

## **Beyond the “ordinary reader” and the “invisible intellectual”: Shifting Contextual Bible Study from Liberation Discourse to Liberation Pedagogy**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Drawing on eight years of experience gathered at contextual bible studies facilitated by the author, this article intends to push the boundaries of the understanding of the role of the “ordinary” reader and the intellectual in the process of contextual bible study (a method of bible study that attempts to work at the interface between faith communities and the academy around issues of social transformation). It argues that if transformation is the end-goal of contextual bible studies then the critical resources which the intellectual brings to the process will have to be far more emphasised and nuanced than it has been in the past; that the effects of globalisation, particularly as reflected in the ubiquitous term “biblical values” which comes up often in contextual bible studies will have to be addressed; and the identity and role of the intellectual will have to be more fully interrogated than it has been in the past. The article argues that neither an understanding that promotes “community wisdom” or “hidden transcripts” nor an understanding of the “all-powerful” intellectual is helpful in understanding the dynamics of contextual bible study. This discussion will be facilitated by elucidating some of the characteristic features of CBS, what I have termed the five C’s of CBS - Community, Context, Criticality, Conscientisation and Change.*

### **A INTRODUCTION – IS LIBERATION HERMENEUTICS STILL STUCK IN THE MUD?**

At the World Forum on Liberation and Theology in Belem, Brazil, January 2009, I was asked to respond to a panel of presentations which dealt with the topic of liberation and embodiment. Chung Hyun Kyung,<sup>1</sup> the eminent Korean feminist theologian, began her reflections praising liberation theology for saving her from destruction – physical, mental and spiritual – but lamented at length about the question one of her Korean students at Union Theological Seminary, New York, posed to her. It seemed that this student earnestly and seriously wanted to know why after 40 odd years of liberation theology the world still faced so many problems and so many injustices. And she was right – it has been too many years after liberation theology – and violence against

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<sup>1</sup> Chung, H.K. Untitled Paper delivered at 3rd World Forum on Theology and Liberation in the Eco-Theological Embodiment Panel, 24 January 2009.

women has not ended,<sup>2</sup> we still have the proverbial “poor among us”<sup>3</sup> and racism and ethnic wars rear their ugly heads over and over again as can be seen by the current catastrophe in the Gaza strip and elsewhere.

At the same forum, Mary Hunt (2009), an equally eminent white American feminist theologian, urged us to consider that “our bodies don’t lie”. The bodies of Palestinian children on the Gaza strip do not lie, she reminded us. They tell a story of real suffering. Bodies do not lie and bodies are imbued with names and identities and characteristics. For example, my name is Sarojini. It is an Indian name which means the lotus flower. The interesting thing about the lotus is that it is a flower which grows on the surface of a river or a lake. Its roots grow deep in the muddy waters but the flower remains untouched by it. It is a symbol of strength and endurance and beauty in many of the Eastern religions including Hinduism and Buddhism, because although it is *untouched* by the murky and muddy waters, it is also ironically *sustained* by it. It is beyond the scope of this essay to go into all the details here, but this muddy, murky, story is the story of my life.<sup>4</sup> And it is this murky experience that makes me the biblical scholar that I am, that makes me attentive to the cry of the oppressed, and that makes me passionate about liberation hermeneutics and Contextual Bible Study (CBS).

These embodied experiences can be described variously; first as being the youngest of seven children and growing up in apartheid South Africa, experiencing sexual violence as a child, then experiences of post-apartheid South

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<sup>2</sup> The United Nations website reports the following : “According to a 2002 report by the World Health Organization, studies in Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the US have shown that 40-70 per cent of women who have been murdered were killed by their intimate partners, usually in the context of an abusive relationship. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that in the United Kingdom 40 per cent of female homicide victims are killed by their husbands or boyfriends. A study in Sweden found that 70 per cent of women had experienced some form of violence or sexual harassment. Statistics from the Netherlands show that about 200,000 women are subjected to violence each year by their intimate partners. It has been reported that 6 in 10 women in Botswana are victims of domestic violence, while in Moldova, 31 % of girls and young women (ages 16-19) are reported to have experienced sexual violence.” See <http://www.un.org/events/tenstories/06/story.asp?storyID=1800> accessed on 27 June 2009.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the 2007 Human Development Report (HDR), United Nations Development Program, November 27, 2007, p.25. notes that although India is rising economically, “the bad news is that this has not been translated into accelerated progress in cutting under-nutrition. One-half of all rural children [in India] are underweight for their age—roughly the same proportion as in 1992. See <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats#src1>, accessed on 27 June 2009

<sup>4</sup> I have documented some of this story in an earlier essay. See Nadar 2000:15-32.

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Africa including the ambiguities<sup>5</sup> of the fact that the new president of our country is someone who said in his rape trial that the complainant was asking for sex because she was wearing a skirt; thirdly, experiences of being a fourth generation South African of Indian descent, sometimes feeling like an outsider to South Africa and yet being refused a visa to go to India in 2002! These are the embodied experiences which make me so passionate about the work I do, and the cause of liberation and transformation that I am committed to. But how does this answer Chung’s student’s question about why after years and years of liberation theology we still have so many problems and injustices in the world. Moreover, what does all this talk of embodiment have to do with CBS?

## **B PERHAPS LIBERATION HERMENEUTICS BELONGS IN THE MUD?**

The answer to the first question is that it is precisely in the problems, in the lived (and embodied) experiences, in the mud as it were, that liberation theology and hermeneutics – like the lotus flower - finds its impetus, its meaning, its existence. In other words, I would argue that after 40 odd years of liberation theology, we still have problems, because this is exactly where liberation theology starts and belongs – with the problems, at the heart of injustice – in the mud. This assertion, however, is not to be interpreted as a glorifying of the mud, nor the problems, nor the injustice - not by any means. I am simply making the point that it is the experience of injustice that provides us with a reason to work for justice.

In his foreword to the English edition of Paulo Freire’s classical book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull (1996:12) highlights the fact that it was Freire’s experience of starvation and real hunger pangs that made him make a vow at the age of eleven, “to dedicate his life to the struggle against hunger, so that children would not have to know the agony he was then experiencing.” Shaull (:12) goes on to say

His early sharing of the life of the poor also led him to the discovery of what he describes as the ‘culture of silence’ of the dispossessed. He came to realise that their ignorance and lethargy were the direct product of the whole situation of economic, social, and political domination – *and of the paternalism* [my own emphasis – S. N.] of which they were victims.

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<sup>5</sup> The ambiguity lies in the fact that the man who was once a struggle hero against racism, could also make some of the most sexist and misogynistic statements in his rape trial. See my forthcoming article on this issue “‘It’s part of my Culture!’ (and religion) – Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics in the light of the Jacob Zuma Rape Trial” in *Private transgressions, Public Tirades, National Politics: The Jacob Zuma Rape Trial*. Edited by Cheryl Potgieter, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Vasu Reddy. Pretoria: HSRC Press, forthcoming.

Inherent in Shaull’s assessment of Freire’s motivation for his work, are two points: a) that Freire’s commitment to the cause of justice stems from his own *experience* of not just injustice, but its subsequent effect – hunger, and b) this caused him to want to work toward liberating the oppressed by conscientising them to the reasons they are oppressed in the first place. In other words, liberation could only be achieved, when people were so conscientised of not only their own oppression, but the oppression of others, that they became inspired and motivated to take steps to change the situation, to step out of the mud.

### C CONTEXTUAL BIBLE STUDY AND THE LIBERATION IMPULSE

Contextual Bible Study (CBS) works within the hermeneutical spiral of “see, judge and act” (De Gruchy: nd; West 1995). It begins with the context and experience, then analyses the context (in dialogue with the biblical text) and lastly attempts to communally find ways of engaging in the struggle to overcome oppression and suffering. CBS was a response to liberation theologies which urged scholars to take context seriously. It was a post-enlightenment development which eschewed the “objective” historical-critical method of reading the bible in favour of a method that argued that “objective certitude” (Keegan 1995:1) was a virtual impossibility and that all interpretation is motivated and ideological.

Proponents of CBS have claimed that the end goal of CBS is transformation, liberation and change. My own definition of CBS which I have used in training workshops and university classes on the subject is that *Contextual Bible Study is an interactive study of particular texts in the bible, which brings the perspectives of both the context of the reader and the context of the bible into dialogue, for the purpose of transformation.* Hence, the main purpose of CBS, it can be said, is transformation and change. This is perhaps one of the things that both the original proponents in Latin America and those in South Africa who have followed in this liberative tradition can agree on. But in response to liberation theology’s call to be connected to the context and to “the people” as it were, the question we can rightly ask is: has CBS as a method been able to help us toward our goal of overcoming injustice – of getting us out of the mud?

Chung’s student’s question is pertinent. Of course it is easy to reject the student’s claim that liberation theology has not helped the world with its problems. After all we have witnessed the lotuses flourish all over the world – Obama’s presidency, the fall of the Berlin wall, and closer to home, the demise of apartheid – liberation theology has certainly had a hand in these events. But the student’s assessment cannot, and should not be so easily dismissed just by citing a few success stories, because as Mary Hunt pointed out – “bodies don’t lie” – and the bodies of children in the Gaza, and the bodies of American sol-

diers in Iraq, and the bodies of women raped in war-torn countries like the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo do not lie. The world still faces the problems that liberation theology has worked so hard to overcome.<sup>6</sup> We have not been able to overcome all the problems and we never will. Such an expectation is unrealistic.

However, what we can and must do, as Tinyiko Maluleke (Maluleke 1996:21) has urged us to do already back in 1996, is to “critically examine the methods used to establish or claim connection to ‘the people’ as well as to evaluate the objectives of that connection”. Taking Maluleke’s challenge seriously is what I will do in this essay – I want to push our understanding of the methods of connection we have to “the people” and to evaluate the objectives of that connection so that we can begin to perhaps truthfully answer Chung’s student question, namely is liberation theology and hermeneutics achieving what it claims to, or what it wants to achieve.

The answer is complicated. Its complexity has to do with the focus and the end-goal of the method and not the formulation of the method itself. What concerns me after years of working in this field is that in most academic reflections and analyses of CBS in South Africa, the focus is not on *how* participants are challenged to change and transform their interpretations of the bible or their analysis of the social context in which they find themselves. Instead, the preoccupation is on a rather bland and dare I say romantic description of both the participants in the bible study and the intellectual. These descriptions of the participants variously range from “oppressed”, “poor and marginalised”, “other” and “ordinary” to “survivors”. Descriptions of the intellectual range from “trained reader” to “socially engaged biblical scholar” to “activist-intellectual” (Cochrane 1999, Philpott 1993, Petersen 1995, Haddad 2000, West 1999a, 1999b and 1999c).

At the time when these epithets were coined, which was mostly during the period when South Africa was “burning” as it were – on the brink of the demise of apartheid, or in the infancy of post-apartheid South Africa, it was clear who the “ordinary” readers were and who the “trained readers” were. The “ordinary” readers were Black, poor and marginalised and the “trained” readers were White, middle-class intellectuals. CBS was important because it was a tool that could be used to engage and convince people of the injustice of apartheid, especially in a context where apartheid was religiously sanctioned. CBS was only one such tool among others.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See UN statistics on poverty and violence against women in footnote 1.

<sup>7</sup> De Gruchy, with Ellis (2008:1), points to some of the other programmes, tools and activities that were being formulated to oppose apartheid: “From the time of the Cottesloe Consultation of the South African members of the World Council of Churches in 1961, following the Sharpeville massacre of the previous year, the rela-

However, it seems as if the objective of liberation that CBS claims to have as its end-goal got lost in the academy. The hermeneutics of liberation which was born in the academy appeared to stay within the academy with a proliferation of new and more fashionable liberation hermeneutics being born at a consistent rate. Feminist (Osiek 1985 and Exum 1995), womanist (Williams 1990; Nadar 2003), bosadi (Masenya 1997), inculturation (Ukpong 1996), divination (Dube 2001) and postcolonial (Dube 2000) hermeneutics are just a few examples of the plethora of innovative and perhaps even “exotic” methods that flooded the biblical scholarly guild. The academy was taking seriously the call of liberation scholars such as Gerald West to experience a “conversion from below,” to be “partially constituted” (West 1999a:44-54) as it were by the real experiences of those who are “poor and marginalised”. Out of this desire to take the muddy experiences seriously was also born a series of empirical research projects into bible reading practices of grassroots communities. So a series of critical analysis on the praxis of CBS in communities began to be reflected on in the academy.<sup>8</sup>

It is in the academic reflection on the process of CBS that my concern lies, and perhaps where we might find an answer to the question as to why liberation theology has not been that effective.<sup>9</sup> In a sense, liberation discourses force biblical scholars to use their skills of interpretation not just for the sake of scholarly debate, but in service of the project of liberation in the wider society. CBS, as an off-shoot of liberation hermeneutics, is an attempt at doing precisely that, but if what is being represented and reflected back to the academy about the CBS process is anything to go by, then I am afraid that Chung’s student’s assessment is correct – we are not succeeding in our cause of liberation which we are working toward, however noble those attempts may be.

Hence, in this article, I will as Maluleke has urged us, critically reflect on the method and the objectives of CBS so that perhaps the contours of the discourse can be adjusted or re-shaped to suit the changing realities of the world in which we find ourselves. Drawing on my varied experiences of facilitating contextual bible studies, I will push the boundaries of the understanding

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tionship of Christianity to apartheid dominated public debate. It shaped the work of para-church organisations that took a strong anti-apartheid stand such as the Christian Institute, the South African Council of Churches, the Institute for Contextual Theology, and the regular conferences of all the major Church dominations; and it was expressed in documents and programmes such as the Message to the People of South Africa, the Programme to Combat Racism, the Black Theology Project, the Belhar Confession and the Kairos Document.”

<sup>8</sup> See Phillipott (1993), Cochrane (1999), Haddad (2000), Dube (1996), West (1996, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2001, Ukpong 1996, etc. are the most notable of these.

<sup>9</sup> Again, I must emphasise that this is not to deny the gains made by this method – it is simply to push us to consider that a more interventionist method and an honest exploration of the nature of CBS will help us better evaluate our attempts at liberation.



of the role of the “ordinary” or “untrained” reader and the intellectual in the process of contextual bible study (a method that I am deeply committed to because I still think it is one of the few viable ways to work at the interface between faith communities and the academy around issues of social transformation). I will argue that if transformation and liberation is the end-goal of contextual bible studies then the critical resources which the intellectual brings to the process will have to be far more emphasised and nuanced than these have been in the past; that the effects of globalisation, particularly as reflected in the ubiquitous term “biblical values” which comes up often in contextual bible studies will have to be addressed; and the identity of the intellectual will have to be more fully explored than simply declaring one’s social location and then carrying on with business as usual. I want to argue that neither an understanding that promotes “community wisdom” nor “hidden transcripts” nor an understanding of the “all-powerful” intellectual is helpful in understanding the dynamics of contextual bible study. Rather a more nuanced and honest exploration of the identities and functions of the intellectual and the “ordinary” reader are needed.

#### **D SHIFTING CBS FROM A LIBERATION DISCOURSE TO A LIBERATION PEDAGOGY - THE 5 C’S OF CONTEXTUAL BIBLE STUDY**

In order to facilitate this discussion it would be helpful to elucidate some of the characteristic features of CBS so that we can begin to engage some of the concerns raised above. I will argue three significant points through my discussion of what I have called the 5 C’s of CBS:

- that CBS is not just a liberation discourse, but a form of liberation pedagogy;
- that the South African context and indeed the global contexts have changed – hence our analysis of communities and intellectuals must change too, and
- that given these changing contexts, a far more deliberate role of the scholar is needed.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it is helpful in terms of sketching the contours of the method of CBS. It is based on how I define CBS in the training workshops I have been asked to facilitate over the years, and it may be helpful to re-state this here:

Contextual Bible Study is an *interactive* study of particular texts in the bible, which brings the perspectives of both the *context of the reader* and the *context of the bible* into *critical dialogue*, for the purpose of *raising awareness and promoting transformation*.

The five key words which correspond to the five C’s in the above definition are interactive (Community), context of the reader (Context), context of the bible

(Criticality), critical dialogue and raising awareness (Concientisation) and transformation (Change).

### **1 Community – what if community wisdom is less than life-giving?**

As already stated, CBS takes its cue from liberation theology, and one of the central tenets of liberation theology is a focus on the community as opposed to the individual. The method of CBS takes community very seriously, rendering a CBS always inter-active and participatory in nature. It is not “taught”, CBS is facilitated. It requires the voices and opinions of all who participate in the study. This means that questions are engaged with and debated, not simply answered by the facilitator. This is not to downplay the role of the facilitator but to help participants draw conclusions through logical and critical argument, rather than a simple return to the all powerful pastor or intellectual who says “the bible says”; or worse still, “God says”.

In the process of doing the bible study, all answers provided by the participants are put up on newsprint or on a board. In one bible study group, I overheard a woman pointing to the newsprint proudly and declaring to another participant that she had provided that particular answer. So it is certainly also a tool which empowers those who are not often given spaces within a church setting to articulate their views.

Although all answers provided are written up, it is not a way of validating what is called “vulgar relativism”<sup>10</sup> or “anything goes”. For example, during the discussion on what the theme of a text is, heated debate ensues between the participants themselves. Over the years, I have facilitated several bible studies on the book of Esther, and the participants usually have a very spirited discussion about whether the king in the story actually rapes the virgins, or they are willing participants in the act. In one group, some male pastors who were very resistant to feminist interpretations of the text even went as far as to suggest that saying that the king was drunk is a “feminist distortion” of the text. They debated whether the phrase “merry with wine” meant being drunk (Nadar 2003:278)! Putting up participants’ responses to questions, makes other participants react and creates a discussion that often goes beyond the text. As facilitator, I have to choose the level of intervention. As a feminist scholar I often find it more important to engage them on the issue of the rape of the virgins than on whether the king was drunk or not. When interpretations are not necessarily life-denying not much intervention is required as others do.

Unfortunately, the academic discourse on community engagement and popular usage of the bible does not often capture the fierce debates that can go on between participants as well as between the facilitator and participants. In

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion on this subject see Macklin (1999: 41-44).



other words “community wisdom”, like culture, is not a monolith. It is fiercely contested, legitimised and defended. And yet all academic discourse has done with this is to valorise the interpretations of the community and raise it to a level of community wisdom. However, this can sometimes actually have the opposite effect to the transformation which we seek as an end-goal.

Although not an analysis of CBS, Gerald West’s article on Isaiah Shembe and Jephthah’s daughter (West 2007: 489-509) is an example of how liberation (of women in this case) can be sacrificed on the altar of “community wisdom”. So engrossed is West in the notion of community that is created in the Shembe community with the bible, that he devotes almost the entire article to a description of how the bible is appropriated by Shembe. The latter is thought to “steal” the story of Jephthah’s daughter and the rituals which were supposed to be observed by the virgins in honour of Jephthah’s daughter and re-shapes them for the sake of the *AmaNazaretha* community. It is unmistakable from West’s descriptions of the liturgical and hermeneutical practices of Shembe that there were clear “hierarchies of compliance” (to use West’s (2007:502) own words). And yet there is a valorisation of Shembe’s hermeneutics, simply because Shembe reads and appropriates the bible over and against the ways in which the missionaries did.

Of concern here is what emerges from the discourse of liberation that focuses on community and indigenous knowledge. The uncritical acceptance of indigenous knowledge appears as almost sacrosanct, without an acknowledgement that the community can themselves be in possession of destructive and life-denying interpretations, which may be exposed, interrogated and ultimately transformed!

Of course there may be good reasons for this hermeneutics, for example the community may have simply “internalised” its own oppression, or there may be some romantic attachment to outdated forms of culture and tradition, or even the community may possess an “incipient theology” that is yet to be articulated (West 2002: 23-35). Whatever the reasons may be, the fact is that after eight years of experience of working in communities of faith with the bible I have discovered from the participants shocking and disturbing interpretations of biblical and social contexts that are more life-denying than life-promoting. I have documented elsewhere how this is made even worse because of globalised forms of religion, such as the increasing charismatisation of churches of the Global South, which promote “biblical values” as a universalising standard for how people should live their lives.<sup>11</sup> From my experience (and many of my weekends are taken up doing this in different contexts) in facilitating the bible studies in communities which are both poor and middle class, Black and White,

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<sup>11</sup> Nadar, Sarojini. “The Bible Says! Feminism, Hermeneutics and Neo-Pentecostal Challenges” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, No. 134: July 2009.

educated and uneducated, male and female, and with people from across the world, from India to Canada, I can honestly say that in all of these interactions, I have struggled to find the “incipient theologies” (Cochrane 1999) and the “hidden transcripts” (Scott in West 2005). Most times during the course of the bible studies I have wanted to do nothing more than shake people out of their complacent “survival” mode (Haddad 2000) and bring them to a point of realising that it is not “God’s will” that they suffer and that oppression of women for example, is not acceptable just because “it is part of my culture!” In other words, what I am expressing here is my frustration at the “exoticising” discourse which permeates the discussion around CBS. Of course there are lotuses, but these cannot be cheap plastic flowers that say “made in china” when turned over. The lotuses must be acknowledged *with*, and *because of*, but also *in spite of* the mud from which it grows and from which it emerges.

As facilitator, I have often had to challenge participants particularly when their interpretations have become sexist. This is what it means to read the bible in community and not individually. It is to understand that there is a wider spectrum of interpretation which exists, beyond the individual, and often pious interpretations which are peddled from the pulpit. Reading in community helps overcome the challenge of the power imbalance that is created when interpretation is left in the hands of a single all-powerful individual. However, “reading in community” should not be mistaken for a valorisation of “community wisdom” when such wisdom may not always be life-giving or liberationist.

## 2 Context – whose context?

A second feature of CBS is its focus on context. Inspired by liberation theology, CBS always begins with context and experience. However, in the discourse around CBS “context” is used to describe the contexts of those who are more often than not poor, women, or Black. In Mary Hunt’s paper<sup>12</sup> on embodiment which I referred to at the beginning of this essay, she urged us to consider that suffering bodies can be found across the world. Yet most of her examples took us to Palestine, Zimbabwe and Cambodia, which of course begs the question if suffering occurs in the US. Context is the starting point for CBS, but after several years of the existence of CBS, I am asking whether that context always have to be poor and marginalised? Is it easier for the poor to pass through the eye of the CBS needle than it is for the rich?

Let me illustrate this point. In 2008, I was one of four biblical scholars invited by the Church of Sweden to facilitate training workshops on CBS. After facilitating a bible study on Esther 2:1-18, one of the insights that was shared by the group was that they found it difficult to identify with the text of Esther because they said sexual violence was not as big a problem in their context, as

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<sup>12</sup> Delivered at the World Forum on Liberation Theology in Belem, Brazil 2009, and as yet unpublished

perhaps it was in mine. But when pushed to consider further how the text did apply in their context, they revealed that beauty standards set by glossy magazines was increasing the prevalence of eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia in the Swedish context. It became very clear as the week progressed that context was not “out there,” but at hand. We are all embodied. We are all in the mud. Everybody has a context. So CBS cannot be only for the poor and the marginalised. One of my concerns is that when we talk about context and embodiment in our academic discourses, we talk about women’s bodies and women’s contexts only – or Black<sup>13</sup> bodies, or bodies with disability or bodies with HIV. But what about the bodies of men? What about white peoples’ bodies? Is there not a context for this? Can CBS be done among White, middle class communities or is it only a tool for the “poor and marginalised” as our discourses have tirelessly revealed.

Anders Hagman, the Swedish photographer and journalist at the “Bible Days” in Sweden captured this tension succinctly in a beautiful reflection on the process which was sent out to the participants and the four facilitators:<sup>14</sup>

After 20 years of visits by fantastic individuals that come to inspire us with their theology I must ask: are you more than Esters [sic] more unfortunate sisters to us? Passive representations of “the other” that come one by one called by the King in the North, to spend a night with us before we send you off as not quite exotic, thrilling, or beautiful enough to satisfy more than our most urgent desires. Are we able to fall in love with the message you bring; are we prepared to invite you to our dinner table. Are we able to show that commitment?

Very insightfully he was able to put his finger on the problem of contextuality being restricted to the “other” or the exotic and the difficulty of making context more real at home. He says:

The space for contextual theology that we offer, I’m afraid, mainly fills a representative role; representations of colour of ski[n], of other faiths and cultures. We are driven by feelings of bad conscience, of ambitions to be worldwide and open, of a longing for someone to save us, but we do not really open any channels into the heart of our churches that could transform us in any deeper sense, or on a bigger scale.

Hagman’s reflections hit the nail on the head in terms of the failure of our academic discourse to see the benefit of CBS beyond simply servicing the “other” but also to be in service of the cause of transformation, whether that is

<sup>13</sup> Personal e-mail correspondence sent to the author and the other biblical scholars who presented at the conference in September 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Email correspondence sent to author on 11 December 2008. Title: “Choosing perspective. A personal reflection after the international bible days in Rättvik, Sweden.”

in a White middle-class church in Hillcrest, South Africa, or a rural community church in Inanda, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. CBS has the potential to transform us if we are committed to addressing the challenges we face in our particular contexts. These contexts cannot continue to be named in the abstract. As Freire (1996:32-33) has argued

The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he [sic] stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons...to affirm that men and women are persons and as person should be free, and yet do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce.

### **3 Criticality – hearing from the “expert”?**

A third feature of CBS is its focus on the critical. This is where the role of the intellectual in not just employing biblical studies tools, but in making it contextually applicable to the participants is crucial. While the context of the reader is important, it should also be noted that, particularly in the increasingly globalised world where ubiquitous phrases such as “biblical values” become universalised givens, this particular feature of CBS cannot be downplayed. Contrary to the misperception of those in the academy whose commitment to the historical-critical method causes them to evaluate CBS as “uncritical,” respecting the text in its own context is an important characteristic of CBS. As I say in my training workshops to the participants, this facet of CBS is to understand that reading “the bible is like reading someone else’s mail” – it was not written to us, but we nevertheless are trying to derive meaning from it. It is here that biblical studies tools are employed to attempt to understand the text in its own context. Most times, the easiest way into the text is through a literary methodology – asking questions regarding character, story, plot, etcetera. But depending on the context and the ability of the participants to engage in historical discussion for example, the facilitator may also introduce some socio-historical information regarding the text. For example, in the bible studies on Esther, although I employ a literary method for the CBS, questions of exile and empire often come up from the participants because they want to fully understand why Esther hides her Jewish identity from the king. Easing into a socio-historical discussion of the text helps participants realise that, notwithstanding the sacred nature of the bible, the bible was written, read, translated and interpreted in a time different from their own.

The critical nature of CBS also means that participants are sometimes enthused to ask general theological and hermeneutical questions that are beyond the text. For example, in my bible studies on Esther with a group of middle-class, Indian Pentecostal women, one of the questions at the end from one of the participants was: Why did God choose the Israelites to be His [sic] chosen people and not anyone else, for example the Indians? (in Nadar 2003:303).

The participants learn very quickly that a good interpreter does not only know all the right answers, but learns the skills to ask the right questions.

Again, in the academic discourse on CBS, the role of the intellectual has been downplayed and to a certain extent under-estimated I would say. In wanting to foreground “community wisdom” CBS discourse has failed to recognise the yearning of participants in CBS for the professional biblical scholar to provide insights which they would have otherwise been blind to. Colleagues who have facilitated bible studies often share their experiences, as one person put it, of the participants’ eyes going as “wide as saucers” when confronted with the idea that two creation stories exist in the bible. I think that the problem in academic discourse is that the phrase “reading with” (West 1996:26) has obscured the power imbalance between facilitator and participant. My experience has been that the participants want to hear from the “expert”, and the critical skills and tools gained through the academic study of biblical texts are crucial in order to meet this need.

#### **4 Conscientisation - Taking the academy to the “poor”**

Another important aspect of CBS and related to its critical and intellectual dimensions, is the question of conscientisation. This question implies a particular interventionist strategy on the part of the intellectual. However, not all intellectuals agree on conscientisation as a goal of CBS. West (2000:601) says the following about the process:

The socially engaged Biblical scholar is called to read the Bible with them [‘ordinary readers’], but not because they need to be conscientized and given interpretations relevant to their context. No, socially engaged Biblical scholars are called to collaborate with them because they bring with them additional interpretative resources which may be of use to the community group.

Later, in another article<sup>15</sup> he elaborates on why he makes such an argument against conscientisation:

I realise that in making this argument I may simply be exhibiting my own identity dilemmas as a white, male South African. For who am I to intervene in breaking the culture of silence of blacks or women? So instead of naming false-consciousness for what it is, I call it something else, so assigning myself a less problematic role.

Hadadd (2000:49) makes a similar admission when she describes how her attempts at intervention were met with silence in a bible study group made up of Black women:

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.tf.uio.no/arkiv/citymission/doc/city\\_mission\\_abstract.pdf](http://www.tf.uio.no/arkiv/citymission/doc/city_mission_abstract.pdf)

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I now recognize that my role is not to conscientize but to enter into mutual dialogue and collaborative work with those I work with... I am less bold or hasty than I used to be about what action I think should be taken against the many gendered injustices I see around me. I listen more, speak less and do not rush into any prescribed solutions to these evils ... At times in discussions with women of Sweetwaters and Nxamalala, I have not been able to be quiet and found myself speaking out my perspective on their oppression. Instead of having the desired effect of moving them into unanimous agreement, it has more often than not elicited silence.

Notwithstanding that both West and Haddad admit that they choose not to conscientise because of their respective identities as White and privileged, their admission does little to help Chung’s student who asks why liberation theology has not fully succeeded in its aim to liberate. And this is precisely where the answer lies. Perhaps instead of only attempting to bring the “poor into the academy” we should be taking the “academy to the poor”. It seems like the purpose of CBS reflection in the academy has been to use it as a research tool, to allow scholars to be “peeping toms” into the lives of the poor. Although West has outright rejected the use of CBS as a research tool,<sup>16</sup> in a sense this is exactly what his and other similar scholarly work has done. Although claiming to bring the “resources of biblical scholarship to the community” West nevertheless admits that he also intends to “take the questions of the community into the field of biblical scholarship” (West 2006: 325). It is the latter intention of bringing the voices of the community into the academy that is foregrounded in the discourse rather than the former of education and conscientisation of the community. There is nothing wrong with doing this provided that we are overt about this, rather than claiming liberation and transformation as our only goal. Again Maluleke (1996:42) already urged us to consider this. “More reflection on the evaluatory process within grass-root research must be done. My impression is that apart from blindness to biases, some researchers tend to fail to differentiate between the tools used in evaluating on the one hand, and the data unearthed in the investigation, on the other.”

Having said this, it must also be added that the tendency to valorise community interpretations, or use CBS as a research tool, has not only been restricted to White intellectuals, but to Black intellectuals as well. Madipoane Masenya’s *Bosadi* (1997) hermeneutics and Musa Dube’s (2001) divination hermeneutics and (1996) Semoya readings have also come under scrutiny for attempting to simply replace the “lost figure of the colonised” into academic

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<sup>16</sup> West (2006:324) emphasises: “It must be stressed that this collaborative reading process is not research. It is part of the praxis of the Ujamaa Centre – a process of action and reflection... We reflect on the process, among other reasons, primarily in order to reconceptualise our action.”



discourse without being critical of the inherent inequalities and even injustices that may be present in such grassroots approaches. The attempts to bring the voices of the marginalised into the academy have been done through a valorisation of the survival methods of the oppressed rather than a critique of why survival is needed in the first place. As Maluleke (2001: 245) has argued:

Survival is necessary but it is not subversive activity. Survival theologies and hermeneutics may valorise the agency of women in oppressive situations, but it does not change the systems.

And it is changing the systems, not glorifying the mud, that will help to answer Chung’s student’s question.

Almost five years ago, Tinyiko Maluleke and I (Maluleke and Nadar 2004) asked some difficult questions in an article which stirred up much debate<sup>17</sup> in the South African academy, but has yet to be fully taken up. One such question was “whether the academy ought to see its role in relation to the poor and marginalized as that of conscientization, education and the imparting of skills” (2004:7). We argued that “for some, the fact that the poor and marginalized are and can be agents of survival and transformation, implies all intellectual interventions should be dialogical (e.g. reading with) rather than pedagogical and kerygmatic” (:7).

My experience of facilitating CBS’s over the years has taught me that it must of necessity be both, lest we be judged that the only people that are ever transformed through our hermeneutical practices are those within the academy, and while we carry on talking to ourselves, people of faith continue to live and die by the very texts which we spend our lives arguing over. In a globalised world where the bible is being increasingly deified and used as a “textbook” rather than as a “sourcebook” (Brettler (2007:7) it has never been more urgent to rouse people out of their “false consciousness.”

A necessary requirement for conscientisation is critical thinking, which we have outlined above. As Freire (1996:69) describes it:

True dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking- ... thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity – thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved.

## 5 Change – So what?

The fifth and final characteristic of CBS is its focus on change. Change is grounded in the “Action Plan” which ends a CBS. This final stage is meant to

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<sup>17</sup> Despite the debate there was never any fruit in terms of an academic discussion apart from West (2006).

ask the question – “so what?” After having done bible study – so what? In as much as it is the muddy experiences which ground us and make us more attentive to the cry of the oppressed, our task is, nevertheless, to ask whether our liberation discourses can help us transcend the mud. Or all it ever has succeeded in doing, was to valorise, perhaps even venerate the mud? We have to ask the critical questions which will ultimately help us transcend suffering, but then we also have to do something about the suffering.

Change and transformation must be a constant goal. Transformation happens on various levels. On the one hand, the ways in which we read the bible is transformed – we learn how to read the bible not only in a way that is liberating and inclusive but also in a way that stays faithful to who we are in our contexts. On the other hand, it is also transformative in that it is hoped that the bible study can transform us to such an extent that it spurs us into action for change and justice, in a world that is often unjust and not willing to change. Bishop Dom Helder Camara’s statement captures some of the hermeneutical moves of CBS – “when I give food to the poor, I am called a saint – when I ask why the poor are poor they call me a communist” (in Powers et al. 1997:62). The criticality and the conscientisation – the asking why the poor are poor – must lead to some change – whether that means actually being challenged enough to give food to the poor or whether that means protesting at the unequal neo-liberal economic policies of George Bush. CBS ends with an Action Plan, where participants are required to say how the CBS has challenged them and what measurable difference they can make in response to the CBS.

## **E CONCLUSION – TOWARD A CONTRAPUNTAL HERMENEUTIC**

After 40 years of liberation theology and over 20 years of CBS, are liberation scholars making a real difference in the lives of the “oppressed” as Chung’s student’s question prompts us to ask? Or have the oppressed simply become “raw data” for us to write our papers – pretty lotuses to put into our vases? Have we simply placed them in our academic discourses to remind ourselves that we need to “be mindful” of the poor, while our hermeneutics of liberation have actually failed to change mindsets of poverty? Who are the oppressed and the poor and marginalised? Can men and White, middle-class people be oppressed too? All of these questions need to be honestly addressed and engaged with if we are serious about the end-goal of CBS. This does not mean we have to polarise the debate and come up with an “either-or” answer. Perhaps “contrapuntal hermeneutics” which Alissa Jones Nelson, has recently argued for in an SBL Forum is where our answer lies. She describes it as a hermeneutics that

seeks to embrace outsider voices without falling prey to either assimilation or segregation. It points towards integration, which at-

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tempts to avoid both the elision and the overstatement of differences.<sup>18</sup>

The academic discourse around CBS as it stands at the moment, glosses over the roles of the intellectual and the community with both an overstatement of differences (i.e. critical and uncritical) or through elision (i.e. reading with). I have argued in this article that, particularly in the changing South African context where binaries of oppressed and oppressor may not be that clear anymore, we need a more nuanced understanding of the “ordinary reader” who is described as “poor and marginalised”, and the “intellectual” who largely remains invisible, or is “socially engaged”. If anything, I argue, the role of the intellectual should be more emphasised than ever. As Said (1994:9) has argued, the role of the intellectual “has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them)”.

The contrapuntal framework, as opposed to the rather static framework which we have at the moment for our interpretive analysis of CBS, seems to be more suitable. As Alisa Jones Nelson argues:

It creates an interpretive framework that challenges an unethical disciplinary hierarchy in harmony with other poststructuralist and post-colonial approaches and also goes a step further in suggesting a possible pedagogical solution to the perpetuation of that hierarchy in the classroom.<sup>19</sup>

I would take Jones Nelson’s argument further than the classroom into the arena of scholarship where such representations are made, so that we recognise that the designations of the ordinary and the intellectual are themselves dynamic rather than static. The intellectual may also be both insider and outsider, critical and uncritical, ordinary and scholarly.

Jones Nelson argues further:

Contrapuntal hermeneutics takes account of hybridity and of the tensions inherent in hyphenated identities. The same character may be insider, then outsider, then insider; may be insider-outsider or outsider-insider; may choose to inhabit one sphere or the other even as fellow inhabitants of that sphere challenge her or his inclusion. Contrapuntal hermeneutics offers one approach to the ethics of biblical interpretation that allows for the complexity of this boundary-crossing movement, in texts, in the interpretation of texts, and in the classroom [and scholarship].

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<sup>18</sup> “Job In Conversation With Edward Said,” SBL Forum , n.p. [cited Jan 2009]. Online:<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=797>

<sup>19</sup> “Job In Conversation With Edward Said,” SBL Forum , n.p. [cited Jan 2009]. Online:<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=797>

This complexity must of essence be worked out in the negotiation of the difficult in-between spaces – the spaces between discourses of agency and oppression, hegemony and freedom, between the lotus and the mud.

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