it is remarkable that Semitic-Hellenistic literature, such as Ecclesiasticus 24:8-12, sees Wisdom as a divine ordering principle associated only with Israel (cf WisSol 10:1-21). Similarly, it is in this literature that Wisdom is identified with *torah* (Ecclesiasticus 24:73; cf also Ecclesiasticus 1:25-27; 6:37; 15:1; 19:20; 33: 2-3; Baruch 4:1).

⁴⁷ See, among others, Marcus J Borg (1994:18-43); Cees J Den Heyer (1996:218-232).

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with groups such as the Pharisees regarding the question as to what the “wisdom of God”⁴⁸ could be.

Paul himself did not know Jesus personally and also did not make much mention of what Jesus would have said or done. Yet his “gospel” is that authentic life is a pneumatological life based on grace, not a self-gratifying life based on the “works of the law”. This expression implies a human endeavour that wants to order transient cultural conventions (such as ancestry and circumcision). It is clear that Paul’s view was based indirectly on the traditions about the message and life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Among other things, Mark called these “cultural-critical” traditions the “gospel” (see, among other texts, Mk 8:35). An important component of these traditions was Jesus’ “wisdom teaching” and healings. He was a spirit-filled teacher of wisdom and a healer who began proclaiming his own vision and experience of “alternative wisdom”, especially by means of pithy symbolic proverbs, metaphorical tales, healing and exorcism, and in his own life showed that God is in an “unmediated” and “paradoxical” way present in the life of people – especially those who were worthless in the eyes of the self-justified, had nothing and could repay nothing to God and fellow human beings.

In this way, Jesus metaphorically redefined the kingdom of God in terms of a non-hierarchical, imaginary household in which all the members of the family had an equal right to direct access to the Father and the Father cared for people like these who knew how poor they were before God, and in which they cared for one another as “fictive” brothers and sisters in obedience to the will of the Father.

Because of his consistent and fearless attitude and conduct, especially toward the “wisdom” of the temple ideology, Jesus came into conflict with the Pharisees, was regarded as a threat by the chief Sadducee priests and heads of families, and was brutally crucified by the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, as if he were a criminal.

⁴⁸ See, among others, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1994, *Jesus – Miriam's child, Sophia's prophet: Critical issues in feminist Christology*. The divine veneration of the post-Easter Jesus (analogous to the Greek-Platonic, Gnostic redeemer myth) also shows points of contact with the trajectory in the wisdom literature that Wisdom came with a definite mission to the human world (Proverbs 8:4, 31-36; Ecclesiasticus 24:7, 12, 19-22; WisSol 6:12-16; 7:22a, 27-28; 8:2-3, 7-9; 9: 10-16). In 1 Enoch 42 the statement is striking: “Wisdom could not find a place to stay, but then a place was found in heaven. Afterwards Wisdom went out to stay with human children, but she could not find a home. So she returned to her own place and lived among the angels.” In addition, the fact that WisSol 1:7; 9:17; 12:1 identifies Wisdom with the Spirit of God should not be ignored. The Wisdom of Solomon can be dated back to between the middle of the second and early first century BCE (see Clarke 1973). This idea of God’s “Sophia” concerned so-called “torah wisdom” (see Mt 11:19). Matthew in particular (but other writers too, such as those of the epistle to the Hebrews) developed a “Christian” *torah wisdom* and thus continued the trajectory.

The “gospel” can be summed up in the light of the essence of the above historical construction of the “redemptive history” of Jesus, with the words weakness, disgrace and foolishness. Paradoxically, according to Paul, these words were God’s powerful dynamics with which God broke the power of sin, reconciled humankind to God and put human beings in the right relationship with God. This redemption is therefore experienced in spite of (and actually owing to) the disgraceful birth and death of Jesus. For Paul, for example, to die with Jesus was to live with Jesus – but no longer subjected to the power of sin, because Jesus was “created in sin” so that on the basis of the “cultural wisdom” manifested in this “redemptive history” we could be placed in the right relationship with God.

The form and content of Jesus’ teaching show that he was a wisdom teacher in terms of the developmental trajectory that can be distinguished in the ancient Eastern wisdom literature. His lessons were oral in nature and consisted of short metaphorical tales (parables) and created “one-line” aphorisms. The gist of both types of forms was “shocking” and beguiled listeners to form new perceptions of old conventional cultural ideas. The latter were suggested among other things as the “broad way” in contrast to the new as the “narrow way”. The historical Jesus’ “alternative wisdom” offered an entirely different representation from the conventional about the role of a cult, about what was pure and impure, about Levite, priest and Samaritan, about the people with whom God was present, about women and children, heathens and outcasts. In two respects this was not entirely unique: it linked up, on the one hand with the criticism in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes against the “retribution dogma” of an eye for an eye, and with the personification of law as wisdom, as we encounter it in the wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon, and on the other hand with the prophetic criticism against the injustice that the highly placed committed against the lowly. It was unique in two respects, though, in that it firstly denied the indirect mediation by means of the “reconciliation acts” of the priests in the cult and the sacrificial ritual through which humankind could be put in the right relationship with God, and secondly it questioned the national and patriarchal predilections. It was not of an apocalyptic nature and proclaimed the possibility of authentic life in the here and now.

5. A “NEVER-PREDICTABLE, URGENT BUT UNANTICIPATABLE” CHALLENGE

In his essay on “cultural criticism” in A K M Adam’s collection *Handbook on postmodern biblical criticism*, Kenneth Surin (2000:49-54) says that an:

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effective cultural criticism for theology will be one that accords with Christianity's affirmations about the means to attain salvation ... A Christian cultural criticism will provide a solution to the "problem" of the world; it will provide its adherents with a way of resolving the problem of a basic recalcitrance of the world ... This soteriologically constituted cultural criticism will have to grant that, in a world constrained by a fundamental recalcitrance that will have to be overcome in the name of redemption, it is always possible that the bringers of redemption will be forced out of sight by a history that cannot have any place for them. Such redemptive and utopian propensities will be hidden and marked by untimeliness as well as being discontinuous with the course of history ... [A]n effective cultural criticism will provide resources for transcoding these hidden redemptive propensities. If historical conditions stand in the way of the pursuit of liberation, then a theologically framed cultural criticism has to go beyond the boundary framed by these historical conditions ... Redemption will thus be a never-predictable event, urgent but unanticipatable, the "new." A theologically adequate cultural criticism will make this realization its most basic principle.

(Surin 2000:54)

Respecting the lives of the prophets, of Jesus, or of apostles such as Paul, it is clear that the historical conditions in biblical times led to the "bringers of redemption" being marginalised because of the seemingly "untimeliness" of their cultural criticism. In this pre-industrial, premodern life-world, religion and culture were extensions of each other – as is the case of the "cultural religion" of modern apartheid-South Africa, including the "bad faith" that is manifesting in firstcontinental "empires" such as the Americans' United States and the British's United Kingdom. Then as today, the "bringers of redemption will be forced out of sight by a history that cannot have any place for them." The critics of the politics of a Pieter W Botha or a George W Bush or that of the Jerusalem temple (the centre of politics, the economy and religion in pre-70 CE) have become the "bringers of redemption" because they have made the "realization" of an "adequate cultural criticism" the "most basic principle" of religious reformation and its faith commitment. Being redeemed means to have peace. Marcus Borg (1994:88) speaks of this peace as the result of an internalization of the "gospel of Jesus":

The gospel of Jesus – the good news of Jesus' own message – is that there is a way of being that moves beyond both secular and religious conventional wisdom. The path of transformation of which Jesus spoke leads from a life of requirements and measuring up (whether to culture or to God) to a life of relationship with God. It

leads from a life of anxiety to a life of peace and trust. It leads from the bondage of self-pre-occupation to the freedom of self-forgetfulness. It leads from life centered in culture to life centered in God.

In his essay, *The realism of the text: A perspective on biblical authority*, the South African theologian who teaches in Princeton, Wentzel van Huyssteen says that adherence to the Christian Bible implies *epistemologically* as well as *hermeneutically* a *faith commitment* to a “Reality we have come in biblical terms to call God” – a commitment to what “*ultimately* and *metaphorically* refers to the reality of redemption in Christ”:

If the biblical texts refer to God, and if this reference ultimately refers to what we have metaphorically come to know and accept as redemption in Christ, then Jesus Christ alone authorizes the Bible. In this sense the Bible has an *authorized authority*,⁴⁹ and as a text that primarily evokes religious response and faith commitment, it has what we may call a redemptive or Christological authority for life in faith, and thus also for life in the church ...Christian faith is therefore *Christian* faith, because it directly refers to Jesus of Nazareth and the God of Israel. And the collection of religious texts we call the Bible is our only and exclusive access to this reality.

(Van Huyssteen 1987:45-46; emphasis by Van Huyssteen)⁵⁰

We have seen that a faith commitment to “cultural criticism” is the result of Jesus of Nazareth’s redefining of the concept of “kingdom of God”. His “redemptive authority” entails that Christian faith creates a tension between “cultural religion” (based on the adherence to human-made conventions) and “authentic faith” in God (based on the “redemption in Christ”). In terms of this redefinition, a life of faith (which is according to Paul and John only possible through the work of the Spirit of God), calls for the renunciation of the self and a life for God and the Other.

What followed from Jesus’ announcement of the actualisation of God’s “kingdom” was the birth of the church,⁵¹ which since then commenced its continued existence in the tension of being “in this world” but not “of this

⁴⁹ Cf S Ogden 1976, “The authority of Scripture for theology”, p 247.

⁵⁰ Wentzel van Huyssteen (1987:34, 40) opposes the “authority neurosis” of some Reformed theologians (see James Barr 1973:113) and endorses a view on Scripture that acknowledges the “itineraries of meaning” contained within a text (see Paul Ricoeur 1981:50).

⁵¹ See Wolfgang Trilling 1978, “Implizite Ekklesiologie”: Ein Vorschlag zum Thema Jesus und die Kirche, p 68, in W Trilling 1978, *Die Botschaft Jesu: Exegetische Orientierung*.

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world". Since the Constantinian period – when the church and worldly power were too easily seen in a one-to-one relationship – “clericals” tried to alleviate this tension through practices such as celibacy and isolation in abbeys, away from the “lay folk”. Early in this period, Augustine wanted to be an exception. Initially, with Luther’s vision of freedom and his theory of the two kingdoms, there was a change in vision, which can be regarded as reaching back to Jesus, Paul and Augustine.

However, the Enlightenment in the midst of industrialisation and modernity made it very difficult for people in the church to consider this distinction properly, concretise or visualise it. In these dark hours the emphasis in dialectical theology on the existential understanding of the language of faith ushered in a new dawn in late-modernity.

However, a bias in contemporary contextual theology may well allow the pendulum to swing too far. It can happen if the most necessary quest for “political correctness” results in liberal humanitarianism silencing the “rumour of the angels” so that the transcendence of the ultimate Reality behind the biblical texts does not manifest in the realities of our everydayness. My view is that the only way that Jesus of Nazareth’s gospel can live fully in the here and now is by taking momentous existential decisions about our faith commitment – in other words, that is to live cultural criticism.

In Lucien Legrand’s (2000:111-112) summation of his book *The Bible on culture: Belonging or dissenting?*, he puts together what Jesus’ “cultural wisdom” was and what, according to me, could an “emancipatory living, in memory of the Jesus of history, entails existentially”:⁵²

Jesus was a Jew. His life, action, thought, language, and teachings were totally rooted in Jewish culture. He belonged to it. This fundamental belonging goes far beyond the categories of “inculturation” or “acculturation.” “Contextualization” would be equally inadequate insofar as the causative “-ization” would suggest an artificial effort of insertion. In the case of Jesus, there was no effort or insertion. He just belonged to the country in which he was born and to its culture ... In the case of Jesus, we find a tension or bipolarity between his prophetic stance and his cultural conformity. In this sense, he is a “marginal Jew,” who stood outside the pale or well-established interpretations of Judaism. His most authentic Jewishness does not fit any of the set forms of the ancestral faith ... If he identifies at all with one of the social groups and its subculture, it was with the “poor of the land,” He shares in their life, speaks their language, feels at home with their wisdom, and uses their metaphors. In that sense, he was no “marginal Jew,” since the

⁵² See my *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as child of God* (Van Aarde 2001:204).

“people of the land” constituted the bulk of the population of Palestine. But here again he escapes neat categorizing. The nonalignment of the common folk with the main currents of Jewish thought was mostly a matter of indifference. In Jesus, there was no indifference. On the contrary, his nonalignment is the expression of a more radical commitment to God and to the coming of God’s rule. In short, Jesus takes all his interlocutors by surprise ... Should we then speak of an “anti-culture” or of a “counterculture”? There are certainly aspects of Jesus’ approach that show him as a dissenter ... Yet the word “counterculture” does not seem to do justice to his vision of a new Israel. Counterculture is an antithesis and, as such, continues to give a mirror image of the culture it negates ... His is an attitude of integral freedom. From within the culture he belongs to and in which he was born, he transcends the cultural as well as the countercultural set patterns ... Humanly speaking, Jesus belongs to the race of the creators who open new dimensions of human existence, of the poets who invent new languages, of the *prophets* and the *mystics* who enter the divine sphere and transcend the human perspectives in their commerce with the divine. They are undoubtedly people of their own times and are expressions of the culture of their land. Yet they go beyond it and become, in the midst of their own generations, the explorers of new horizons of being. So was Jesus.

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