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The Hermeneutic of Resonance: Making Biblical Theology Relevant Today

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Introduction

Some years ago I eagerly attended a workshop in Austria whose aim was to prepare materials to be used by interested Protestant congregations in German speaking countries in the following year during the poorly attended "Bible Week". The first full day of the workshop was covered by a presentation from an OT professor who took us through the critical questions in the book of Jeremiah: the scissors of the editors, the inconsistencies in the book, the background of the times, etc. He seemed to be quite sure of what he was saying, an expert with surgical precision. Of course he never cared to indicate why we are even reading the book now. He had done his "postmortem" job and left the results to us, the others to apply in any way we wanted.

After many hours of listening to him with my then very limited knowledge of German, I decided to go out and take a walk. Later in a working group, a German colleague expressed sympathy for me. He felt sorry for me because he assumed my education in the "third world" (unaware that I actually studied in the West) did not expose me to such highly "scientific," sophisticated knowledge. He told me: "Sorry that you had to go out. I think all this was too new and difficult for you. You do not learn this in Africa, I guess." I responded that in fact I did have to learn all those things in Tanzania (von Rad, Bultmann, Dibelius, Käsemann, & co.), and my PhD in Scripture was done in the USA from professors who boasted of being graduates of renowned German theological faculties (Heidelberg and Tübingen). I assured him that nothing was new to me. I had gone out because I thought we were wasting too much time on stuff I new was irrelevant for the work that had brought us there. We had gone there to prepare study materials for the congregations, not to listen to endless, irrelevant theories nobody can even prove any longer. So, I posed a question to him, requesting him to tell me what from all we had heard the whole day was going to be included in the study materials we were going to prepare. The answer was of course no surprise to me: Nothing! "That was only meant for us. We cannot include any of those in our materials for the congregations." It was clear to me once again: biblical scholars wasting their time and money on interesting but irrelevant mental exercise! Therefore there have been new endeavours to read the Bible in more relevant and meaningful ways, not least in Africa.

In a book review of the book: *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective*¹ an Australian Fergus King² exposes what African and non-Western scholars have always gone through. After briefly mentioning the issues addressed by the authors, he concludes: "This collection of essays provides an important apologetic for African biblical scholarship, and will appeal especially to those who are convinced of the importance of African biblical scholarship and its need to be taken seriously."³ Then the remaining half of the review is devoted to dismissive criticism of the book, which lacking any

¹ Edited by David Adamo, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2006

² In *Mission Studies* vol. 24 no. 2 (2007) 353f

³ Fergus King, p. 353

substance is devoted on typo errors and what he judges to be grammatical problems, claiming these errors strengthen "the prejudices of those already disposed to look down their noses at African biblical scholarship."⁴ There is good reason to believe that he is speaking of himself here!

Despite such dismissive attitudes, the point is made in the book that we as Africans do not find the so-called "scientific" historical-critical approaches to the Bible honest, accurate, or scientific at all. Equally irrelevant but interesting are more modern literary approaches of the literary cultures. Even if they were scientific, these approaches are unhelpful at best, but surely irrelevant. Since many "biblical scholars" have adopted these approaches and teach them at their seminaries in the Southern hemisphere, biblical scholars are mainly treated as irrelevant in their churches. This is so because they are proud of being "academic" and therefore as academicians they are presumably expected to distinguish themselves from the ecclesial.⁵

I have had an everlasting interest of making my education in biblical studies relevant to my existence and service in my church and my ministry wherever I am. I got a boost in my desire by studying at Luther Seminary,⁶ where even the biblical studies' major was named: Scripture. I owe so much to those wonderful teachers who clearly did not get stuck in the past, but their orientation was intended to serve the church, not to simply be rational biblical experts. Now serving in Germany, as a preacher and leader, it is very clear to me that in fact the concerns Africans and others raise about irrelevant biblical interpretation are not uncommon in the West.

In the late 1990's, we started an ambitious "Theological Education by Extension" program in the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, Northwestern Diocese. After the first introductory course many people were excited and joined the program. Later we introduced a course on the theology of the Old Testament, using a book on the introduction to the theology of the Old Testament by Prof. Leonidas Kalugila.⁷ In a matter of weeks most participants withdrew from the course because it was full of all the theories from the "Scandinavian School" of the 1970s, which nobody thought to be relevant to their own lives. That was the death of the program. After all, the book raised doubts about the Bible, the book the participants all held in so high regard. Since it went against their basic faith tenet, they simply stopped the learning all together and thought the diocese was getting lost. We were unable to continue the program.

⁴ Ibid, p. 354

⁵ Grant LeMarquand, "Siblings or Antagonists? The Ethos of Biblical Scholarship from North Atlantic and African Worlds", in Adamo, pp. 62ff gives a sketch of the development of critical biblical scholarship in the North Atlantic, especially represented by William Wrede among others to the time of the world being unsure about the assumptions underlying the approaches. The critical scholarship distanced itself from ecclesiastical constraints, therefore having little to do with the church life like sacraments, worship or prayer. Biblical interpretation was thought to be neutral, value-free. Biblical scholars were expected to be experts to tell the others what texts meant when they were written, and others should then take the interpretation and use it however they wanted, including systematic theologians. The academicians should only uncover the past and remain there. Therefore for the current life, the biblical scholar is irrelevant, especially if those he or she expected to take the "diagnosis" and use it ignore it.

⁶ Luther Seminary belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and has a very clearly faith-oriented Mission Statement: "Luther Seminary educates leaders for Christian communities, called and sent by the Holy Spirit to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ and to serve in God's world."

⁷ Leonidas Kalugila, *Utangulizi wa Theologia ya Agano la Kale* (Dodoma: Central Tanganyika Press, 1991)

The assumptions of biblical interpretation we have learnt from the West are not axiomatic for all generations and all Christians globally. Indeed they were probably useful to address the questions that some people in the Western society raised at that time. But none of us has an illusion any longer that there are static principles of interpretation that are globally applicable in a scientific manner. They have never been there!

Each generation must ask themselves what the biblical message is for themselves as they struggle to remain faithful interpreters of it. I always ask myself whether the critical assumptions and ensuing approaches of the Western scholars have actually helped their church to understand the Bible better, let alone use it! In church circles we agree that, "reading the Bible engages people in ongoing reflection about what it means for their lives."⁸ It has probably worked for the western post-enlightenment society since truly, the "social, political, religious and cultural location of the scholar will inevitably have an impact on the shape of the scholarship produced."⁹ For that reason, it would be for me unfair to judge as wrong the interpretive methods and processes of the West, if they address their own situation and needs. It is for the western people to judge whether the way they read the Bible is appropriate for them in each generation. However, I would still raise the question of whether the interpretation has helped to strengthen the faith of the members as well as the life of the church in local congregations.

As LeMarquand states,

there is no universal hermeneutics which is ready-made and applicable to every country or situation in the world. Instead every hermeneutics is concretely rooted in and influenced by the specific context out of which it arises and for which it is devised. Every hermeneutics on the Bible struggles to let the text and the Christian tradition be interpreted so that the Christian propaganda is not re-stated altogether in other lands, but is let to be interpreted with a deep awareness of the specific situation in which it operates.¹⁰

Biblical interpretation must continue to be done by every people, every nation and every generation to stay relevant.

For the Africans, states Ukachukwu Chris Manus, "the Bible may be 'read' as the 'Word of God' addressed to African peoples, who must personally receive its message and encounter it in their own idioms."¹¹ Unfortunately, he laments, "African theological discourse on issues such as eschatology, salvation and ecclesiology have tended to remain perpetually foreign, and neo-colonialist in thought, language and expression—and quite often, irrelevant to the contemporary African contexts" He asks further, "must we still keep on living in the European mind-set represented by people like Friedrich von Hegel who had stated 'that Africans were incapable of self-perception and self-description and had to be 'civilized' by Europeans who had supposedly attained a 'higher' level of

⁸ Craig Koester, *A Beginners Guide to Reading the Bible*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1991) p.14; see also LeMarquand, p. 66,

⁹ LeMarquand, p. 67.

¹⁰ Manus, p. 32.

¹¹ Ukachukwu Chris Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa: Methods and Approaches* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003), p.1

cultural consciousness...?"¹² Must the Africans read and understand the Bible in the same way as those in other parts of the world?

The answer is categorically: NO! African interpretation does not need to prove itself to any other group, especially those who have the propensity to despise it. In Oduyoye's words, African Christianity does not need "to justify itself before the courts of European and American judges."¹³ But African biblical interpretation is not relevant simply because it is not Western. If Western interpretation makes sense to African situation, why not share it as members of the global church? There is a possibility of having a genuinely "African" interpretation but that is so archaic that nobody in the current situation can understand what type of Africans it is addressed to. It may have in mind an African who lives in a bush, who is naked, who is illiterate, and unexposed to the globalized world. That would be no less irrelevant to a modern African whose world is that of cell-phone, Coca Cola, Heineken bier, Satellite TV, football World Cup, and "Made in China", all of which make an African part of the global fabric.

The Position of the Bible in Africa

What is the Bible for? Why do people buy, own and read the Bible? I can say there is no book that is possessed by more people in Africa than the Bible. The Bible is the book owned by each itinerant evangelist, each church elder, even by those who cannot read! The Bible is the only book that has been translated in more languages than any other book in the world.¹⁴ There are small languages which have nothing else published in that language, apart from the Bible.

The Bible is therefore the book used to achieve different objectives.¹⁵ Maluleke summarizes it that the Bible is:

Most accessible basic vernacular literature text, a storybook, a compilation of novels and short stories, a book of prose and poetry, a book of spiritual devotion (i.e. 'Word of God') as well as a 'science' book that 'explains the origins of all creatures. In some parts of Africa, the dead are buried with the Bible on their chests, and the Bible is buried into concrete foundations on which new houses are to be built. In many African Independent Churches it is the physical contact between the sick and the Bible that is believed to hasten healing.¹⁶

¹² Ibid., partly quoting Jesse Mugambi, "Missiological Research in the Context of Globalization" in *Swedish Missiological Themes*, vol. 86 no. 4 1998, Uppsala, Swedish Institute of Missionary Research.

¹³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Biblical Interpretation and the Social Location of the Interpreter" in *Reading from This Place*, vol.2, *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed. Fernando Sergovia and May Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 37

¹⁴ I was told in 2000 that the new translation of the Bible sold the highest number of copies of all books in Sweden, even by those who do not go to church, and the reaction to the new translation in German of the Bible in just language, i.e. *Die Bibel in Gerechter Sprache*, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006) was astounding!

¹⁵ While translating the whole Bible in my own mother tongue, Ruhaya, there was a serious debate about what type of language should be used. Most committee members preferred the "original" Ruhaya, which unfortunately not so many young people understand any longer. For these elderly, the Bible was supposed to be the custodian of the real Ruhaya, something I personally found misguided.

¹⁶ Cited in Gerald West, "The Bible in South African Black Theology: The Bible as *Bola* and Other Forms of African Biblical Interpretation" in David Tuesday Adamo, *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (New York, University of America Press, 2006) p.49

The multi-purpose use of the Bible is not limited to Africa, though. In his *A Beginners Guide to Reading the Bible* my teacher Craig Koester says the different objectives of reading the Bible are also found in the West. He says, the Bible “plays many roles in our society, not just one. The same book can be a source of inspiration and personal guidance (like in devout Bible studies), a source of truth and authority (like in taking oaths), a literary classic (used in literature classrooms), and more.”¹⁷ In the publisher’s preface, it is aptly stated that: “The Bible has been a source of spiritual strength, comfort, and guidance for countless people over the centuries. They have looked to it because of what it has to say about God, about human beings, and about our daily lives.”¹⁸

The Bible is used as a religious symbol, or even a piece of fetish. It is believed by many to symbolize divine authority, even divine presence as the Ark of the Covenant did in the wilderness. African Christians use it to substitute some other things in specific rituals. For example, many people believe a divine intervention is needed when a ground is broken for a new house construction. I know a close friend of mine, a fine systematic theologian who wrapped the Bible in plastic papers and physically laid it in the concrete foundation of his new house. He tried to give a logical explanation for the action that was far from superstitious.

When I got married, traditionally a younger sister should have carried a machete for me all the time, a sign of my new responsibility to protect the family. Being a pastor myself and people unsure of whether they should do the traditional thing or not, decided instead to give her a Bible that she carried the whole day staying on my side and later gave to me personally. I have seen seldom a wedding where the new couple did not receive the Bible, with some words about God’s protection from their parents. Every time I hear the explanation that the Bible, the word of God should form the foundation of the new family. The Bible should be read every day to empower people and give them directions in life.

I know a young lady I worked with who was often disturbed by evil spirits and really scary dreams. She decided to put the Bible under her pillow, and the nightmares stopped. She spoke about it and gave testimony of the efficacy of the Bible in keeping the evil spirits away! I had no theological explanation for it. But for her it was real! Who has the right to speculate on whether it was effective or not?

Most people who go to church in my country carry their Bibles with them.¹⁹ They would like to follow the reading in church and read during the preaching. Many simply carry Bibles without reading even once. It is not uncommon for preachers to ask members of the congregation to read a verse or two during the preaching. Sometimes the more the Bible looks totally worn out, the better, since it is assumed it is read more often. The Bible is therefore very visible and its use as a symbol is also obvious.

¹⁷ Craig Koester, p. 10.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 7.

¹⁹ I have observed the difference with Germany. In many churches, especially of the reformed or united tradition, there is only one Bible, lying open at the table (alter) in front and it is never touched during service! It is not uncommon that the preacher does not carry the Bible to the pulpit because the sermon is already well done and even some lectors use their own computer printouts. The symbolism is not necessary and nobody carries the Bible to church. They are very good listeners.

The Bible is also widely read. I am very often amazed at a very high degree of Bible literacy among ordinary Christians in Africa. One of the most highly demanded publications of my church; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania is its lectionary. Many people need it to guide them to read the Bible daily in families. Africans read the Bible in order to get instruction and guidance on simple rules of life, to set or clarify moral and ethical issues. In times of sorrow and trouble they read it for comfort. In times of hopelessness they read it for encouragement. In times of struggle like it was in fighting against apartheid in South Africa, it is read for inspiration and assurance. When somebody does something wrong, the Bible becomes the source of admonition within the community or even by the person himself. A verse or two would suffice to achieve the goal. A verse read to a person can sometimes change the situation the person is in.

African readings of the Bible “point to practical implications of the biblical text that North Atlantic scholars often bracket out.”²⁰ This type of reading is not for getting knowledge or understanding. What is really valued is the mystique, the unexplainable, the complexity of the text. That is what is needed. Not rationality. For the reader or listener, the emotional, spiritual involvement is what is intended and wanted, even though understanding may form part of it. Indeed there are concepts and terminologies that are not understandable. But religious language is supposed to be mysterious and difficult. Having some unclear concepts and terminologies as well as the plurality of meanings is not a problem for the readers but ironically they make the Bible be regarded as a genuine book of faith.

However not everybody is satisfied with this experiential or mystical reading or use of the Bible. Many would also like to read the Bible for understanding of complex matters in the world. The claim that the Bible has answers for all questions is quite common among non-theologians, especially the influential preachers. They even try to prove science wrong. It is therefore clear that they do encounter some problems from inquisitive readers who find the Bible inconsistent, illogical and therefore problematic. The educated people as well as those who are simply against Christianity are happy to pinpoint several contradictions in the Bible in order to prove it wrong. Simple things like the genealogy of Jesus in the Synoptics, the unanswerable questions in the OT, are difficult to defend through a literal, experiential, or mystical reading. That is where the exegetical methods of the West can help to illuminate some of the matters that are obviously unclear. It can satisfy the curious academic and rational minds in the church as well.

The Hermeneutic of Resonance

In order to make biblical scholarship relevant in our contexts I argue for the hermeneutic of resonance. This terminology was used by Levison and Pope-Levison saying for them it is the hermeneutic, “that juxtaposes NT conceptions with key elements and key figures in African traditional religion.”²¹ The African Traditional Religion resonates especially with the Hebrew Bible, emphasizing on an element of the Transcendent in all spheres of life, preponderance of rites, rituals and traditions, as well as the centrality of group loyalty. Key concepts include as well the role of ancestors, reality of spirits, the healers in community, priests and magicians, etc. I took this concept

²⁰ Grant LeMarquand, op. cit., p. 68. However, this is not limited to African readers only. There are many in the North Atlantic who holds the same view as well.

²¹ John Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison, „Global Perspectives on New Testament Interpretations“ in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) 339.

further,²² by broadening the scope of “resonance” beyond traditional religions. I identify four aspects of the hermeneutic of resonance.

First, there is **textual-canonical resonance**. The starting point of any hermeneutic is the biblical text itself. That means people need to read the biblical text itself. Reading the Bible itself may sound like a given. But it is well known that theologians are used to read more books about the Bible than the Bible itself. The Bible is read as one book, a book of divine counsel. Here the insight from canonical criticism could be very much helpful, since we do have one Bible. Some communities that have more literary culture can be helped by the stratification of the Bible in several sections according to authors. But many believers take the Bible as one book; there is no part that can be taken out or any part that can be added. No individual book of the Bible is more important than the others. The search for different theologies of authors is quite strange in cultures that are not used to the capitalistic copyright mentality. The question of who wrote which book cannot be more irrelevant. No matter who wrote the individual books of the Bible, we have it as one book, and we should try as much as possible to read it as such. So the reading of the biblical text should be done in relation to the canon.

The division between the Old Testament and the New Testament, which has been emphasized by theologians, is very strange to the ordinary reader. In fact the African Christians do have a special affinity to the OT since it culturally resonates very well with their own reading situation. Questions of land, water, tribal conflicts, wars, the presence and influence of the Divine in ordinary lives, the value of elders, the reality of miracles as well as the powers of the world of spirits are vividly clear and resonant. The miracles in the NT, the powers of Jesus, the questions of eschatology are also resonant with the African reading situation—whether of the sophisticated intellectuals or of the illiterate villagers.

There is no theologian who has commanded authority on interpretation of the Bible in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania like Christopher Mwakasege. He is a lay Lutheran preacher with a teaching ministry within the Lutheran and other protestant churches. He is the most sought for Bible teacher at church synods of the Lutheran church and maintains his own website.²³ People even pay to go to listen to him in big cities, he teaches seminars of pastors and bishops, and he remains loyal to the Lutheran church. His basic strengths are his Bible literacy, relevance and simplicity. His knowledge of the biblical text and how he can bring together different parts of the Bible in a sensible manner is simply astounding interpretation is the biblical text itself.

Second, there is **theological resonance**. The question here is how much our biblical interpretation contributes to the theological discourse of the church. The interpreter does not approach the Bible without preconceptions. If the interpreter is a believer, shall be a Christian who has most likely absorbed a lot of theological information from childhood. The reading of the Bible brings up many questions that relate to what he or she has already internalized. The confessions we have form a foundation of our basic assumptions before we even pick up the Bible to read. I have been completely amazed to learn in Germany that these theological foundations have stayed at a core

²² Fidon R. Mwombeki, „Biblical Interpretation in a Current African Situation: The Case of Blood“, unpublished PhD dissertation, Luther Seminary, 1997, pp. 62

²³ <http://www.mwakasege.org>

of the endless denominational divisions over centuries.²⁴ It would be absurd to imagine that our interpretation is free from these convictions. As Lutherans we do interpret the Bible from the point of view of our confessional conventions, to the extent that I sometimes find too far-fetched. We are sometimes tempted to put words in Luther’s mouth, or to force him address issues that never would have come to his mind (like globalization, homosexuality, etc.) Any interpretation that does not resonate in some way with the theology of the believing community in which it is made is simply ignored.

And one of the very fundamental theological convictions of the believers especially in Africa is that the Bible is the word of God. God speaks through it. People want to hear what God says. The issues of divine inspiration are kind of taken for granted. The Bible is an inexhaustible source of timely wisdom and guidance. The same passage or verse speaks differently every day and in different occasions. Reading it as simply a historical literary piece would not resonate with the African Christians. It is active today!

As another Luther Seminary teacher of mine, Richard Nysse, says, the Bible is not for the past: “The classroom is a context,” Nysse says. “If Christ is risen, then He’s in the classroom. And so it’s appropriate to ask, ‘what has God done here in the last 50 minutes?’” He wants his students to understand that the interpretation of Scripture is never a mere academic exercise. “Every time they pick up Scripture to work on interpretation, they are in the presence of the living God,” he says.²⁵

Third there is **ecclesial resonance**. Relevant biblical scholarship must be “pro-ecclesia.”²⁶ Many people, including non-Christians, read and interpret the Bible. These days in Africa and Asia Moslem clerics read the Bible extensively. Academicians, politicians, and business people read the Bible with different motives. Some have an agenda of proving the Christianity wrong. Some want to justify their political moves and actions. Some want to prove their academic acumen. All these are possible. But for theologians of the church, our hermeneutics must be in resonance with the believing community, i.e., with the aim of helping the church to grow and sustain itself, to improve its self-understanding and self-confidence, to illuminate about its identity, etc. The moment a theologian interprets the Bible in a way that does not resonate with the self-understanding of the church the believing community dismisses the interpreter wholesale. Since the Bible is a book of faith and for faith, it is difficult to convince anyone if the interpretation does not address matters of the community of faith. An interpretation that does not promote the welfare of the church breaks the church and is therefore self-defeating since without the church no theologian is needed anyway. As one of my Luther Seminary professors still maintains, the welfare of the church is the paramount focus of biblical scholarship. According to his profile posted on the Website of Luther Seminary, “He

²⁴ The debates, disagreements, and open antagonism between people of Lutheran, Reformed or United confessions are simply unbelievable. There are still places where in the same city congregations are identified as either Lutheran or Reformed, and in those congregations even the election of elders becomes very problematic. None is willing to forgo what they hold so central in their faith.

²⁵ http://www.luthersem.edu/faculty/fac_profile.asp?contact_id=rnyss

²⁶ Joseph A Burgess, „Lutheran Interpretation of Scripture“ in *The Bible in the Churches: How Various Christians Interpret the Scriptures*, ed. by Kenneth Hagen (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1994), 116 says that one of the five principles of Lutheran Biblical interpretation is that “interpretation can only be done within the church.” The other four are: the NT interprets the OT, the clearer interprets the unclear, scripture interprets itself, and “*Was Christum treibt*.”

considers himself first and foremost a pastor of the Lutheran church. This attitude shapes his work. 'I cannot be a scripture specialist without keeping the church, its needs and its ministry in view,' he says.²⁷ Another Luther Seminary scholar aptly presents a conviction I have been part of as a student there, Sarah Heinrich says: "At Luther, we focus on reading and interpreting the Bible for the sake of the mission of the Church."²⁸

The moment theologians do not keep the church's needs and ministry in view, they are ignored and the people rely on their fellow untrained readers of the Bible who become their authority. The concerns of the church should form the basis of the interpretation, not questions raised by outsiders like agnostics, atheists, etc.

Fourth, there is **social-cultural resonance**. Relevant biblical scholarship must resonate with the reading situation of the readers. This is for example the foundation of Justin Ukpong's "Inculturation Hermeneutics."²⁹ In February 2009 I was in Tanzania and happened to turn on to one of the TV-evangelists' programs who calls himself in Kiswahili: "*Mzee wa Upako*" (meaning: master of anointment). On that particular day "the Lord had put in his heart" the problem of "bad luck." He paraded a great number of people in his recorded prayer service who had "experienced miracles," including healing, getting a promotion at their job, etc. When presenting the problem of bad luck, he expressed a very deep concern about the many "demons" that enslave people. He tried to explain how many in the audience were experiencing hardships because of bad luck. Their businesses are not profitable enough. They are poor even though they work hard. Some have got no children despite being treated so many times in different hospitals. Some have "demons" of high-blood pressure and diabetes. He knew even the names of "demons" that bring specific illnesses and bad luck. These are sent by the enemies in community, some of whom even kill people.

Around this time there was a nationwide campaign against killing of people with a skin disorder (albinos), whose parts were believed to be used in performing some superstitious rites to make miners strike the gold and tanzanite minerals without much effort. More than 35 had already been killed throughout Tanzania, children as well as adults. Their body parts were being chopped away and taken to witchdoctors who would use them to help the miners bring "good luck" in their work. I was very embarrassed to read stories of albino kids being hacked to death in front of their mothers, school children being hijacked and killed on the way to school, and old people strangled to death for their body parts. Some were being left for dead, but surviving to tell the agonizing and embarrassing stories of torture, though without feet or hands! This insanity is taking place by people with satellite phones and BMWs, with high education, and in the 21st century Tanzania!

When I watched that 30 minutes program of this "evangelist," in which he was inviting people who had "bad luck" even without knowing to come to his "prayer ministry" the following day, it became very clear to me that his message was resonating with what was going on in the society. He had a theological explanation of what was happening and of which most people in the audience were afraid. I do consider his theology absurd, exploitative, ridiculous and totally

²⁷ http://www.luthersem.edu/faculty/fac_profile.asp?contact_id=ahultgre

²⁸ http://www.luthersem.edu/faculty/fac_profile.asp?contact_id=shenrich

²⁹ Justin Ukpong „Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995). For a brief synopsis see LeMarquand, op. cit. pp. 70-78.

unacceptable. Indeed many become disappointed later because the promises that deny reality, even the reality of the seriousness of AIDS, are not fulfilled after visiting his "prayer ministry." However he manages to capture so many people because his message resonates with the fears, realities in his society. He takes their physical and spiritual worlds seriously. He talks about witchcraft as a reality. He identifies with the fears of the people. The problem with a mainline biblical scholar is that he or she does not address the issues but evades it because it does not fit into his or her "scientific" framework.

It is hard to believe that even in the Tanzania parliament, one day in 2008 the session came into trouble when someone reported to have seen somebody spray some superstitious stuff on seats of some members of parliament. They had to adjourn the parliament! We are living in the 21st century but our people still believe so much in witchcraft and superstition that any scientific explanation that denies it will simply be ignored. After all, the Bible is full of it.

A biblical scholar trained in the hermeneutic of suspicion, coming and addressing the people in Tanzania by using so much time to explain why the stories of miracles in the Bible are incredible and must have been creations of writers will simply be a laughing stock. Spending time to explain to the congregation how much unsure the preacher is about who actually wrote the letter to Ephesians is nonsense. People want to know what God says to their situations.

But I am not sure the West is totally different either. The questions like where the dead are and whether or not they have any influence in our life are very relevant and must be addressed without fear or failure. Why do people go to cemeteries on Sunday morning after or instead of worship service? I am even more than ever convinced that the spiritual questions are abundant in the West as well, only that they are not publicly addressed.

I am still wondering whether the biblical expositions of the churches in Europe have driven people away from attending church services. Indeed the Bible is central in the churches there, and the sermon is the core of all of it. But I am asking myself, why are people not interested in listening to these sermons? Has anyone checked whether the sermons resonate with the social, spiritual and cultural situations of the listeners? Is it because they do not have time? Why is it not possible to listen to long sermons while they are good listeners of much longer public lectures? Have they become too abstract and impersonal? I have not found the answer yet.

Conclusion

The Bible is a book of faith. It must be read from faith to faith. For proper biblical interpretation we need good biblical scholars. But biblical scholarship can be relevant only if it is resonant with the text, with the confessions, with the aspirations and identity of the church as well as with the social-cultural situation of the readers. Otherwise, we are wasting time and resources on an education that nobody in the believing community wants or needs.