
Inviting and Hosting a Stranger in the Experiences of the Faith Communities: An Experiment in Constructing an Ethical-Poetical Christology

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Abstract

The numerous 'faces of Christ' in Africa, as well as those resulting from historical study in the West, call for a rereading of the event of Jesus. From the inquiry into the origin of the numerous faces, and the biblical evidence for the 'process and purpose of naming God' which are textually introduced by Exodus 3 and again taken up by the 'ego eimi' sayings of Jesus, it is suggested that the event of rereading is to be seen as an integral-incarnatory socio-historic dynamic. This dynamic is theologially understood and construed in an ethical-poetical Christology which will function within contemporary contexts as an invitation of Christ into the experiences of the faith communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a document based on the Seventh International Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), Oaxtepec, Mexico in 1986, it is stated (Document 1986:198).

Third World theologies are born of suffering and humiliation on the one hand and the will to dignity on the other. They are rebellion and protest against personal and social sin and against all forms of domination. They start from the people's painful experience of poverty and death. Commitment to and practice of liberation comes first; praxis is pregnant with theory; theology articulates the truth of praxis. The starting point is the faith experience and description of historical reality understood

* Paper delivered at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg at the Second Conference of South African Academy of Religion on 24 June 1996.

analytically/intuitively as well as struggles for change in favor of the oppressed. The event of Jesus and the tradition of his movement are accepted and *reread in the light of our sufferings, struggles, and faith experience* — (my emphasis).

'Rereading the event of Jesus' in Africa is — in the words of Ernest Sambou — 'the prime theological urgency' in order to discover 'the true face of Jesus Christ' so that 'Christians may have the living experience of that face, in depth and according to their own genius'. (Sambou, quoted in Sanon 1990:85).

The aim of my paper will be to focus on the process of the "rereading of the event of Jesus" as stated above, but then, to highlight analytically and theologically the diverse and pluralistic nature of the very (socio-historic) process itself within the (South) African contexts of religious experiences¹.

Such an endeavour requires the rough outlines of my (methodical) presuppositions from which I am addressing the question:

- * From a western-orientated theological tradition (Protestant), I approach the question at hand from the conviction (a) that the construction of any christology is a labour of interpretation, making an existential point (cf Taylor 1990:178), and (b) that no exegesis in construction such a christology, is possible without presuppositions (Bultmann);
- * The 'forward' of the biblical text (that is, the 'position' in front of the text) is thus the workroom for formulating interpretations in its dialectic relation to the (con)texts, traditions and the people involved;
- * The purposeful encounter of my specific worldview and the worldview of others², exposes oneself. The aim however — if the parties involved are committed to frank openness and thus criticism — is to hear one another in dialogue and reflection. It is these very (implicit/explicit) worldviews which make up the communal, socio-historical matrix from within which we are (theologically) naming the transformative power of Incarnational presence (that is, our religious experiences here and now in which we are naming our relationship to God/Christ/holy Spirit).

- * Not only has every period its own way of representing Jesus (Schillebeeckx), but also every culture.

Firstly I want to address the question of the numerous 'faces of Christ' within western-orientated and African theologies, and enquire into its origin: Why is this the case? Secondly I want to focus on the biblical evidence for the 'process and purpose of naming' and thirdly, to look at the theological implications of this process within our own context, characterized by cultural pluralism. Lastly I want tentatively to suggest, in the light of my understanding of this process of naming, that we have the responsibility for constructing and living an ethical-poetical Christology which will function as an invitation of Christ into the experiences of the faith community. This understanding I will characterize as 'beyond belief to relationships'.

2. FACING THE FACES

Within contemporary western-orientated theologies, numerous characterizations of the person and life of Jesus are to be found: Visionary, moral/wisdom teacher, peasant, protester, magician, prophet, bandit, messiah, rebel, revolutionary³. The same can be said of other contexts⁴, be it in Asia (cf Sugirtharajah's (1993) 'Asian faces of Jesus' or Wessel's (1990) 'The Asiatic face of Christ' in 'Images of Jesus'), Latin America (Sobrinho's (1987) 'Jesus in Latin America') or Africa (cf Wessel's (1990) 'The African Christ' in 'Images of Jesus'; Nyamiti's 'African Christologies Today' in Schreiter's (1991) 'Faces of Jesus in Africa' or Pobee's (1992) 'Exploring Afro-Christology'). What do we make of this theologically and how is this to be understood? How are the many images of Jesus (that meet us for the first time) to be understood? How do these images relate to the historical Jesus, and: Should they?⁵

What makes the question even more complex, is the fact that historical study (in the West) produces results very different from what Christians are accustomed to hearing and affirming about Jesus. Borg (1995c:942-3) alleges that contemporary scholarship affirm essentially none of the content of the Nicene Creed (eg born of a virgin, ascended into heaven in a visible way, a literal second coming). He puts it this way: 'If one of the disciples had responded to the question reportedly asked by Jesus in Mark's gospel, "Who do the people say that I am?", with words like those used in the Nicene Creed, we can well imagine that Jesus would have said, "What???" (Borg 1995c:943).

Deepening and broadening the complexity of this very (western) 'What???' from the perspective of the African contexts, is the admission of many African theologians that 'there are still many among us who do not succeed in expressing for themselves

just what Jesus Christ is for them' (Penoukou 1991:26). Not only is 'Jesus a strange figure' to and in Africa ⁶, but also disfigured in such a way that it has led to a 'faith schizophrenia' and 'cultural confusion' (*Onwa*) among many African Christians. A few quotes in this regard should suffice. Udoh (1988:80) states: 'If God was never an Alien in Africa or anywhere else in the world; and if Africans had long experienced and responded to deity, then religion is nothing new among us. The new element, and therefore problematic in African religious experience, is the image of Jesus Christ'.

Mbiti (1991:28) elaborates:

African Religion has not pronounced the name of Jesus Christ. But we might venture that He is present through the presence of God. He is the unnamed Christ, working in the insights that people have developed concerning God, insofar as these insights do not contradict the nature and being of God as revealed more openly in the New Testament A great deal of ignorance about Him is present in African Religion. As long as His name is unknown, His many faces are blurred till they find a focus on the Jesus of history and geography, and the Christ of faith.

And Obaje (1991:45) adds:

The average African convert today is still not sure of how Christ is related to them ... Africa sees Christ as the Christ of Euro-American Christianity who comes to Africa only on Sundays on a missionary visit from Palestine via Europe and America, and one who does not speak the African language nor understands the African culture.

Is this admission of 'strangeness' and 'disfiguration' (especially if one looks at all the different ways that Christianity was introduced to Africa) only true of the African contexts⁷. Or are these theologians simply more honest? But is this 'strangeness' and danger of 'disfiguration' not true from the very inception of Judaism and Christianity itself? From its 'shaky beginnings' in Palestine Judaism in the Mediterranean, the contact with other different religious traditions throughout their wanderings, the later influential contact with Hellenism in the Greek-Roman empire, the process of the coining of theological concepts and confessions (and the powerstrategies behind them!) by the church and councils, the period under Constantine the Great in which Christianity became a legal religion of the Roman Empire (and with it the history of the Christian church in alliance with the powers that be) And so it continues!

How then is this to be understood? I am not trying to give an answer to this question in terms of content (— that would be premature and misplaced —), but I would like to focus on the process as such, and suggest that this very process of the ‘naming of God and Jesus Christ’ in different contexts, is an integral-‘incarnatory’ socio-historic dynamic⁸ of Christianity, textually introduced by Exodus 3 and again taken up by the ‘ego eimi’ sayings of Jesus Christ⁹, and which functions within contemporary contexts as the very challenge of exploring/living a Christian life.

3. INTRODUCED TO THE INTENTION OF THE NAMELESS GOD

The question — in which he has cloaked his own doubt as to the intention of God — of Moses to the God who addressed him (Ex 3:13) who he should say to the people has sent him (What is his name?), contains both a request for information and an explanation of its significance (cf Childs 1974:74). By requesting his name, they seek to learn his new relationship to them. The word-play on the name of God (‘I am who I am’), confirms the connection between name and significance, that is, knowledge of the name was an indication of a relation with that person’s being¹⁰.

The formula is paradoxically both an answer and a refusal of an answer. Rather God announces that his will be revealed in his future acts, which he now refuses to explain. At least two elements are — in my opinion — of great importance: That God confirms his relationship with them and keeps it open toward the future, and secondly, that this relationship is characterized as a personal (name) relationship (not only with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but also with them). From a historic perspective, it is confirmed in the ongoing relationship (God — Israel) and the establishing of new relationships (such as with Gideon and Jeremiah to name but two).

For my purposes of even greater importance, is the ‘naming-process’ which is set in historical motion and characterizes in content this ongoing relationship. It demonstrates a strong link between the divine activity and the social life of the community, that is, of a deity who draws into the sphere of his concerns the moral and social needs of a people: ‘I am’ is called eternal Governor, everlasting King, Ruler, Owner, Rock, Immanuel, Saviour, Shephard Thus, the elements which characterizes the relationship (the nearness and distance) such as worthy of being (exclusively) worshipped, ‘place’ of refuge, holiness, one that judges, leads, saves, protects, helps, is merciful etc are captured in the process of ‘name calling’ of the God, who humanity has not seen and whose name is not known, but who has established on his own initiative, a relationship ‘from heaven’. Put in a different way: The historic-signifying process in which the ‘More of reality’ is ‘called “personal” names’ on the basis of the established relationships, thus functions as an ongoing invitation in continuity — but

also in discontinuity — in each new historic context with the purpose of exploring the significance of the relationships with the ‘nameless God’. Why also in discontinuity? Simply because not all names seems in the long run to be appropriate to name the significance of the ‘nameless God’ so that the names will always stand in a dialectic tension with both the ‘new’ names amongst each other as well as the foregoing names. Did however this situation not change with the coming of Jesus Christ?

4. JESUS CHRIST: AVOIDING BEING ONTOLOGICALLY LABELLED BUT NOT EXISTENTIALLY NAMED

In exploring the main lines of Christological affirmations (Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, Lord, God) to be found in the New Testament and as understood in contemporary historical scholarship, it is notably accepted that (a) Jesus of Nazareth was quite different from how he is portrayed in the gospels — and for that matter, in the creeds of the church, and (b) that all of the Christological affirmations does not appear to have explicitly been used by Jesus of himself (the pre-Easter Jesus), but are of post-Easter origin. If this is the case — apart from all the different questions that this raise — I would like to suggest that the ‘name calling process’ can be understood in line with the Old Testaments ‘invitation’ that the relationship between God and his people should be ‘called names’ which would be explanatory to its significance.

I would like to mention especially the seven ‘I am’ (*ego eimi*) sayings of Jesus which he used to describe himself. They cover a wide range of metaphors ¹¹ which — in each case — illustrates some function of Jesus: to sustain, to illuminate, to admit, to care for, to give life, to guide and to make productive.

Is it then not theologically acceptable to infer from the preceding, that

- in the light of the historic preceding encounter (introduction of the ‘nameless God’) and the ongoing process of name-calling of the relationship,
- the theological interpretations of the significance of the incarnation
- the content of the message of Jesus and the way that he relates his person to the message and to his relationships (The ‘way’ as indicated in the foregoing formulation: avoiding being ontologically labelled, but not existentially named)

that his ‘person and work’ can be seen as leaven of this very interpersonal, socio-historic process in which the ‘presence of God’ in the ‘incarnated Jesus’ through the ‘Spirit which blows where and when it wills’, is named (‘christened’) in every new context ¹², be it historically or demographically.

If this interpretation is justified, then the 'new names' for Jesus Christ in Africa today should not be frowned on. But even more: Then it should not be the case that embracing Christ and his message means rejection of one's own cultural values, be it African or Western or Asiatic. However, at the same time the aforementioned dialectic of contemporary names amongst each other (also interculturally) and with names of the past, is applicable, that is, it should function (self)critically. Put in another way: The ongoing process of the 'naming of the faces of Christ' in different contexts and in the encounter of contexts must lead to the challenging questions: What do they tell me of the 'other', the experience of the 'More of the other' and of myself and my relationships. The process of 'naming' thus function in this way — theologically understood — as an invitation to search together for the concrete significance of 'Incarnational presence' here and now.

How can this be spelt out more clearly in terms of Christology? Before I finally turn to this question, we must briefly turn to the 'faces of Christ' in the context of Africa.

5. NAMING JESUS CHRIST IN AFRICA

God is no stranger to Africa (Udoh), since religion is in the African's whole system of being (Mbiti). The stranger — as noted above — is the figure of (or disfigured) Christ. However, especially in the last two decades (cf Wessels 1990:109) much work has been done on African concepts of Christology so that within the context of Africa today one encounters an astonishing range of expressions for Jesus: Christ the victor, integral healer, chief, elder-brother, master of initiation, ancestor, black messiah (cf Nyamiti 1991:3-23; Pobee 1992; Schreiter 1991:viii-xiii; Wessels 1990:109-115). These concepts are part and parcel of African worldviews and addresses directly the contexts from which they originate.

6. EXCURSE ON AFRICAN WORLDVIEWS AND CONTEXTS

6.1 WORLDVIEWS

The most important 'basic' elements of the African worldviews, according to Dyrness (1990:42-52), are:

- * harmony (preserved or enhanced by religion and ritual; the human community does not create it, but it is given by God and the ancestors; it is enshrined in the normal orders of life and death, rainy season and dry, planting and harvest; life however is also vulnerable);

- * God and the powers (the universe is alive and controlled by powers that sustain the harmony; the belief in a single, all-powerful and present God, creator and controller of the universe, is unquestioned; living in close relation to God are the spirits, created by God to mediate his power; the spirits, which are called by various names, are thus separate sources of power; closer to the living community, though still in the spiritual realm, are the ancestors (called the living or lively dead); the ancestors are of the utmost importance; as they have represented the stability of the community in life, after death they remain a vital part of the community until enough time has elapsed for them to pass out of living memory and finally disintegrate into the corporate memory of the tribe; as God can not be approached directly, the mediation of specialists (priests, mediums) is necessary. Other human mediators which all functions on different 'levels', are the diviners, medicine men, chiefs, elders and fathers.
- * The Human community (the human person plays a central role in all African thinking, but always in the context of the community)
- * Means of fellowship (Are not meant to provide for communion with the gods, but to enlist these powers in support of the community; the object of ritual and cultic acts is to sustain the social and cosmic order).

6.2 CONTEXTS

Most of these contexts — according to Obaje (1992:47) — are characterized by poverty, suffering, corruption, spiritual undernourishment, diseases, demonic oppression, witches, wizards, wickedness, ignorance, oppressive civilian and military dictatorial governments, inequality, aggressive tribalism, religious fanaticism, inter-ethnic wars, political and social unrest, neo-colonialism, inefficiency, under-development of resources, austerity of basic commodities in life, inadequate philosophy for living.

It is in the light of these basic elements of the African worldview and the challenges and needs of their (existential-religious) contexts, that Pobee (1992:15) states:

If the *depositum fidei* is important for *homo africanus*' statement of Who Jesus is, equally important is who the African is, because *homo africanus* is encountered by Christ as he or she is. In any case, *homo africanus*'s history travels with them in the encounter with Christ. Its impact travels directly out of traditional African religion into a whole new existence structure around faith in the God of Jesus Christ with them in this encounter with Christ.

If then in the encounter with the (strange or disfigured) Christ, the 'who' of the African and the 'who' of Christ are respectively exposed as Pobee explains, and if the same can be said of other contexts¹³, what does this entail for the encounter of the others, and, for Christology in Africa?

7. FACE TO FACE: CONSTRUCTING AN ETHICAL-POETICAL CHRISTOLOGY AS INVITATION TO MOVE BEYOND BELIEF TO RELATIONSHIPS

Is not the encounter of the interface of the very diverse and different faces of Christ a 'heavenly' invitation and urging on of humanity to search and concretely find 'the nameless God' anew in our relationships here and now, and contexts? Can it not thus also be understood in some way or another as a religious corrective and directive? Put differently in the words of Schillebeeckx (1979:671):

Whereas God is bent on showing himself in human form, we on our side slip past this human aspect as quickly as we can in order to admire a 'divine Ikon' from which every trait of the critical prophet has been smoothed away. Then we 'neutralize' the critical impact of God himself and run the risk simply of adding a new ideology to those which mankind already possesses in such plenty: that is to say, Christology itself!

Taking Schillebeeckx's understanding of the 'neutralization of the critical impact of God himself' seriously, I would like tentatively to suggest that the challenges which 'face' us in the encounter of the diverse 'faces of Christ', can theologially be made sense of in an ethical-poetical Christology, that is, a Christology which will be testimonial (with the catch-word 'remembering' as constitutive), utopian (with the catchword 'imagining' as constitutive) and emphatic (with the catchword 'hope' as constitutive)¹⁴. I now turn to this suggestion.

8. AN ETHICAL-POETICAL CHRISTOLOGY: A 'FORWARD' SUGGESTION

In the light of the foregoing exposition of the process of the 'naming of the nameless God' in relationships, and taking Christ's incarnation seriously (which concretely imply to be committed to a lifestyle which seeks the realisation of the coming of God's kingdom), I would like to put my interpretative vantage point in the short phrase: It invites us to face God in the other. Put differently: The coming of God's kingdom as God's story in our world, 'named', told and written anew in imaginary commitment and con-

firmation (that is, being the image of God and conforming in action to the image of Christ), must bring peoples face to face with one another. The 'face to face' encounter must empower and thus enable the peoples in the naming and recognition of the risen Lord in our midst. Such a christology which seeks to bring one another face to face, I would like to designate as an ethical-poetical christology. This is a christology which is a process where someone says something to someone about something. It is a christology structured as response and address which 'names' the practical and concrete manifestation of God's kingdom in a given place and at a given time. Such a christology cannot be (rationally) 'possessed', but must be written anew in terms of the 'who', the 'where', the 'why' and the 'when'.

In the formulation of an ethical-poetical Christology in the 'interface' of encountering contexts in Africa, it is precisely the cultural pluralism and the very real concrete needs of the different contexts, which necessitate an ethical priority over the epistemological question¹⁵. Put differently: The good has to come before the question of truth and being. Why, and: Does this not imply uncritical action? Firstly: Why? Simply because the different (and conflicting) worldviews in Africa do not only push us into a labyrinth of images, but also confronts us with the endless spiral of undecidability (the epistemological question). It is precisely the ethical responsibility and the ethical response that reintroduces a dimension of depth, that is, reintroduces a 'new, concrete quest' for humanness here and now. It is to come 'face to face' (Levinas) with one another, with the other as an other. The other in need makes an ethical demand upon me so that the question 'where are you?' (ethical demand) must be asked before the question 'who are you?' (epistemological question). However, in addressing the ethical demand, the face of the respondent ('Here I am') will take shape in due course (if we have patience with one another!). Secondly: Does this not imply uncritical action? No. It demands constant discernment. The face — for example — of a terrorist or of a 'blue collar businessman' (the image of power) and the face of one being terrorised or of a squatter (the image of powerlessness) is simply not the same. It is thus to reinterpret ethically the role of imagination as a relationship between the self and the other, that is, imaginary must be recognised as a process which relates to something or somebody other than itself (Kearney). It is to imagine otherwise, that is, an imagination that is able to respond: 'Here am I'. However, the responsive imagination can not only be ethical since it is not enough. It must also be poetical.

Poetics (in the broad sense of poiesis as 'inventive' making and creating) is the carnival of possibilities where everything is permitted, nothing censored. It is the willingness to imagine oneself in the other person's skin, to see things as if one were, momentarily at least, another, to experience how the other half lives (Kearney 1988:

368-9). It is a creative letting go of the drive for possession, of the calculus of means and ends. It empowers to identify with the heroes and heroines as well as the forgotten or discarded persons of history. It opposes the apartheid logic of black and white. In short: the poetical imagination nourishes the conviction that things can be changed. But the ethical and poetical, albeit two different ways in which imagination can open us to the otherness of the other, belong together.

The task of an ethical-poetical Christology thus will be hermeneutical (discernment, integrating), historical (remembering the past to change the future) and narrative (to tell and retell one's story, enabling the proliferation of the narrative identity).

The task undertaken by such a Christology will determine the character thereof. Three dimensions (which correlates to the three constitutive elements of religious experience¹⁶), namely remembering, imagination and hope) — in my opinion — must be pointed out:

- * It will be testimonial, that is, the power to bear witness to exemplary narratives (eg Jesus' story) legaced by our cultural memories and traditions. It is to listen and respond to one another's stories, to put oneself in others' shoes. It is to recall the 'names of God/the images of Christ' and the forgotten victims of history. This is what Metz calls 'dangerous/subversive memories'. It is to forgive (to forget the wrongdoings of the other) and to accept forgiveness. It is precisely this testimonial dimension which helps the utopian dimension not to degenerate into empty fantasy.
- * It will be utopian, that is, exploring self-critically and learning 'ways of being' Christians (being the images of the unseen God and conforming to the Christ images) in our world in the coming of God's kingdom. It is 'thinking/acting as' the body of Christ. It is the imaginative ability to disclose the possible in the actual, the other in the same, converging differences without fusing, the new in the old, and the never-yet realized enabling to guard against dogmatism.
- * It must be emphatic, that is, to remain open to what is given from beyond (to be receptive), to respect the otherness of the other person, to treat the other as an end rather than means, to expose oneself in welcoming the stranger, to empathize. It is a receptivity that becomes compassion. It is a compassion that brings hope into the world.

9. A CONCLUSION: BEYOND BELIEF TO RELATIONSHIPS

Have the 'face to face' encounters within the African contexts already born some fruit? Yes, and No. Yes, the African faces of Christ highlight the 'spiritual and personal' poverty of western-orientated theologies, enstrangled in a rationalistic possessiveness. No, the inability to come to terms creatively with the modern world has been laid bare as a weakness. Yes, the (western) scholarly distinction of a historical Jesus and a theologically interpreted Christ/Christ of faith cannot be ignored in African viewpoint. Nor can the epistemological questions.

Much more can most probably be said. I however, want to focus — in conclusion — on another 'Yes', which to me is of the utmost importance. The interface of the faces in which the nameless God is being named, has been humanized (or 'personalised') in such a way that the nature of faith (believing) has unwillingly been pressed into the spotlight. It challenges an understanding of faith which is primarily and merely the 'holding for true' of the bible, tradition, articles of faith etc. It is a 'believing of eternal true things about God, Jesus, the Spirit, the Christian doctrine' Rather — and in this I see the greatest gain of the interface of the faces — 'believing' is about entering into meaningful relationships. It is to enter into and to live from the constitutive relationship with God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. It is to enter into and to live meaningful human relationships. It is — as the word 'believe' mean in its Latin and Greek roots — to 'give one's heart, one's self' in the relationship (Marcus Borg). Thus, 'faith' in this sense, is inviting. An invitation which embraces life in its totality, in all its relationships, in all its dimensions since Jesus did not only forgive sins. He also healed the sick, told stories, calmed a sea, travelled around, attended a wedding, visited friends, fought with the church leaders, cried in a garden, died rejected on a cross ... and rose from the death, leaving us with the promise of a new heaven and earth. It is in this sense that believing becomes inviting the total and cosmic Christ into the experiences of the faith communities. It is in this sense that believing becomes hosting the stranger Jesus.

End Notes

¹ From my own perspective, I am here addressing the challenge posed amongst others by Van Aarde (1993:33) in his paper presented at the international meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Westfälisches Wilhelms-Universität Münster, Deutschland on 26 July 1993 which he formulated as follow: 'The concern to bridge the gap between contextual theologies and the tradition of European theological thought and scholarship would be intellectually significant at any time, but in the current situation in South Africa, and the world at large, it is critical'. Such an endeavour is always risky, running the danger of being perspectivistic, eclectic, bias, overgeneralizing, even creating the impression of being unsympathetic through the process of abstraction (which literally means to strip an idea of its concrete accompaniments). Be it as it may, it should

be undertaken — committed in finding a way together — but then in the spirit of being willing to hear one another as we all have something to say, and with the openness to be corrected and/or to acknowledge different points of view.

² The term 'worldview' is not understood and used in the sense of being a monolithic entity (such as a Western over against an African worldview), but simply as an indication of frames of references with distinctive/different orientations.

³ Scholarly contributions specifically on 'Who Jesus was' have become vast. See amongst many others the recent contributions of Borg (1995b), Crossan (1991) and Macquarrie (1990). For a recent overview (with bibliography) of South African contributions, see Van Aarde (1993).

⁴ It is rather conspicuous that whereas theological reflection in Asia or Africa speak of their respective perspectives on Christ (eg Asiatic faces of Christ), western-orientated theologies until recently seldom make mention of '(North) American faces of Christ' [Borg (1995b) an exception] or 'European faces of Christ'. If such terms are used, it is mostly from another context and then in an incriminatory way (cf for example Obaje 1991:45). Is this perhaps not a very justified criticism of an implicit (rational) arrogance of traditional western theological reflection which pretends that it and only it, can lay claim to formulating the (universal) truth?

⁵ Yes, they should in one way or another. The 'way' however is the question. I here follow Schillebeeckx (1987:15-6) who states: 'People talk about Jesus because they believe in him and not out of historical interest. However, what is also important here is the fact that this confession relates to a historical person, from a quite specific situation in our history: Jesus of Nazareth, no one else, and also not some mythical being or other. Christology without a historical foundation is empty and impossible'. Cf also the qualified point of view of Borg (1995c) on historical scholarship in its relationship to Christian theology which I find very illuminating. In the light of Borg's exposition, I find Sugirtharajah (1993:x) unqualified point of view in which he states that the crucial question in Asia is not what the historical Jesus looked like but what he means for Asia today, inadequate.

⁶ In is interesting to note that established academic theologians like Maimela (1992) and Mofokeng (1992) do not reflect on or make any mention of this 'strangeness of Jesus to Africa' in their points of views on the theological significance of Jesus Christ in Africa.

⁷ The 'African Report' (in Abraham 1990:28-56) is very helpful in this regard.

⁸ With the term 'socio-historic' I am simply referring to the 'ongoing' act of 'naming' through history (historic) and the fact that the 'naming' is imbedded in a specific context of politics, economy, family values and religion (socio).

⁹ I understand the ongoing interpretations of words of Mk 8:27 'Who do the people say I am?' not merely as a straightforward identification of the figure of Jesus, but especially as a naming of the existential-religious significance of Jesus, or for that matter, of Christianity as such. Directly

related thereto is the conviction of many (most?) contemporary new testament scholars that Jesus did not think of himself as divine or as 'Son of God' in any unique sense, if at all (cf Borg 1995c:943).

¹⁰ Cf Eichrodt (1961:178-187) for a discussion on the older Semitic designation of God ('*el*') and its significance in relation to YHWH and Israel's religious thought.

¹¹ The seven 'I am' sayings in John are as follow: bread (6:35), light (8:12), door (10:7), shepherd (10:11), resurrection, and life (11:25), way, truth, and life (14:6) and vine (15:1).

¹² This ongoing historical proces of 'naming' is executed in terms of economic 'needs' and/or political issues, and/or in terms of family values and/or religion. Of decisive importance is the 'who' (the powerful/powerless) of the process of 'naming'.

¹³ Yes, it can. Within the European context (albeit for reasons of their own), the 'strangeness' and 'disfiguration' of Jesus have already been formulated as searching critique of their own theological heritage and reflection. Thus Albert Schweitzer in his 'Quest of the historical Jesus' gave historical scholarship something to think seriously about: 'The historical Jesus of whom the criticism of the future will draw the portrait will not be a Jesus Christ to whom the religious of the present can ascribe according to long-cherished customs its own thought and ideas, as it did with the Jesus of its own making. Nor will this Jesus be a figure which can be made by a popular treatment to be sympathetic and universally intelligible to the multitude. The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma. He passes by our time, and returns to his own' (Schweitzer interpreted in Breech 1989:7). This critique was taken seriously by the German theologian Bultmann (1924:3) of Marburg who later stated: 'Wie verschieden sind die Jesus-bilder der liberalen Theologie, wie unsicher das Bild des historischen Jesus: Ist er überhaupt noch für uns erkennbar?'. Precisely this quest had led to many more quests and brought about a Renaissance in studies on Jesus (cf Borg 1995b). Furthermore: Bultmann (1924:25) had already made the connection — which Pobee alluded to in his indication of the interconnection of the 'who' of the African and the 'who' of Christ — in the following formulation: 'Gegenstand der Theologie ist ja Gott, und von Gott redet der Theologie, indem sie redet vom Menschen, wie er vor Gott gestellt ist, also vom Glauben aus'.

¹⁴ The reasons for my choice of concepts (remembering, imagination and hope) have been worked out in previous articles. See in this regard Veldsman (1992, 1993, 1994).

¹⁵ For my earlier grappling with these questions in formulating an ethical-poetical Christology, see Veldsman (1994). In my exposition of an ethical-poetical Christology, I am indebted to the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney of Dublin, especially his 'Poetics of imagining' (1991).

¹⁶ See Veldsman (1992, 1993)

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