

READING WITH YOUR SOUL
A Cross-Cultural Reading of Mk 14:26-16:8 and Jn 8:1-11

John Mansford Prior♦

St. Paul's Institute of Philosophy, Ledalero, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

For over 30 years bible sharing has been practised widely in Indonesia. This article begins with the experience of a group of prisoners in Maumere's jail sharing St. Mark's account of the Passion and Resurrection (Mk 14:26-16:8). Each participant took on one of seven key roles in the narrative and seven distinct versions of St. Mark's account emerged. Previously the same group had shared St. John's story, commonly known as "The woman caught in adultery." (Jn 8:1-11). On that occasion a group of professionals in Belgium also these studied the same passage; the two groups then exchanged the results of their individual sharing, compared them and then responded to the similarities and differences. Based on the two experiences, this article takes up the issue of inter-cultural or cross-cultural hermeneutics, and the contrasting yet complementary approaches of the scholar and the "ordinary reader" who converses across social, economic, cultural and religious borders.

♦ John Mansford Prior shares his Indonesian experiment, a new way of sharing the Bible, which is creative, therapeutic and potent enough to shake and free the human spirit. It can evaporate illusions and dissipate fear so that the wounds of yesterday can be exposed and healed and the sharers can accept themselves in all their weakness. This method may be profitable used in our houses of formation. – Editor

On That Friday Evening . . .

Everyone had gone home, the Judeans for the Passover, the gentiles to relax. Each mulled over the day's events. Unknown to others, Joseph of Arimathea quietly slipped out to report to Pilate that the disturbance was over; he himself had rolled the stone to close off the tomb. Nevertheless, Pilate was still concerned with security and above all with his own position. "I never thought you priests would go through with it to the very end. Rough him up a bit, perhaps, send him back to the Galilean hills maybe, but an execution just hours before the Passover? And, I still think it possible that Jesus' family will organize a demonstration," he said. Joseph reassured Pilate, "The Sanhedrin is well content. All is calm. The story's over, the temple is safe, and we are in control again."

Meanwhile shut up in their hidey hole, the male disciples were busy defending their absconding to the Galilean women who had returned from Calvary, "We followed a miracle worker, a healer, not a submissive prisoner, a failed Messiah. We recognised the Jesus of the crowds, we don't know this bound Jesus crowned with thorns. And now, after silencing Jesus, we'll likely be next. You are free to go to the tomb on Sunday morning and do the honours, nobody takes any notice of women." Over cups of sour wine, the soldiers were airing their fears in a downtown tavern, "Having heard so many stories of this guy's miracles we were on tenterhooks wondering when he would turn the rabble on us. And then, we also had to be on full alert convinced that Barabbas' followers would not lie down quietly while we asphyxiated two of their militia on Golgotha. It's always us foot soldiers who have to take the brunt of everyone else's frustration and anger; and we were only carrying out orders."

The above conversation occurred among members of a bible group in Maumere, Indonesia. Each member had identified her/himself with one of the characters of St. Mark's Passion and Resurrection account - there were a couple of chief priests full of self-importance including, Joseph of Arimathea, a confused Pilate who

later regretted his fateful decision, a crowd readily available to the highest bidder, a few timid male disciples, two articulate, faithful women disciples from Galilee, some tipsy soldiers, and a few revolutionary “bandits” full of resentment. What kind of bible group imagined this?

Group Profile

The members of the bible group are among over 140 prisoners in Maumere jail. There are 15 of them aged between 20 and 50 years. There are 13 men and just two women. They hail from the islands of Flores and Timor in Eastern Indonesia: eight come from the local district of Maumere, one each from East Flores, Ende and Bajawa; two come from Timor, one of the women is a Chinese-Indonesian while another has parents from the isles of Sabu and Adonara. Except for two, they are all drop-outs from lower secondary school. They have been sentenced between three and 10 years with offences ranging from child molestation and rape, to stealing and murder.¹ Before entering prison they were farmers, local traders and government employees.

Except for a former SVD novice, they had hardly ever opened the Bible let alone practiced Bible sharing. And yet since 2008 we have been holding Bible sharing each week on Tuesday afternoons. In 2009 we chose the Passion and Resurrection narrative from Mark’s Gospel. During each gathering the members read a segment through the eyes of each of the protagonists². Gradually from their present situation, the group members entered into the world of the Bible and participated in the life of each character in the story, and as far as possible share the fate, the values and the strictures of the personality chosen.³ The quotes above come from the session before the final one, when, after Jesus’ burial, in their imagination the protagonists met downtown “on that Friday evening” and confronted each other on the day’s events. Needless to say, seven versions of the Passion emerged.⁴

It should be noted that this was our second cycle of Bible sharing in the jail. It takes time and patience to establish a modicum of trust among the prisoners. The two facilitators⁵ also needed just as much time to accompany them “into the text”, to approach the text from the individual perspectives of the main characters rather than through the pious platitudes or the dogmatically correct response

(the “public transcript”) that they have heard from teacher, priest and catechist over the years.

But, once they felt unthreatened in a calm, friendly atmosphere, and gained for themselves the freedom to play with the text without feeling shy, fearful or seeking quick results, the text began to play with them and move their consciences. At that moment God’s word became truly alive and demonstrated its power, “sharper than any two-edged sword, reaching as far as where soul divides from spirit, or joints from marrow, and examines critically the reflections and thoughts of the heart. And nothing created is concealed before the Word: everything is naked and exposed to the scrutiny of the One to whom we have to give an account.” (Hb 4:12-13). Aside from empowerment in God’s word, what practical benefits can we glean from Bible sharing like this?

Practical Benefits

Over the past two years many benefits have accrued to the group. The initial awkward and suspicious atmosphere has given way to mutual trust and intimacy. If at the beginning the sharing was somewhat stiff, it soon became smooth until during the final session they could present their imaginative conversation “on that Friday Evening”. Also, they created their own “compassionate community” within the harsh prison environment. When they respond to each other’s sharing, they display an increasing awareness of the other’s suffering. Bible sharing is helping the imprisoned community deal with the storm that has enveloped their lives and that of their families, a storm they themselves fanned.

Additionally, Bible stories stir up a great deal that is both new and surprising. For instance, after reading of Jesus’ arrest in Gethsemany one prisoner recalled bitterly how one night, “I was arrested by the police in my own home. I was sleeping. Suddenly I heard loud voices outside calling my name. They woke me up. I looked outside and saw that the police had surrounded my house. At that moment I was both afraid and confused, and wished I could run away.” Armed with guns and searchlights the police terrified the whole household. Another example: Jesus’ silence before Pilate was immediately understood by everybody. As one said, “I was on trial because of my criminal act and yet my voice

was not heard in mitigation. I don't think trials have changed much since Jesus' day." As another complained, "What's the point of talking when the police and judge have seemingly decided the verdict even before the proceedings began."

Another male prisoner challenged his sentence claiming that a family member gave false testimony, or that the police examination and trial were flawed. There is a tendency to hide personal responsibility behind an unfair judicial system oiled by money and the right connections. It may well be that these accusations have some truth in them. And yet, they did commit the crimes for which they were sentenced.⁶ But, within this ambiguous situation, as they allow the Biblical narrative to touch their lives, they slowly come to terms with themselves.

From this it can be seen that Bible sharing has the power to shake and free the human spirit. It can evaporate illusions and dissipate fear so that the wounds of yesterday can be exposed and healed and the sharers can accept themselves in all their weakness. Despite their being pressed down by problems, and suffering mental stress, Bible sharing plants seeds of therapeutic power: the Greek word *sozo* translates as 'healthy', 'wholesome', 'salvific'. How come Bible sharing can have such influence?

Storying

In sharing, such as carried out in Maumere jail, each of these prisoners brings their life situations, demands and experiences to the biblical text and seeks to elicit a word from the text for their own situation. They are then ready for "storying", that is, authoring a multiple retelling of the Passion and Resurrection narrative from the divergent perspectives of the protagonists. As the quote at the beginning shows, the prisoners re-told these narratives in line with their experience and from the perspectives of the seven main characters in Mark's gospel. The participants who took on being soldiers, for instance, finished their tale with "It's always us foot soldiers who have to take the brunt of everyone else's frustration and anger; and we were only carrying out orders."

In cultures that still predominantly use oral tradition, such as those in Southeast Asia, lives are ceaselessly interwoven with

storytelling. Stories mediate life and meaning, they are told and retold repeatedly to depict life, transmit values and hand on hard earned wisdom for life. The stories may be personal, but their interpretation is communal. The story teller does not own their story or have the last word, but rather the story is never finished; it is a page of the community's fresh and continuous reflection.⁷

This is narrative theology and gives birth to what we can read in the opening quote. Freely expressed opinions in confidence within a trusting community are central to Bible sharing as these fragile groups articulate their "narrative theology". Such narrative theology, birthed by "ordinary readers", rescues the incoherence, playfulness, stubbornness, ungraspability and ambiguity of the Christian story from the hands of dogmatic literalism, absolute certainty and closed formulas.⁸ Or as claimed by Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics has finished its job when it has opened the eyes and the ears, that is, when it has displayed before our imagination the figures of our authentic existence."⁹

Scripture creates more than a world; it shapes a community that is the bearer of that world. Thus, there is an imperative to read the Bible together and in collaboration with a variety of others. Bible sharing proves a sturdy root in our mission of social transformation.

The centre of the Christian message (*kerygma*) is not a proposition but a narrative, the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Nazarene. As Ricour claims, the community of Christians at its deepest is primarily also a community of storytellers.¹⁰ Stories demand retelling again and again. *Anamnesis* – we recall, we make present, we participate anew. What happened in the biblical narrative is happening today, here and now in the reader. The point of reading the bible is not so much to learn and understand more, but rather to be renewed so that we become more like the Incarnate Word. For many prisoners this entails acquiring the courage to silence the gong of resentment that is drowning out their inner voice.

The Characters Tell their Stories

The prisoners did not hesitate to describe the personalities of the biblical characters. As Southeast Asia's religious, cultural,

economic and political context today is not so distant from that of first century Palestine,¹¹ the qualities they voiced were usually spot-on. For instance, they understood that Judas betrayed Jesus not in order that Jesus be arrested and condemned, but to force him make a stand against the Roman authorities, just as Adam Malik and friends held the nationalists' leader Soekarno under house arrest in August 1945 to "force" him to proclaim Indonesia's independence. That this is also the opinion of many exegetes was not known to the group. Their portrayal of Judas and Pilate was sympathetic, while their representation of the soldiers and the male disciples was pretty scurrilous as they avoided personal responsibility. The group's chief priests were depicted as well content; their strategy succeeded.

The two facilitators assisted – but only now and again towards the end of a session – in explicating the protagonists' roles as unearthed by historical-literary exegesis. However in other cases, earlier input was needed, for example, in characterising the two men crucified with Jesus. They are "bandits" to the authorities (Mk 15:27), but nationalist revolutionaries in the eyes of the landless (Mk 15:7). This fits in with the differing colonialist and nationalist attitudes towards Indonesia's guerrillas fighting for political independence in the 1940s and with the contrasting Indonesian and local appreciations of separatist movements in more recent times (East Timor, Papua, Aceh).

Readers Generate Meaning

So what is happening when Christians with a minimal background in scripture, read their experience into the text?¹² Paul Ricoeur suggests that the historical reference of the text uncovered by biblical scholars is replaced by a new reference, "the actual moment of the new reader". Reading, Ricoeur claims, is a response to a text. The text can open itself up for further development and enrichment by new readers; texts have a "surplus of meanings". What is clear is that biblical interpretation is not limited to "restoring the source text all along this sequence or sequences of repeated actualization", rather this reader-response process "re-invents, re-figures and re-orientes the model."¹³ Meaning is no longer considered a given within the text, but something produced in the act of reading.

The Bible reading of the Maumere participants is shaped by the cultural background in which they grew up, and more immediately by the prison community which gives them their present status in society. The group was not so much interested in the “real author” or “implied reader” presupposed by the text, or indeed in the history of the text itself, but in only what is present on the page. The text has a life of its own. Whatever meaning the group gives the text and wherever it is found, the group itself is ultimately responsible for determining its worth.¹⁴ In this process of “re-contextualisation” the Maumere prisoners’ group changes the text from an “historical object” to become “a friend and an ally”.¹⁵

Completing the Narrative

Story, imagination and behaviour cohere. Stories are carriers of potential behaviour. The plot gives shape to a conviction, an outlook on life: it offers a way to be. Stories are always open. They stimulate the imagination of the readers and challenge them to finish the account. This is readily accepted in the case of parables, each of which finishes with a semi-colon rather than a full stop; the reader is invited to continue and so complete the story.¹⁶

“Finishing the story” came out most dramatically when, in St. Mark’s Passion and Resurrection narrative, we came to the account of the empty tomb (Mk 16:1-8): “And going out, they (the three women from Galilee) fled from the tomb, for quivering and astonishment had hold of them. And they said nothing to anybody. For they were afraid ...” Such is the sudden ending of the original gospel whereby the evangelist abruptly hands over responsibility to announce the resurrection from the Galilean women to the contemporary reader. Mark’s gospel seems to finish not with a semi-colon, but with a series of dots: ... over to you! One of the prisoners said: “According to me, the reason why Mark finished his gospel here is that *we* have to look for the continuation of the story.” In this process of “finishing the story” a new context and culture begin to operate; the original reference of the text is replaced by a new one, the situation of the current reader. Imagination precedes praxis.

An important question can be raised here: “What is needed so that this process of ‘storying’ and ‘completing the story’ can be carried

out effectively?" We found one answer in taking part in a Bible sharing cross-cultural programme.

Exposing Cultural Assumptions

Each member of the Maumere Bible group introduced a certain point of view, a perspective, to the text. Each participant confronted the text with her/his expectations and interests. While the Christian tradition which the group embodied is capable of absorbing new insights, pietistic and devotional Christianity can also lead to comprehending scripture in a petrified manner. For instance, the three Protestant members brought with them their individualistic and pietistic readings, while the Catholics their more devotional approach. Readers are always part of a reading and interpretive tradition, often without being aware of it. A readiness to accept diversity, the courage to confront the text and be confronted by it, and an ability to enter the text and place the text at a distance, are conditions for productive and creative sharing.

For this process to be honest and open it is important to name clearly the bias and the agenda (often hidden) that the group brings to the text. In a biblically non-literate group such as ours in the jail, this cannot usually be done at the beginning of a session. However, towards the end of a session the facilitators can question the stance of the group members, their pre-understanding or presuppositions. One result was that the women members increasingly questioned the "male-stream" take of the majority. For instance, they said: "On Golgotha, the three women, Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Salome, replaced the position of the three male disciples, Simon Peter, James and John, who experienced the transfiguration on Mount Tabor yet ran from Golgotha." Nevertheless, many of the men tended to remain somewhat defensive in their ingrained patriarchal prejudices, as when they tried to maintain their authority (despite running away) when they met the women in their imagination "on that Friday Evening", as quoted at the beginning, and "ordered" the women to go to the grave on Sunday morning!

"With the Eyes of the Other"

Apart from the three women questioning the male assumptions of the other members, and the role of the outside facilitators, an

additional way of bringing out cultural presuppositions is to link one group to another one whose members live in starkly different cultural worlds.¹⁷ Reading the Bible inter-culturally or cross-culturally is a “border-crossing” experience, crossing geographical locations, cultural identities, social positions, church affiliations, intellectual processes and contemporary praxis.¹⁸

In 2008 our Maumere group – conventional villagers with minimal formal education from a strongly Catholic Southeast Asian cosmic culture – was linked to a group of independent professionals in Belgium, a couple of whom worked as parish associates while some others had but a tenuous relationship with the institutional church; some were legally married, others lived in partnerships. Both groups studied John 8:1-11 independently in the intimacy of their own small group.¹⁹ Subsequently, key points of the sharing were exchanged with the partner group on the other side of the world. Then the story was read again, this time through the eyes of the partner. Reactions of the Belgium group to the sharing in Maumere were reported to Maumere, as were the responses of Maumere to the sharing in Belgium.²⁰

These three phases - individual group sharing, exchanging the results and then responding to the other’s reactions to the sharing - correspond to a hoped for growth in understanding. The participants try to comprehend each other’s points of view, emotions and decisions. One sits in another’s chair and tries to look at the text through the other’s eyes, and then look again at life.

This process clearly brought out certain cultural presuppositions present in each group. The whole procedure provided a fascinating picture of what readers do with bible texts and what bible texts do to readers. What learning took place?

Questioning Assumptions

Both groups got to know the other’s very different context in a country they had never before considered. Despite the stark differences between a group of Belgian professionals who gather monthly from homes in neighbouring towns in a secular society and a group of villagers confined to prison on an eastern Indonesian isle, they found points of contact such as the Catholic

faith of the majority and their struggle with interpersonal relationships. Each group had to adjust previously held prejudices; the educated Belgians had to acknowledge that the “school dropout” Indonesians were well acquainted with the bible while the Indonesians were drawn to accept that young, Belgian Christians still see the need to undertake regular Bible study, travelling long distances each month in order to do so.

Understanding the Other's View

The stark “asymmetry” of the groups became a point of reference also. The Indonesians became more open to the Belgians’ emphasis upon individual choice while the Belgians became more understanding of the role of the wider family in customary marriage. The Belgians saw how the prison environment and the simple life-style of the Indonesians who come from a consensus culture strongly influenced their interpretation, while the Indonesians saw the middle-class status of the Belgians as one source of their rugged independence. One stated boldly, “They can afford to think differently”.

Questioning Different Emphases

The Belgians remarked on the Indonesians’ emphasis on the juridical side of the incident – the Indonesians, for instance, checked up the law of Moses on adultery (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22) and discovered that both the man and the woman should have been brought to trial, not the woman alone. This led to a lively discussion which concluded that adultery was not the real issue in question; the woman was simply being used “to put Jesus on trial”. Indeed, the Indonesians stated that, “in Indonesia it is the custom for the husband to report his wife to the authorities if she is committing adultery”. According to Jewish custom, the husband should have thrown the first stone; thus the Indonesian group decided that this was no legal trial.

Appraising Each Other

The groups were not afraid to appraise each other. The Belgians noted how strongly the Indonesians seemed to identify with the woman. Furthermore, “you identify too strongly with the woman as an adulteress as though her one act now decides her identity just as your criminal case has defined your present status”. The

Belgians tended to treat the woman's offence somewhat lightly "maybe because adultery is something we can imagine doing ourselves." For the Indonesians, adultery is a criminal offence, and is also a major breach of local customary law.²¹ The Indonesians found it odd, to say the least, that Belgian couples, living together without a marriage certificate, were engaged in Bible study.

The Indonesians could not understand how in Belgium sexual liaisons are considered personal affairs while in Indonesia they are clearly public offences. "In Indonesia even just dating has so many cultural restrictions if we want to avoid people taking action against us". The Indonesians also noted that "in our country it is always the man who is brought to trial, not the woman." One member added, "I can't imagine this law being carried out these days. If it were, there would be a great many men stoned to death".

Involving God?

The Belgians noted how the Indonesians associated guilt and punishment with God, "something we explicitly don't want to do!" While the Indonesian Jesus was the "forgiving one", the Indonesian God was portrayed as an "eternal punisher". The Belgians also gained the impression that some of the prisoners "so victimise themselves that they cannot recognise their role as perpetrator (criminal)".²² They wondered whether male domination (13 men with only two women in the group) partly determined the way the members tried to talk themselves out of personal responsibility. They also questioned to what extent the Indonesians could speak freely and frankly within the confines of the prison, although they accepted there were some "strong personal stories".

Understanding the Other's Culture

In order to grasp the Indonesian take on John 8:1-11, the Belgians had to ask many questions about Indonesian culture and law (both customary law and positive law). Similarly, the Indonesians needed to try to understand the urban, secular culture of Belgium and the wide variety of ecclesial allegiance present in the bible group, before they could understand the Belgians' interpretation of the passage.

Listening and Appreciating

In both these two very different groups, the life situation of the members was clearly being read into the text, and then the text in turn read the contemporary circumstances of the participants. In scripture, God speaks to each one in their own situation. If each person is listened to and respected, as they have the right to be, then they experience Bible sharing as liberation, as renewing identity and as affirming personhood. Freed from the confinement of self, the prisoners no longer bobbed erratically on the surface of the currents that swept them into jail, but are willing to sink to the depth of life's wrestling and grow until able to determine their own direction in life.

Insights from "Ordinary Readers"

Personally, I have never ceased to be amazed at the insights I have gained from such readings whether among shop assistants in town, peasant farmers in the Wolofeo interior, stubborn, resilient widows in Patisomba on the north coast, or long-term prisoners living in the cramped quarters of Maumere jail.²³

Generally speaking, the poor have little to defend and so quickly speak openly allowing the text to read their lives in an unthreatening manner, while officials have their position to protect and so have great difficulty in being sufficiently transparent to engage in meaningful Bible sharing. For instance, in the 1970s a Basic Ecclesial Community in town, whose members were government officials and their families, could not share their life in the light of the scriptures; they hid behind questions such as "What do scholars say?" "What does the priest think?" Meanwhile in the 1980s, a group of twenty widows²⁴, living a precarious existence in a small local migrant community at Patisomba some 12 kilometres west of town, immediately identified with the elderly widow Naomi and the younger widow Ruth as they found their life story (economic migration) narrated in the biblical Book of Ruth.²⁵ "I am Naomi!" "I am Ruth!" they exclaimed with joy: "The Bible is telling the story of our life (economic migrants)." No pretence, no masks, but rather a word of hope, of encouragement, of empowerment. At the same time "ordinary readers" learn how to interpret their daily struggle in new ways and see themselves in a new light, more valuable, more reflectively than before. This

raises the issue of the relationship between the insights of “ordinary readers” and the grasp of professional exegetes.

Multiple Readings

The relationship between the sharing of “ordinary readers” and exegetes has been under scrutiny by biblical scholars in Asia, Africa and Latin America since the 1970s. My first introduction to this subject was through the 29 bible sharings by *campesinos* as recorded in Ernesto Cardenal’s *The Gospel in Solentiname*²⁶. Also from Latin America I have been encouraged by the many writings of Carlos Mesters, in particular his inspirational *A Defenceless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*²⁷. From Asia Sugirtharajah²⁸ has written and edited many volumes, while numerous books have been published comparing and contrasting readings from Asia, Africa and Latin America.²⁹ All these volumes point to a stark truth: what has often been presented as universally applicable is actually no more than an aggregate of European norms that were considered worth standardising by the incoming preachers!³⁰

For over thirty years Asia’s finest biblical theologians have accompanied Bible sharing among “ordinary readers” and have focused on questions relevant to their contexts of poverty, violence, minority ethnic and religious status and gender injustice. Such Bible sharing and theologizing is fundamentally practice-oriented. Inter-pollination between biblical stories and everyday reality has opened up an era of immense theological creativity in Asia and Africa. Today, the list of such hermeneutics is long and the quantity of literature overwhelming.³¹

Multi-cultural readings of the Bible face two major problems.³² First is the fact of plurality itself. A real conflict of interpretation arises only where conflicting social and cultural practices are legitimised by interpretations of the (same) text. For instance, the Belgian group read John 8 as accepting of adult consensual liaisons, while the Indonesians maintained the same passage upheld (their understanding of) God’s law on the exclusivity of sexual relationships within a monogamous marriage. Both readings cannot be correct.

This brings us to the second problem, namely the lack of criteria with which to determine the weight to be given to each of the

mediating factors. How can we establish a hierarchy of values for a proper intercultural reading strategy? For instance, should we give more weight to the value of individual choice as strongly advocated by the Belgians or to the rock-hard necessity of consensus as insisted upon by the Indonesians?

However we respond to these two crucial issues, it is clear that we need to continue to practise a communitarian reading of the text, and triggered by the text, make a critical interpretation of the cultural practices we habitually use so that we continually grow as pilgrims, seekers, discoverers.

Reading with your Soul

Fortified by Bible sharing over six weeks, in the one but final session the Maumere group could portray the seven main characters of the Passion in imaginative conversations “on that Friday Evening”. Their descriptions are convincing. In such “biblical fantasising” insights from western exegesis continue to be necessary in order to place the grasp of the local group within a broader stream of understanding. At the same time scholarly findings need to be used hand-in-hand with insights drawn from the experience of those pushed to the edge of society. Long term cross-cultural missionaries – *missio ad gentes, ad exteros, ad vitam* – are in an excellent position to aid mutual understanding between academics and the poor, and make possible readings between continents, cultures and divergent social groups.³³

This clearly demands great sensitivity. When Gregorius Nule and I read the bible with a group of prisoners in Maumere jail, the two enablers are not present as equal dialogue partners. Both of us are ordained, we are lecturers in theology and we can come and go as we please; we also freely associate with the prison’s staff, and one of us is a foreigner. We could easily dominate the proceedings, and on occasion do. We share the scriptures among participants who are frequently intimidated and have anyhow been “programmed” to follow every word and whim of the prison guards. Thus, we find that the role of the enabler as “activist-intellectual” at the grassroots³⁴ in a process of liberating or transforming Bible sharing is rather problematic. Listening to the prisoners’ take on a Bible passage and also that of a group of

Belgium professionals while remaining cognisant of exegetical learning, requires, to paraphrase Martin Buber:

Reading the Bible as though it were something entirely unfamiliar, as though it had not been set before us ready-made, at school and after in the light of 'religions' and 'scientific' certainties; as though we had not been confronted all our life with sham concepts and sham statements which cited the bible as their authority. We must face the book with a new attitude as something new. We must yield to it, withhold nothing of our being, and let whatever will concur between us and it. We do not know which of its sayings and images will overwhelm us and mould us, from where the spirit will ferment and enter into us, to incorporate itself anew in our body. But we do not disbelieve anything *a priori*. We read aloud the words written in the book in front of us; we hear the word we utter, and it reaches us. Nothing is prejudged. The current of time flows on, and the contemporary character of ourself becomes itself a receiving vessel.³⁵

Indeed, from the "ordinary reader" we are learning to read the Bible with our soul.

References

- Buber, Martin (1956) *The Writings of Martin Buber: Selected, edited and introduced by Will Herberg*. New York: The World Publishing Company.
- Cardenal, Ernesto (1976) *The Gospel in Solentiname* New York: Orbis Books.
- de Wit, Hans, Louis JonkerMarleen Kool & Daniel Schipani (ed.) (2004) *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*. Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit.
- Dube, Muse (2001) "Introduction" in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, Musa Dube (ed.) Geneva: WCC Publications.
- England, John, John Prior et al. (eds.) (Vol. I 2002, Vol. II 2003, Vol. III 2004) *Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources*. Delhi/Quezon City/New York: ISPCK, Claretian Publishers, Orbis Books.

- Gramsci, Antonio (1988) *A Gramsci Reader*, David Forgacs (ed.)
London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Grant-Henderson, Anna L. (2007) *Handbook for Practical use of Exegetical Tools: Ways to help us get deeper meaning from the text*.
South Australia: MediaCom Education Inc.
- King, Ursula (ed.) (1994) *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (in particular "Part Three: The Bible as Source of Empowerment for Women") London: SPCK.
- Lee, Moonjang (2008) "Reading the Bible in the Non-Western Church: An Asian Dimension", in *Mission in the 21st Century: Exploring the five marks of global mission*. Andrew Walls & Cathy Ross (ed.). New York: Orbis Books.
- Mesters, Carlos (1989) *A Defenceless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Mesters, Carlos (1995) *God, Where Are You? Rediscovering the Bible*
New York: Orbis Books. (Portuguese original 1972)
- Premnath, D.N. (ed.) (2007) *Border Crossings: Cross-cultural Hermeneutics*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1981) *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*. London: SPCK.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1995) "Toward a Narrative Theology", *Figuring the Sacred*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1998) *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, by André Lacocque and Paul Ricoeur. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Segovia, Fernando F. (2000) *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Singgih, Gerrit E. (1982) *Dari Israel ke Asia: Masalah hubungan di antara kontekstualisasi teologia dengan interpretasi Alkitabiah*.
Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia.
- Singgih, Gerrit E. (2001) *Hidup di Bawah Bayang-Bayang Maut: Sebuah tafsir Kitab Pengkhotbah*. Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia.
- Soares-Prabhu, George M. (1999-2001) *Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu*. Vol. I "Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today"; Vol. II "A Biblical Theology for India"; Vol.

III “Biblical Spirituality of Liberative Action; Vol. IV “Theology of Liberation: An Indian Biblical Perspective”. Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth.

Sugirtharajah, R.S. (ed.) (1991) *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*. New York: Orbis Books

Tagle, Luis Antonio (2007) “Telling the Story of Jesus” in Mario Saturnino Dias (ed.), *Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia: A Celebration of Faith and Life*. Asian Mission Congress, Chiang Mai. Bangalore: Claretians Publications.

Weber, Hans-Ruedi (1981) *Experiments with Bible Study*. London: The Westminster Press.

¹ On 16th March 2009 there were 147 prisoners held in the jail, 144 men and three women. Thirty seven for “moral offences” (illicit sexual relations, sexual abuse, rape), 21 for murder (including one abortion), 18 for stealing. There were another nine incarcerated for cruelty, seven for gambling, four for public disorder (drunkenness) and two for robbery.

² John learnt this approach from Hans-Ruedi Weber’s *Experiments with Bible Study*. London: The Westminster Press, 1981. John used this method for the first time with a farmers’ group in the interior parish of Wolofeo in 1982. After the series of bible sharings, the key characters of the passion held their “evening debate” from the sanctuary replacing the sermon of Good Friday.

³ Moonjang Lee terms this approach “reading inferentially”. See, “Reading the Bible in the Non-Western Church: An Asian Dimension”, in *Mission in the 21st Century: Exploring the five marks of global mission*. Andrew Walls & Cathy Ross (ed.). New York: Orbis Books, 2008,148-156.

⁴ The passion episode from Franco Zeffirelli’s 1982 film *Jesus of Nazareth* was shown in order to open our imagination. This dignified film gives ample scope for reflecting on the meaning behind the episodes.

⁵ Gregorius Nule, a fellow lecturer at Ledalero, also accompanies the bible group as do SVD students Ferdy Tukan (recorder), together with Tommy Welle, and more recently, Kornelis Montero (listeners). Goris Nule brings with him his experience of bible sharing for many years in Chile (1993-2001). Goris, Ferdy, Tommy & Kornel also enliven the atmosphere with their singing.

⁶ Some claim there are cases where the police have apparently “unloaded” unsolved crimes onto a prisoner caught for a similar offence, thus helping to clear the books. If this is true, then it would result in an increased sentence, and so the prisoner would regard himself more as a victim than a criminal.

⁷ For an Asian theology of “storying” see Luis Antonio Tagle, “Telling the Story of Jesus” in Mario Saturnino Dias (ed.), *Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia: A Celebration of Faith and Life*. Asian Mission Congress, Chiang Mai. Bangalore: Claretians Publications, 2007, pp.27-38. Insights from Africa are equally

applicable to Eastern Indonesia. See, Muse Dube, "Introduction" in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa Dube. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001, 7ff.

⁸ By way of contrast, I cannot help but reflect on how Joseph Ratzinger, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), turns each gospel narrative into a doctrinal statement confirming a consiliar dogma of the fourth century.

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*. London: SPCK 1981, 35.

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Narrative Theology", *Figuring the Sacred*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, p.236-48.

¹¹ There are more points of contact between the eastern Indonesian situation today and that of first century Palestine than with that of a highly urban secular society.

¹² In the end readers have to decide for themselves what gives meaning to their life story as a part of God's whole story.

¹³ Paul Ricoeur in *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, by André Lacocque and Paul Ricoeur. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p.xi.

¹⁴ While narrative criticism focuses on ways in which the text determines the reader's response, "reader-response" focuses on ways in which the reader determines the meaning. See, Anna L. Grant-Henderson, *Handbook for Practical use of Exegetical Tools: Ways to help us get deeper meaning from the text*. South Australia, MediaCom Education Inc., 2007, pp.82-88.

¹⁵ An exegete relates to the text as an "historical object". When a text is read within the contemporary context of the reader, the text becomes a "support", "friend" and "ally" in the wrestle of life.

¹⁶ Not simply "retelling" the biblical narrative, nor even just placing oneself into the narrative as one of the biblical characters, but considering the biblical story unfinished and so go on to continue and complete it oneself. One graphic example is that of the teachers in the interior parish of Wolofeo who attempted to complete the parable known as "the prodigal son" (Lk 15:11-32). They continued the conversation between the father and the elder son. However, they got stuck and could not find a way to reconcile father and son as they found themselves on the elder son's side (the elder son was maintaining his customary rights). The teachers concluded: "If any of us were to show compassion like the father in the story, then our customary law would collapse!"

¹⁷ Only very recently has research been carried out on multiple readings of the bible across social and cultural borders. Mutual exchange and intercultural communication between ordinary readers in different continents has barely been touched on. We still know very little about the exact relationship between bible reading and social transformation. The first such study I know of is that of Hans de Wit from Amsterdam. For over three years hundreds of ordinary readers from more than twenty-five countries and the most varied communities of faith studied John Chapter 4. For a report and analysis of the project see, *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*. Ed. by Hans de Wit, Louis Jonker, Marleen Kool & Daniel Schipani. Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2004.

¹⁸ See, D.N. Premnath, (ed.), *Border Crossings: Cross-cultural Hermeneutics*. New York: Orbis Books, 2007.

¹⁹ The Johannine passage was, unsurprisingly, chosen by the Maumere prisoners; they often choose passages concerning trials and judgement. As one put it, "We know where we itch!"

²⁰ The group in Belgium used Flemish, the group in Maumere Indonesian; international contact was through facilitators in English translation.

²¹ In Indonesia if the victim and the perpetrator can come to an understanding at a customary village tribunal, then there is no need to have recourse to the police and the courts.

²² Nevertheless see footnote No.6 on the possible "unloading" of unsolved crimes onto a handy prisoner.

²³ The SVD seminarian recorder claims, "I learn a lot *about* the bible in the seminary; I learn how the bible changes daily lives here in the prison."

²⁴ "Widow" refers to any wife living alone (with her children); some of their husbands had died, other husbands had simply migrated to Malaysia and lost contact with their family; other "widows" had a child but no partner. They are among the hardest working and most articulate poor that I have had the privilege to know.

²⁵ The women presented their insights during the weekly Eucharist on the last Sunday of the annual bible month (September).

²⁶ New York: Orbis Books, 1976.

²⁷ New York: Orbis Books, 1989. An earlier work, *God, Where Are You? Rediscovering the Bible* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995; Portuguese original 1972) also captures Mesters' masterly interweaving of 'scientific' and 'contextual' reading.

²⁸ For instance R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1998).

²⁹ Volumes found helpful include, R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*. New York: Orbis Books, 1991; Ursula King (ed.) *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (in particular "Part Three: The Bible as Source of Empowerment for Women") London: SPCK, 1994; Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000).

³⁰ The Methodist bishop Yap Kim Hao of Singapore, a former general secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia, has said: "Theological ideas are created in Europe, improved in England, distorted in the USA and then piggy-backed to Asia."

³¹ For a comprehensive annotated bibliography of Asian theologies see *Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources*. John England, John Prior et al. (eds.). Delhi/Quezon City/New York: ISPCK, Claretian Publishers, Orbis Books. Vol. I 2002, Vol. II 2003, Vol. III 2004. To refer to just one Asian biblical theologian of international stature, George M. Soares-Prabhu. See, *Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu*. Vol. I "Biblical Themes for a

Contextual Theology Today”; Vol. II “A Biblical Theology for India”; Vol. III “Biblical Spirituality of Liberative Action; Vol. IV “Theology of Liberation: An Indian Biblical Perspective”. Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 1999-2001. And from Indonesia the biblical scholar and contextual theologian E. Gerrit Singgih. See, *Dari Israel ke Asia: Masalah hubungan di antara kontekstualisasi teologia dengan interpretasi Alkitabiah*. Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1982; and his, *Hidup di Bawah Bayang-Bayang Maut: Sebuah tafsir Kitab Pengkhotbah*. Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2001.

³² See, Hans de Wit, op. cit. p.30.

³³ One international network that facilitates inter-cultural readings of the bible is *Bible Studies and Mission* (BISAM), a study group of the *International Association for Mission Studies* (IAMS). See the IAMS website (www.missionstudies.org), click Study Groups, click BISAM.

³⁴ “Organic intellectual” is Antonio Gramsci’s term. Gramsci (1891-1937) somewhat over simplifies the relationship between the intellectual who wrestles with ordinary citizens. See, *A Gramsci Reader*, edited by David Forgacs. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988.

³⁵ Paraphrased from “The Man of Today and the Jewish Bible” in *The Writings of Martin Buber: Selected, edited and introduced by Will Herberg*. New York: The World Publishing Company, 1956, pp. 242-243.