Albert Schweitzer and the Interpretation of the New Testament

David J. Hawkin

A friend of mine recently complained to me that scholars in Biblical studies are obsessed with method. 'Biblical studies is far more concerned with *how* you interpret the Bible than it is with what the text actually means,' she claimed. This is, of course, quite untrue. A quick perusal of any publisher's catalogue would reveal that only a small proportion of publications in Biblical studies is devoted to methodology and how one interprets texts. But it was interesting that my friend's perception was otherwise. Why did she think this? I think that what she had noticed was that the biblical studies area is very rich in methods and had mistaken this for an obsession with method itself.

Biblical studies was not always so methodologically enhanced. It is only in relatively recent times that it has become such a creative and imaginative enterprise. But although the full flowering of Biblical methodology is relatively recent, the seeds for such flowering were sown over a century ago by a man whose own study of the New Testament was quite limited in terms of method. That man was Albert Schweitzer.

Schweitzer is well known as a great humanitarian and as a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. He was a truly remarkable man. He was a renowned musician, a medical doctor who devoted his life to building and running a hospital in Lambaréné in Gabon, and a great Biblical scholar. Perhaps his best known writing is *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. This was a brilliant work which had a major impact on New Testament studies. Up to the time of Schweitzer Biblical studies was dominated by liberal theology. The emphasis in liberal theology was on human freedom. Liberals believed that humans had been ordained by God to use their free will to make the world a better place. This, they asserted, was the essence of Christianity: to proclaim the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of all humanity, to love one another and in so doing to bring about the Kingdom on earth. Schweitzer's book effectively brought an end to liberal theology. This earmarked the book as a classic, but its significance

goes even beyond this achievement. What Schweitzer did with this book was open up new, creative possibilities for the interpretation of the New Testament. It is my intention in this paper to articulate this dimension of Schweitzer's legacy which I do not think has been emphasized enough.

Albert Schweitzer and the Quest of the Historical Jesus

The writing of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* was prompted by a key insight which came to Schweitzer at the very beginning of his theological studies. In 1894, when reading Matthew 10-11, he received sudden illumination. The insight which came to him at that moment is related thus by Schweitzer himself:

> In Matthew 10 the mission of the Twelve is narrated. In the discourse with which he sends them out Jesus tells them that they will almost immediately have to undergo severe persecution. But they suffer nothing of the kind. He tells them also that the appearance of the Son of Man will take place before they have gone through the cities of Israel, which can only mean that the celestial, Messianic Kingdom will be revealed while they are thus engaged. He has, therefore, no expectation of seeing them return. How comes it that Jesus leads his disciples to expect events about which the remaining portion of the narrative is silent?[1]

This question came to Schweitzer with what Norman Perrin has called 'the force of a revelation,' and all of his subsequent thought was dominated by it.[2] So it is no surprise when, in *Quest of the Historical Jesus,* Schweitzer says that it was Johannes Weiss who had understood the teaching of Jesus the best. Weiss, in his book, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*[3], had argued for a 'thorough-going' or 'consistent' eschatological understanding of the message of Jesus. Weiss' work was an explicit criticism of the prevailing liberal understanding of Jesus' teaching. In this understanding the Kingdom of God was an inward and spiritual reality. It was a seed which grew in the hearts of believers. It motivated you through the love of your fellow humans to bring about the Kingdom on earth. The goal of history, then, was the realization of the Kingdom of God. This accorded well with the values of the time and especially the belief in progress. But Weiss claimed that the Kingdom of God was not something which humanity could bring about through the practice of love for each other. In fact, it was not something which lay *within the present historical order*. It was rather a transcendental reality which would be initiated by *God himself in the future*.

Schweitzer was convinced that Weiss was right. In his typical colourful style Schweitzer says, 'In passing…to Johannes Weiss the reader feels like an explorer who after wanderings through billowy seas of reed-grass at length reaches a wooded tract, and instead of swamp feels firm ground beneath his feet, instead of yielding rushes sees around him the steadfast trees.'[4] Schweitzer's reconstruction of the life of Jesus builds on Weiss but goes beyond him in one crucial aspect. Weiss focused on the teaching of Jesus which he saw as dominated by 'consistent' eschatology. Schweitzer applies eschatological categories not only to the *teaching* of Jesus but also to Jesus' *own self-understanding*. Schweitzer thus broadens his inquiry to include how Jesus himself understood his life and mission. Schweitzer argues that Jesus was dominated by 'a "dogmatic idea" which rendered him indifferent to all else.'[5] It is this 'dogmatic idea' of Jesus which explains why his life took the direction it did. Jesus' whole life was focused on the coming of the Kingdom of God. Schweitzer believed that Jesus understood the Kingdom of God to be the irruption of the activity of God into human history. To proclaim the Kingdom of God was to proclaim the apocalyptic end of history.

Jesus expected the Kingdom of God to arrive at harvest time and that is why in Matthew 9:37f. Jesus speaks of the harvest as plentiful and the labourers as few. He is, in fact, speaking analogically of the harvest in the Palestinian fields and the harvest of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom would come at the same time as the harvest in the fields. The disciples are sent out to announce the coming of the Kingdom at harvest time. Matthew 10:23 makes it clear that Jesus did not expect the disciples to return before the Kingdom had come. But Jesus was wrong. The disciples do return and the Kingdom has not come. Says Schweitzer:

> The disciples returned to Him; and the appearing of the Son of Man had not taken place. The actual history disavowed the dogmatic history on which the action of Jesus had been based. An event of supernatural history which must take place, and must take place at that particular point of time, failed to come about. That was for Jesus, who lived wholly in the dogmatic history, the first 'historical' occurrence, the central event which closed the former period of His activity and gave the coming period a new character.[6]

What Jesus had proclaimed had not happened. But in the face of failure Jesus did not abandon his eschatological hopes, but rather rethought his mission, and came to the conclusion that he himself must inaugurate the Kingdom by setting in motion the final messianic tribulations. This required that he himself must

go to Jerusalem to die. Jesus thus embarks upon a most heroic course of action. Says Schweitzer:

> [Jesus] in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on the last revolution which will bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him…. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.[7]

Schweitzer's historical Jesus is quite unlike the one created by his liberal contemporaries. Schweitzer's Jesus may be heroic, but he is also driven by an apocalyptic vision. He is a profoundly world-denying figure who has no points of contact with liberal modernity. Schweitzer claimed to have returned Jesus 'to His own time.' 'Whatever the ultimate solution may be,' he says,

> the historical Jesus of whom the criticism of the future…will draw the portrait…will not be a Jesus to whom the religion of the present can ascribe, according to its long-cherished custom, its own thoughts and ideas, as it did with the Jesus of its own making. Nor will he be a figure which can be made by a popular historical treatment so 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.[8]

Schweitzer's presentation of Jesus as 'a stranger to our time,' is so forceful that it opened up what has been referred to as a 'hermeneutical gulf' between Jesus and ourselves.[9] Schweitzer had shown that Jesus could not be simply appropriated as a man of our time. The assumption that once the historical Jesus was recovered through critical Biblical scholarship we would be able to grasp the essence of Christianity had been shown to be a chimera. What had emerged from Schweitzer's reconstruction of the historical Jesus was not a Jesus of our time teaching an easily appropriated message, but rather a stranger to our time, whose teaching was world denying and at odds with the modern world.

The Implications of Schweitzer's work for Biblical Studies

Schweitzer came from a long tradition which identified faith and critical reason. As he saw it, new and vigorous spiritual forces in Christianity could be unleashed by the increase of historical knowledge about its beginnings. He

stood in the tradition of Protestant rationalism in which the assumption was that the pursuit of truth was necessary and salutary. Schweitzer brought this commitment to truth to his historical inquiry into the New Testament. He was a devout Christian with a passionate allegiance to Jesus. He also believed that the will was primary. That is, his faith was voluntaristic. This explains why, when he could have had a career in academia, he choose to go to Lambaréné in Gabon to establish a hospital there. He thought that Christians were called to transform the world—which was essentially hostile—into a world where love prevailed. And it is at this point, of course, that the difficulty is created. For Schweitzer, a metaphysical agnostic who, in the tradition of Kant, saw religion primarily in terms of ethics and the will, Jesus was a great heroic figure who gave complete expression to what it meant to be religious. But there is a contradiction between the thesis that Jesus proclaimed a Kingdom of God which was entirely other and was brought in by God and God alone, without the help of human agency, and the idea that to be a Christian is a matter of the human ethical will and that we are called upon to improve the world and help establish God's Kingdom. This was a contradiction which Schweitzer himself was never able to completely resolve. Schweitzer's greatness lay in the fact that he never wavered from his commitment to critical reason and to truth and he pursued his line of inquiry to the very end. But then it was at an end. His inquiry led him to a Jesus who was foreign, a 'stranger to our time'.

What Schweitzer demonstrated was that the more we come to penetrate the world of Jesus and of ancient Palestine, the more we see how foreign it is. The thought world of Jesus is several universes of discourse removed from our own. The greater the recognition of this fact, the more we see that historical Biblical scholarship has, in fact, clear parameters. To put it more sharply, after Schweitzer exegesis, the drawing out of the meaning of Biblical texts, is seen more clearly as a branch of the history of ideas. *Exegesis itself cannot adequately bridge the gap between then and now.* It *can* contextualize the message of Jesus and thus we can recapture what it *meant for the people of the time.* But to bring that meaning into the present requires more than exegesis. It requires hermeneutical creativity. That is, we must transpose the message of Jesus into categories that are meaningful to the present. Before Schweitzer it was assumed that exegesis *was* hermeneutics. It was assumed that once we had recovered the original meaning of the Biblical text its message would have a clear meaning for us. But Schweitzer showed that the world which Jesus inhabited was not like our world,

and Jesus' apocalyptic message was not readily appropriated by people in the modern world. In so doing Schweitzer set Biblical studies on a new course, one in which, in the famous designation of Krister Stendahl, it was acknowledged that what a text *meant* should be distinguished from what it *means*[10].

I think that the first significant figure after Schweitzer to deal systematically with this issue was Rudolf Bultmann. In *Theology of the New Testament* Bultmann says, 'Either the writings of the New Testament can be interrogated as the 'sources' which the historian interprets in order to reconstruct a picture of primitive Christianity as a phenomenon of the historical past, or the reconstruction stands in the service of the interpretation of the New Testament writings under the presupposition that they have something to say to the present.'[11] Accordingly, in a magnificent *tour de force,* Bultmann tried to bind together exegesis and hermeneutics by transposing the intentionality of exegesis into the rich and evocative categories of existentialism. So, for example, he accepted that Schweitzer and Weiss were right in their insistence that the Kingdom of God for Jesus was an event in the future to be brought about by God. But, says Bultmann, 'The Kingdom of God is a power which, although it is entirely in the future, wholly determines the present'.[12] Bultmann's explanation of what he means by this is an excellent illustration of his methodology in action. He says:

> It determines the present because it now compels man to decision; he is determined thereby either in this direction or in that, as chosen or as rejected, in his entire present existence… the coming of the Kingdom of God is therefore not an event in the course of time, which is due to occur sometime and toward which man can either take a definite attitude or hold himself neutral. Before he can take any attitude he is already constrained to make his choice, and therefore he must understand that just this necessity of decision constitutes the essential part of his human nature… If men are standing in the crisis of decision, and if precisely this crisis is the essential characteristic of their humanity, then every hour is the last hour, and we can understand that for Jesus the whole contemporary mythology is pressed into the service of this conception of human existence…thus he understood and proclaimed his hour as the last hour.[13]

It is in this way that Bultmann attempts to interpret 'the theological thoughts of the New Testament in their connection with the 'act of living' '—i.e., as

explication of believing self-understanding'.[14] Bultmann's transposition of exegesis into existential categories is so brilliant and compelling that it dominated the scholarship of a whole generation of New Testament interpreters. In our postmodern world, however, existentialism does not have the sway it once did and its influence, and subsequently the influence of Bultmann, has become negligible. But Bultmann had seen the problem that Schweitzer's work had created and he had attempted to come to terms with it. Bultmann's work is in a very real sense an enduring monument to Schweitzer's legacy. Nietzsche criticized Immanuel Kant because through his conceptual innovations Kant bound together human autonomy and respect for others. But this bond, said Nietzsche, was only temporary, and Kant had proven to be no more than a 'Great Delayer' because he had merely delayed the recognition of the inevitable. Similarly, Bultmann is a kind of Kantian figure, a Great Delayer who tried to re-establish exegesis and hermeneutics as one enterprise. But they are not one enterprise. They are, it is true, *related* to each other. The relationship between them, however, is complex. Schweitzer was unable to satisfactorily resolve the question of how to relate the Jesus of first century Judaism to the Christian of the contemporary world. Bultmann was similarly unsuccessful. Recent developments in Biblical studies have continued to wrestle with this basic issue of Biblical interpretation: how do we relate what the text *meant* in its original context to what it *means* for us today?

Thematic Approaches

One approach is to isolate a particular theme or thematic complex in the New Testament in the hope that this will make it clearer how it relates to the modern world. The best examples of this approach are centred on political hermeneutics. How does Jesus' teaching and actions relate to our present day political concerns? This becomes an especially pressing question when we are thinking about political terrorism, for example.[15] Almost all of the writers on this issue have focused on Jesus' relationship with the Zealots. S. G. F. Brandon's *Jesus and the Zealots*[16] was ground-breaking in this regard. Brandon argued that Jesus was a political revolutionary who identified with Jewish resistance to Rome. In Brandon's view the Gospel of Mark covered up the true nature of Jesus' mission. As Jesus was an advocate of revolution this left Christians in a dilemma when thinking of the implications of such a model to the contemporary world. Did Christians have to be revolutionary too?

Brandon's book sparked intense debate with much criticism of his thesis. Martin Hengel is probably his most eloquent critic, suggestion a more nuanced approach to the issue is warranted. Jesus, says Hengel, was certainly a revolutionary teacher, but he was not an advocate of violent revolution.[17] More recently Horsley has shown that the term 'Zealot' is too imprecise. The opposition to the Romans took various forms. There were social bandits, popular prophets, messianic pretenders, members of the 'fourth philosophy', and Sicarii. Any theory which simply identified Jesus with the 'Zealots' was therefore far too undifferentiated.[18] Perhaps the most interesting work on the 'politics' of Jesus, however, came from the American Mennonite Howard Yoder.[19] Yoder criticized the argument that the New Testament did yield general ethical principles, such as 'economic justice' or 'social equality', but that it could not provide practical advice on how these could be achieved in the concrete social and political context of contemporary society. To put it in the terms of our previous observations, the argument that Yoder was criticizing claimed that there is a clear distinction between discovering the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament (exegesis) and making it relevant to the present day (hermeneutics). Yoder thought that this two-step approach to New Testament ethics obfuscated the centrality of New Testament teaching. For Yoder, the New Testament gives us a norm: the practice of Jesus. Jesus' non-violent and redemptive activity should be the model for Christians in their interpersonal and social relations. Hermeneutics, however, focuses on ends, or how effective we can make the message of Jesus. Yoder thought that this is misguided. Christians should not be focused on how effective their actions are. God is the only judge of that.

Yoder is making a vitally important contribution to the debate about ends and means and Christian practice. He is very critical of the modern inclination to try to manipulate and control our own destinies. He maintains that when we confuse ends and means this is exactly what we do. But essentially Yoder is left with the same conundrum as Schweitzer. How can the example of Jesus be followed in the modern world? Yoder presents us with a Jesus dressed in Mennonite garb. Thus he fails ultimately to relate his non-violent Jesus to the daily cares and tribulations of ordinary people in the contemporary world, and leaves us with a Jesus who is as much of a 'stranger' as is the Jesus of Albert Schweitzer. Yoder's work reflects the short-comings of thematic approaches in general, and recent scholarship has not pursued this avenue of inquiry.

Liberation theology

Like thematic approaches, Liberation theology does not attract as much attention in the scholarly world today as it did twenty years ago. Nevertheless, liberation theology still has much to teach us, as Ivan Petrella has forcibly argued.[20] There are two distinct emphases in Liberation theology. First of all, many liberation theologians emphasize the importance of the historical Jesus. Second, many further emphasize that there is no hermeneutical gulf of the kind of which Schweitzer spoke. Jesus is certainly not a stranger for the poor and oppressed of South America (the *campesinos*). Jesus is very much someone to whom they can relate.

The Historical Jesus

Many Liberation theologians see the recovery of the historical Jesus as a vital counterpoint to what they perceive as the remote, superhuman Christ of ecclesiastical tradition. As Jon Sobrino, one of the foremost exponents of Liberation theology, puts it:

> If a Christology disregards the historical Jesus, it turns into an abstract Christology that is historically alienating and open to manipulation. What typifies Jesus as a historical reality is that is that he is situated and personally involved in a situation that displays structural similarities to that of present-day Latin America.[21]

The last sentence is the key to understanding the agenda of Liberation theology. The people of Central and South America who experience poverty and oppression are the ones who can best understand the gospel precisely because they are impoverished and oppressed. As Charles Elliot says: 'You have to start where people are particularly the people that the Bible is primarily concerned with, who are the dispossessed, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the prostitute, the pimp and the tax-collector.'[22] It was to these groups of people that Jesus addressed his message, and who, in the contemporary world, can understand this better than the poor and oppressed of Central and South America, whose experiences are so similar? For many in the so-called Basic Communities the similarities between their own situation and the situation described in the Gospels is so evident that they can draw parallels which seem very naive and unsophisticated to the Western scholar. This may be seen, for example, in *Gospel in Art*,[23] a book which reproduces paintings done by Nicaraguan peasants during the cruel and repressive dictatorship of Anastasio

Somoza Debayle. Many of the paintings are scenes from the Gospels which identify characters and scenes from the New Testament with characters and scenes from contemporary Nicaragua. Mark Corner elaborates:

> In a painting illustrating the massacre of the innocents (Matt. 2.16), for example, we see soldiers in the uniform of Samoza's National Guard. They carry automatic weapons, not swords. In another picture, depicting the story of Salome's dance before Herod (Mark 6.14-29), we again encounter a scene from contemporary Nicaragua. Not only are the furnishings and the dress of the characters modern, but set out on the table as part of the refreshments are bottles of Coca-Cola. The bottles point to the all-pervasive influence of the United States, just as in the New Testament period the coinage pointed to the all-embracing power of Rome.[24]

The strength of Liberation Theology lies in its emphasis on the spontaneous and intuitive interpretations of scripture by the peasants in the Basic Communities. Because they identify with the historical situation described in the Gospels, they are able to experience the story of Jesus in an intensely personal way. They do not experience Schweitzer's 'hermeneutical gulf' and Jesus is not a 'stranger' to their time. But, from a Western academic viewpoint, the way the peasants in the Basic Communities draw simple parallels between the situation of Jesus' time and their own time ignores completely academic canons of historical reconstruction.

There are, however, educated Liberation theologians who are aware of the pitfalls of drawing simplified parallels between our time and the time of Jesus. They try to reconstruct the life and times of Jesus using scholarly academic criteria. Unfortunately, however, these reconstructions are academically flawed. Pixley, for example, says:

> Our interest is focused instead on the historical project borne by Jesus and his Galilean movement, as told in the Gospel narratives…. The way to discover the historical project is to look into the narrative for: (1) the strategy of the movement (2) the organizational principles for the group of followers, and (3) the enemies of the movement.[25]

The problem which this statement is that it ignores the lessons learned from Schweitzer about the so-called 'old quest' for the historical Jesus. The old quest failed to appreciate that the Gospels as we have them are theological documents

and not simple history. We cannot take them as direct evidence of the historical actions or strategies of Jesus himself.

Pixley is not alone in falling into this trap. Jon Sobrino's very learned work on the historical Jesus does the same. Sobrino builds his whole reconstruction of the intentions of Jesus around the notion that there was a crisis in the ministry of Jesus after which he decides to give up his political agenda and become a martyr. (This is very similar to what Schweitzer said.) Sobrino thus treats Mark's narrative as though it is simply a window through which we look to see things as they actually happened. But form criticism has shown that the Gospels are nothing of the kind.[26] They are theological documents, overlaid with theological development, and do not give us access to the mind of Jesus and his internal struggles.

The so-called 'new quest' of the historical Jesus, however, recognized the problem that the theological nature of the Gospels posed, and tried to come to terms with this by drawing up criteria which would enable us to distinguish theology from history. But this failed too, because it was realized that imposing artificial criteria derived from modern historiography upon the Gospel narratives in order to separate theology from history was illegitimate. The Gospels writers did not conceive of history without theology. History and theology were one and the same. Yet another prominent and scholarly Liberation theologian, Juan Luis Segundo, fails to understand this. He says: 'It is a matter of finding a criterion of trustworthiness or reliability, or better, of priority in the reliability of the facts narrated…[moreover] what was attributed to Jesus without reference to his passion, death, and resurrection.'[27] Segundo does not, indeed, make the same mistake as Sobrino, and repeat the mistakes of the old quest. But he does make the same mistake as those engaged in the new quest. When he undertakes to separate the prepaschal traditions from the post-Paschal traditions he is essentially doing what they attempted to do. Liberation theology, then, with its confused methodology, has been unable to satisfactorily close the hermeneutical gulf opened up by Schweitzer, despite attempts at rehabilitating its fundamental tenets by such thinkers as Ivan Petrella[28] and Arno Tausch.[29]

African Christianity

In sharp contrast to the Northern hemisphere, Christianity is growing and vibrant in the Southern hemisphere: in South America, Africa, and Asia.

Philip Jenkins has referred to the Christianity of the Southern hemisphere as the 'New Christendom.'[30] Christians in Europe cannot but be struck by the vibrancy of this new Christianity. African Christianity in particular is growing exponentially. To what does it owe its vitality? And how does this revitalized expression of Christianity deal with Schweitzer's 'hermeneutical gulf'?

Lamin Sanneh, in his book *Whose Religion is Christianity?*[31] gives us some insight into why Christianity in Africa is so vibrant. He begins by making an important distinction between 'world Christianity' and 'global Christianity'. World Christianity is, he says, 'the movement of Christianity as it takes form and shape in societies that previously were not Christian', whereas global Christianity is 'the faithful replication of Christian forms and patterns developed in Europe'. This distinction is important for Sanneh because he sees global Christianity as a somewhat negative force and world Christianity in an extremely positive light. World Christianity is a positive thing because it 'emphasizes the discovery of Christianity by diverse cultures in ways that resonate with their cultural concerns.' This has important implications for interpretation theory. Sanneh says:

> People want to interpret Christianity by standards of exegesis and doctrine familiar to them, something that the Christendom model of the church warranted. World Christianity, by contrast, must be interpreted by a plurality of models of inculturation in line with the variety of local idioms and practices. The mental habits of Christendom predispose us to look for one essence of the faith, with a corresponding global political structure as safeguard, whereas world Christianity challenges us to pay attention to the dynamic power of the gospel and to the open-ended character of communities of faith. Doctrine and exegesis are important, it should be stressed, but not without the dimension of personal experience and the network of human interactions.'[32]

He continues:

> The West can learn from the fact that the gospel entered a particularly promising historical phase of cultural transformation when in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it encountered the religions and societies of Africa…I just don't see how Europeans can continue—and I devoutly hope they do continue—to study and teach Christianity without paying heed to examples of Christianity's successful cross-border expansion in post-colonial societies.[33]

He then makes his most telling statement of all: 'The tradition of exegesis that has been practiced in the West seems to have run its course.'[34]

What exactly does he mean by this statement? He seems to be arguing that African Christianity, because of its distinctive cultural roots, has a unique opportunity to express the faith in unique ways, ways which are not bound by Western canons of interpretation. African Christianity is able thus to speak directly to the people. He uses the example of the Maasai of East Africa. Their African creed speaks of Jesus as 'a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God' until finally he was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed, hands and feet, to a cross and died.[35] Then 'he lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him and on the third day he rose from the grave… We are waiting for him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe. Amen'.[36]

One cannot deny that such a way of framing the creed does overcome the hermeneutical gulf that has troubled Western exegesis since Schweitzer. And if all that was involved in the transformation of Christianity in Africa was simply transposing the creed into a meaningful cultural idiom, few would have a problem with it. But the bigger picture reveals a more disturbing trend. The New Testament world is merged with our present world in a way which makes it difficult for many Westerners to accept. Much of African Christianity, for example, sees 'demons, demons everywhere'.[37] So there is a great deal of emphasis on exorcisms, with very disturbing consequences.[38] Moreover, some of the conservative social views cultivated in African churches are rending the Church asunder in a most unchristian way.[39]

Conclusion

Christianity in the African churches is different from that found in South America and influenced by Liberation theology. Although Liberation theology originates in the Basic Communities it has received its articulation from intellectuals, many of whom received their academic training in the West and who were thoroughly acquainted with, and influenced by, the scholarship of the West. African Christianity, as Sanneh has observed, is an expression of Christianity which is becoming more and more un-Western as it resonates with the indigenous culture. In his magisterial book, *The Pattern of Christian Truth*,[40] the renowned Anglican scholar H.E.W. Turner argued that we should see the development of

Christian orthodoxy as a balanced interaction of fixed and flexible elements. The fixed elements are the Biblical Revelation, the Creed and the Rule of Faith. The flexible elements can be seen clearly in the way theological idiom can vary as it is expressed in various cultures and thought-forms. As Turner says: 'The selection of a distinctive theological idiom, whether it be eschatology, ontology, or even in more recent times existentialism, illustrates one possible element of flexibility in Christian thinking.'[41]

When the fixed elements of the Christian tradition are stressed to the exclusion of the flexible elements Christianity becomes irrelevant and archaic. When only the flexible elements are stressed Christianity becomes a mere on-going multiplicity of interpretations with only linguistic resemblances to each other. Turner's insight has much to teach us. Christianity is a dynamic faith. There is development. First century Christianity is not like twenty-first century Christianity. But there is continuity between the Christianity of the first century and that of the twenty-first. The task of theology is to identify the movements of thought and faith in that continuity. This is a creative enterprise which works within the tradition and in dialogue with its sources.

This brings us back to the 'hermeneutical gulf' of post-Schweitzerian Biblical studies. After Schweitzer it becomes clear that exegesis is governed by the historical critical method, and that for exegesis to be meaningful to us today we need to go beyond its limitations and engage in hermeneutical activity, that is, we must creatively transpose the Christian message into categories which are meaningful today. Exegesis and hermeneutics are, however, wedded to each other. Exegesis seeks critical consensus. The original ideas and literary sources are ascribed an essential meaning which is embedded in the intention of the author. This intention is often modified or amplified when transposed into a different context. Critical analysis seeks to discover how much has been changed in this process. In other words, the focus is on understanding the *genealogy* of the text. In creative hermeneutical activity the task is to relate the message to the present. Here the intention of the author is not the central issue. The focus is on the *transformation of meaning* rather than the genealogy of appropriation. The primary question is not whether the interpretation resonates with the intention of the author or the creator(s) of the tradition, but on how evocative and meaningful the interpretation is. This is a crucial task, one which has been on-going for two thousand years. But it must never be forgotten that

hermeneutics has to *build upon the insights of exegesis*. It has to work *within the tradition* and in *dialogue with its sources*. In the language of H.E.W. Turner, there has to be an *interaction* between the fixed and flexible elements.

Schweitzer, because he was a rationalist and a von Rankean historian,[42] thought that his critical exegesis would yield for him a Jesus who was immediately relevant to our own time. It did not. He thus described Jesus as a stranger to our time and thus opened up the hermeneutical gulf. The primary task of theology is now, more than ever, to bridge this gap and make Jesus a present living reality. We have seen that some of these efforts have come from non-European countries such as those in South America and Africa. We have seen that many of them transform Jesus into someone who speaks to people in the present, but in the process intellectual integrity is often sacrificed. It is certainly legitimate to find expressions of Christianity which resonate with the indigenous culture. In the parlance adopted by H.E.W. Turner, we must acknowledge that there are flexible elements in the Christian tradition. But we cannot simply ignore the Enlightenment. In exploring the Christian faith we must conform to the canons of critical inquiry. Exegesis has to take account of the critical methods of our post-Enlightenment world. The New Testament world of exorcisms and the three-decker universe is not a world which can be reconciled with the scientific modern world.[43]

Schweitzer has brought into extremely sharp focus the theological task of making the Christ a meaningful experience in our lives. In our post-Enlightenment world it is a daunting task. But it is a task with the greatest reward of all: the encounter with Christ. There is no more eloquent testimony to the power of this encounter than that which comes from Schweitzer himself at the very end of his *Quest*:

> He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.[44]

Dr. DAVID J. HAWKIN teaches in the Department of Religious Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

ENDNOTES

1. Albert Schweitzer, *Out of my Life and Thought*: *An Autobiography*, trans. C.T. Campion (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1933, 1949), pp. 6f.
2. Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 33.
3. Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, trans. and ed. by Richard H. Hiers and David L. Holland (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).
4. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus. A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede,* trans. W. Montgomery (London: A & C Black, 1910, 1936), p. 238.
5. *Quest*, p. 353.
6. *Quest,* p. 359.
7. *Quest*, p. 370f.
8. *Quest*, p. 398f.
9. See the insightful article of C. K. Barrett, 'Albert Schweitzer and the New Testament,' *Expository Times* 87 (1975-76), pp. 4-10.
10. Krister Stendahl, 'Biblical Theology', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1982), Vol I, pp. 418-22. Stendahl correctly sees that this distinction has its beginnings in the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, which 'had drastically widened the hiatus between our time and that of the Bible, between West and East, between the questions self-evidently raised in modern minds and those presupposed, raised, and answered in the Scriptures' (p. 419). But it was Schweitzer who illuminated these contrasts so sharply that they could not be ignored.
11. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grodel (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1955, Vol. II), p. 251.
12. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1934, 1958), p. 51.
13. *Ibid*.
14. *Theology*, Vol II, p. 251.
15. See Timothy Gorringe, 'Terrorism: Some theological Reflections' in *The Twenty-first Century Confronts its Gods*, ed. David J. Hawkin (New York, SUNY Press, 2004), pp. 111-128.
16. S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (Manchester: The University Press, 1967).
17. Martin Hengel, *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).
18. See Richard A. Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs* (New York: Trinity Press, 1985).

19. John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).
20. But see Ivan Perella, *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (London: SCM Press, 2008); *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto* (London: SCM Press, 2006). Liberation theology has influenced such diverse thinkers as Samir Amin. See, for example, his *Empire of Chaos* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992).
21. Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978), p. 353.
22. Charles Elliot, "Is there a Liberation Theology for the UK?" Heslington Lecture, University of York, 1985, p. 11.
23. Philip Sharper, *Gospel in Art* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984).
24. Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis* (Louisville: Westminster, 1989), p. 55.
25. George Pixley, *God's Kingdom: A Guide for Biblical Study* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1981), p. 72.
26. Edgar V. McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).
27. Juan Luis Segundo, *The Historical Jesus of the Synoptics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), p. 47.
28. See above, n. 20.
29. See his *Global Capitalism, Liberation Theology and the Social Sciences. An analysis of the contradictions of modernity at the turn of the millennium* ed. with Abdreas Mueller and Paul Zulehner (Huntington, New York: Nova Science, 2001).
30. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Rise of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
31. Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
32. *Whose Religion is Christianity? p. 35.*
33. *Whose Religion is Christianity? p. 58.*
34. *Whose Religion is Christianity? p. 58.*
35. *Whose Religion is Christianity? p. 59.*
36. *Whose Religion is Christianity? p. 60.*
37. See Diane Vera, 'The growing number of Christians of kinds which inherently fear demons, Satanists, witches, occultists, Pagans, and atheists,' at: <http://theisticsatanism.com/asp/trend.html>. (Accessed Jan. 8, 2010).
38. See BBC reporter Angus Stickler's comments on exorcisms in Angola at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4677969.stm.> (Accessed Jan. 15, 2010).
39. See 'Out of Africa' by Douglas LeBlanc at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/July/27.40.html?start=3.> (Accessed January 15, 2010).

40. H.E.W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (London: Mowbray, 1954).
41. *Pattern*, p. 31.
42. Leopold von Ranke (1795-1786) was an historian who had a profound effect on nineteenth century thought. His maxim *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* (literally, 'how it actually has been') was taken by many of them as their guiding principle when undertaking historical reconstruction.
43. See the comments of Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), esp. pp. 1f, 15.
44. *Quest*, p. 403.