


The Bible in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: 'What's in it for me?'

**Author:**Willem H. Oliver¹ **Affiliations:**

¹Department Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, School of Humanities, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Willem H. Oliver,
erna.oliver@outlook.com

Dates:

Received: 01 Apr. 2020

Accepted: 07 July 2020

Published: 08 Sept. 2020

How to cite this article:

Oliver, W.H., 2020, 'The Bible in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: 'What's in it for me?''', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(4), a6020. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.6020>

Copyright:

© 2020. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The society in which we currently live and operate is globally the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and locally our (unique) environment or community. Although we are still in a lag period between the 3IR and 4IR, the 4IR already has a global disruptive effect, with artificial intelligence being gradually implemented, with fluid contexts, and where nobody agrees on anything. Deep learning, unlearning and relearning must take place on a daily basis. The question could well be asked if there is any place for the Bible and Christianity in this new vibrant global community.

All theology is contextual. Although theology deals with what is most absolute in reality, citing Mellert, it is also relative in that there is never a final or last answer to most religious questions. The handbook and norm for our theology and religion is still the Bible – a compendium of books written approximately 2000 years ago with no new information added to it ever since. The challenge of the church is to make that information contextual in this 'disruptive' era and to bring the gospel in a new and fresh way to everybody without compromising the basic truths and normativity of the Bible.

This article argues that the Bible should still take centre stage in the academic training of our theological students, in our preaching of the gospel on a daily basis, in our engagement with people in need and in the transformation of our societies in general. As the centre of Jesus' preaching on earth was the (coming of the) kingdom of God, he also acted as the perfect example of how to establish the kingdom of God and the flourishing life on earth.

Contribution: This is a more practical article and puts the notion of the significance of the Bible within the environment of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. As this is a disruptive era, it requires from us to also present the word of God in a 'disruptive' way. We will have to present the 'old' word of God in a brand-new way so as to make sure that the people of this era will grasp it.

Keywords: Bible; Fourth Industrial Revolution; Authority of Bible; Relativity of Bible; Contextual theology; Flourishing life.

It's easy to say that Christ is the answer. But what exactly is the question? (cf. Green 2009:3).

Introduction – The Fourth Industrial Revolution

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is dawning – but has not yet completely dawned – on the third decade of the 21st-century post-postmodern¹ global community, being susceptible to any disruptive object or action coming its way. Penprase (2018:210) calls this transition time between the 3IR and the 4IR a 'lag period', in which people experiment with and are trained in the new technologies that are disseminated throughout the world. In this lag period, the line between the digital and physical worlds is becoming more and more invisible, with digital technologies being used more frequently, like artificial intelligence (AI),² the Internet of things (IoT)³ and Big Data⁴ that are blended with our daily lives (cf. Mohapi 2017).

Although many members of the previous generations are very *sceptical* or totally ignorant about this imminent era, the youth and young adults are very *susceptible* to it and embracing it, literally with both hands. Smartphones and tablets are visible everywhere, with the adolescents

1.Already in 2012, Jeffrey Nealon started to refer to a post-postmodern society (Nealon 2012).

2.Artificial intelligence, also called machine intelligence, is the development of a computer system or systems that would have the capacity to execute tasks that normally requires human intelligence, such as decision-making, doing translations and speech recognition and having a visual perception.

3.Internet of things is a system created to inter-relate computing devices with each other in which they can automatically identify each other and transfer data from and to each other without the interaction of a human being.

4.Big Data analyses very large and complex data sets on computers and extracts information from these large data sets.

Note: Special Collection entitled The use of the Bible in Theology, sub-edited by Willem Oliver (UNISA).

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

(and even younger) and (young) adults being mostly on social media and/or constantly playing games. Because of the fluidity of everything, especially information, around them, people find it easier to accomplish deep learning,⁵ coupled with constant unlearning and relearning (Veldsman 2019). If knowledge is not recent, it is often regarded as outdated or redundant. On one technology, entertainment and design (TED) talk, the presenter apologised that the information he was sharing with his audience was already two weeks *old!* (Van den Berg 2015). *Old* information or knowledge should be unlearned, new information should be learned and relearned and deep learning should take place. However, how can this be applied to the rather *old* information of the Bible and its theology? Before we answer this question, let us first look at the current situation of both academia and the Christian congregations.

The current ('theological') situation in academia and the church

Academia

According to Volf and Croasmun (2019, cf. 11), (the presentation of) theology has gone astray because it has deserted its purpose, the purpose being, very practically, to:

[C]ritically discern, articulate, and commend visions of the true life in light of the person, life, and teachings of Jesus Christ, [and] to help human beings identify God's home as their home and to help us journey towards it. (p. 45, 71)

They add that the purpose of Christian theology is the flourishing of all life because it stands in service of the continuation of Christ's mission to embody and spread the good news of God's coming to make the world into God's home (Volf & Croasmun 2019:75). The subject matter of theology, on which theology has to focus to accomplish its purpose, depends on the basic character of life in its fullest, actually to become a dwelling place of God (Volf & Croasmun 2019:64) – discussed later.

The 'desertion' that Volf and Croasmun (2019:11) refer to has worldwide taken its toll in academic theology, where the students are taught and trained to become preachers at the hands of the educators. The consequence is a vicious spiral effect. Many churches regard the education and training of prospective preachers as 'at best useless and at worst harmful' (Volf & Croasmun 2019:37), and therefore they train their own preachers, resulting in less students enrolling for theology, leaving the theological institutions in some kind of an emotional and financial crisis. The once big theology departments and faculties are currently either deposed or 'tucked away at the very edge of her erstwhile domain out of institutional inertia and, perhaps, a bit of respect for her bygone power and renown' (Volf & Croasmun 2019:44).

Added to this is the fact that academics write articles that are to be read by their peers and not by the congregants of

5. Deep learning 'takes place through interaction and participation' (Brown 2013:15), resulting in deep knowledge. One of the conditions is that something must be interesting enough to interact with (cf. Brown-Martin 2017:11).

churches, who were and should still be their 'traditional audience' (Volf & Croasmun 2019:39) to learn more about God and the Bible. The consequence of this action is that the academic theological articles and books have become irrelevant to our laypeople, and therefore they are not looking for existential answers in these documents anymore.

Already in the 19th century, (academic) theologians have detected this 'crisis' and tried to remedy it by doing theology from a scientific perspective, while defining themselves as scholars who primarily engage themselves with the producing of knowledge, therefore being 'social scientists' (Volf & Croasmun 2019:47). This resulted in the subject matter being moved away from God and the preaching of his kingdom, to Christianity and the world of religions; it has also moved away from 'norms and purposes' to 'facts and causes' (Volf & Croasmun 2019:47). In this way, the theologians moved away from God's purposes and did not preach God's kingdom to the world anymore (cf. Volf & Croasmun 2019:48), as theology has just become another science. The consequence of these actions is that a lesser important object and purpose of study are, since then, mostly focussed upon and communicated to the students, which means that the knowledge and love of God is replaced by an increasing knowledge of Christianity.

This way of doing theology has the tendency to relativise the normativity of the Bible, mostly ending up either in a 'nostalgia and attempts at repristination (the conservative side) [or] suspicion and unending critique (on the liberal side)' (Volf & Croasmun 2019:52).

Life in the church – The narrative of the congregation

At this stage, we experience a church of great diversity, which may be described as a unity in diversity, but definitely not a universality (cf. Bevens 2011:3, 4). Currently, the majority of Christians are from the so-called *Two-Thirds World* (non-Western, therefore outside North America and Europe), more specifically from Latin America, China and Africa (Bevens 2011:4).

In most churches, we commonly find two extreme groups of congregants; a (mostly) small group of conservatives and a bigger group of liberals. The conservatives want to keep religion in the same way as their ancestors have performed it, without any change, despite the fact that, on the one hand, their circumstances and their culture have changed much through the centuries and even during their own life time and that they have gained new knowledge, and, on the other hand, that the church needs to unlearn and relearn the ancient creeds and the content of the Bible within a new world (cf. Volf & Croasmun 2019:52). These conservatives believe that the creeds' formulations still apply without any reformulation, and that the dogmas of yesteryear are currently still just as applicable (cf. Volf & Croasmun 2019:52). They also live with the prevalent warning of the church to stay away from the world 'out there' (Green 2009:4).

The liberals or 'progressive camp' mostly find pleasure in criticising everyone and everything (Volf & Croasmun 2019:54): 'They interrogate and unmask; they trouble and problematize; they demystify and destabilize'. Their critique just never ends. They apply it to everything in the church, be it the content and context of the Bible, the church's view of the Bible through history, or the presence and application of God within the 4IR, mostly not giving a positive alternative.⁶ According to Volf and Croasmun (2019:57–58), '[t]heology reduced to this mode of critique is fundamentally atheological [where] theology isn't concerned with questions of truth and goodness but serves merely as a tool', mostly to destroy or falsify other views.

A logical point of criticism on both these stances is that the liberals are focussing more on Christianity than on theology, whereas the conservatives are against innovation and transformation. However, both these groups are still in and part of the church – and sometimes fighting each other. Crowds of people (especially in the West) have already left the church as they 'seem to believe that the Church is out of touch. It does not touch their everyday lives, it does not touch their concerns, their routines, or their struggles' (Green 2009:3). They find it very hard, even impossible, to integrate their Christian belief and their daily life with each other (Green 2009:3). Here, the church and the theologians are guilty, as they do not teach and supply their preachers and congregants with sufficient knowledge and tools to deeply understanding the meaning of their faith.

Fortunately, there is a third (non-extreme not-so-large) group in the church, which we may call a new Christian community or generation. This group, still mostly being part of established churches, is scattered all over the world, trying to get the church in line with a new society, also trying not to compromise the normativity of the Bible (too much). They are not to be identified with 'new church' movements who are filling the world at an astonishing pace (cf. Oliver 2019).⁷ These are the people who will take the church into the 4IR, whereas the other two groups will (optimistically) get smaller and inaudible till they vanish with time.

The role of the Bible and the Christian tradition in contextual theologies

Jesus' preaching on earth

The focal point of Jesus' preaching on earth (according to the Gospels) was the (coming of the) kingdom of God, referring to God's rule and realm on earth (present and future). Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God as a reality with reference to the dynamic and interactive relationship between God and his people, based on the words of the covenant, found in, *inter alia*, Leviticus 26:12: *I will walk among you and be your*

⁶There is a cynical reason for the latter: if they supply a positive alternative, then *that* will be open to criticism.

⁷Also look at Wikipedia for a list of new Christian movements (Wikipedia 2019).

God, and you will be my people. This covenant refers to two actions: (1) the action of God to look after his people in a divine way and (2) the act of his people to worship him and take care of his kingdom in a responsible way. This accords with and is a result of God's words in Genesis 1:28 where he appointed human race as his representatives and guardians on earth. Volf and Croasmun (2019) elaborate on this:

[H]uman beings and the world come to fulfillment when they become in actuality what they have always been in intention: when God rules the world in such a way that God and the world are 'at home' with each other – more precisely, when God comes to dwell in the world and when the world has become and experiences itself as being God's home. (pp. 68–69)

This also finds expression in the Great Commandment of God (cf. Mt 22:37–40) in which Jesus states that we should love God above all things and love our neighbours as we love ourselves. This implies that God stands (and wants to stand) in a relationship with his children, while he wants his children to be in relationships with each other. After all, that was the reason for his coming to earth as Jesus – to again put human race in the right relationship with God (cf., e.g. Jn 3:16), which will result in the right relationship with each other.

Different angles and different interpretations⁸

In contrast to the scenario depicted under the previous heading, Volf and Croasmun (2019) refer to the current situation in churches:

[D]epending on the setting and guiding interests, Christians – including theologians – push some motifs into the background, play up others, and orchestrate them with various degrees of consonance or dissonance with each other and with the setting, all the while striving to be faithful to the New Testament and primitive traditions. (p. 103)

Theologians and congregants alike interpret God's word according to the tradition that they have and respect, according to the context in which they live, generally through the eyes of their church and specifically through the interpretation of their congregation as a hermeneutical community (cf. Smit 2015:188). In this way, people create different contextual theologies, which are, in fact, different ways in which they interpret the Bible from the context that they are living in, 'in the absolute belief that their [perspective is] the right one' (Smit 2015:176).

One would love to refer to the interpretation – in fact, the contextualisation – of the Bible as a unanimous decision and fact, where everybody agrees on the perfect and exact judgement of the Bible in every situation and context. This would consequently end up in one general Christian church with a clear vision of the Scriptures, leading to congruent contextual theologies emanating from local congregations. However, from the earliest Christian times, people interpreted and communicated the gospel of God in different ways, emanating from and leading to different interpretations. Firstly, there were those who did not know much about

⁸For an informative article about this history of interpretation, cf. Smit (2015).

Jesus and his gospel but were so passionate about the gospel that they could not be silenced. A good example is Apollos who preached the gospel in Alexandria and elsewhere. However, *[w]hen Priscilla and Aquila [a couple who were co-workers of Paul – cf. Rm 16:3] heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately (Ac 18:26)*. Secondly, we observe that people who knew the gospel well had different angles in their presentations. The earliest examples are Jesus himself and Paul. In his preaching, Jesus, who was the main determinant for the founding of Christianity, focussed, according to the Gospels, on the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt 8, 10, 11 & 13), as well as eternal life (cf. Jn 3–6, 10, 12, 17). Paul, who regarded himself as an apostle by the will of God (2 Cor 1:1) and the will of Jesus (1 Cor 1:1), laid more emphasis on justification by faith (cf. Rm 1:16–17). These two examples cannot be regarded as different interpretations of the gospel, but merely as presenting the gospel in different ways or from different perspectives within different contexts. A last example concerns different (diverging) interpretations of the word of God, resulting in what the church called ‘heresies’, which were doctrinal views in ‘variance with the recognised, established and official doctrine’ of the church (Deist 1984:73). Three examples will suffice: Gnosticism (mainly between the 1st and the 6th centuries), having a pre-Christian origin, emphasised special (esoteric) knowledge and did not regard Jesus as the Mediator between God and human race (cf. Deist 1984:68); Marcionism (initiated by Marcion in 165 CE) regarded the Old Testament as a barbarous book and only a few books of the New Testament as canonical (Deist 1984:100); in the 2nd century, Montanus started a Christian group (existing between the 2nd and 4th centuries), which was an ‘explosion of prophetism’ (Sundkler & Steed 2000:22), practising a strict asceticism and believing in the imminent second advent of Jesus (Deist 1984:107). It is very important to emphasise that most of these ‘heretics’ could be regarded as committed Christians, although their interpretation of the Scriptures differed from that of the church (cf. Oliver & Oliver 2018:3 of 12).

Currently, we still have Christians all around the world who identify with the three groups being discussed above. We still have people or preachers who passionately proclaim the word of God, but with very little knowledge thereof, ending up in naive explanations and interpretations of the Bible. When these ‘lay’ preachers are asked something that they do not have an answer for, they mostly regard it as a mystery, or they give a twisted answer. However, it is a challenge to convince people living in the 4IR, to believe in a ‘mystery’.⁹

People who nowadays identify with the second group of people mostly emphasise certain parts of the Bible more than others in proclaiming the gospel. With the dawn of the 4IR, these people are indispensable in and for the church, as long as they do not overemphasise one part of the Bible above the rest or make a dogma of it.

⁹This excludes the gullible groups all over the world who will still believe ‘everything’ their preachers tell them, which needs discussion in a separate article.

Unfortunately, there are still many people (‘churches’) who can currently be identified with the third group. For these people, their dogma – their personal interpretation of the Scriptures – comes firstly, sometimes to such an extent that, if one does not comply with it, one is destined to go to hell (according to them).

Contextual theology¹⁰

Time, place, culture and tradition mark the life of the church and the way in which the gospel is interpreted. Jesus, for one, lived in a certain time, in a specific place and country, with a definite culture and tradition, which obviously differs from ours. This also applies to the contexts within which all the books of the Bible were written. If we look at the theologians and Christians who operated through the centuries, we realise that they lived in different circumstances – time, space, culture and tradition – and to live life to its fullest, they had to live according to this ‘old’ theology, reinterpreted and applied to their current circumstances (cf. Volf & Croasmun 2019:63).

This makes all theology contextual. Bevans (2010:1) is adamant about it: ‘One can even say that there is no such thing as “theology,” because there is only contextual theology’. For him, contextual theology is a theology performed in a critical dialogue with two realities: the experience of the past (recorded in Scripture and the church’s tradition[s]) and the experience of the present, within a specific context, consisting of four elements: a personal or communal experience, a ‘secular’ or ‘religious’ culture, a social location and social change (cf. Bevans 2010:1; Bevans 2011:9). Key is the centrality of experience, as it is the (Bevans 2011):

[H]onouring or testing or critiquing of experience that makes theology contextual ... [C]ontextual theology is a theology of rich and challenging dialogue that tries to articulate my context, my experience, and dialogue of this experience with the experience of Christians down through the ages that we find in Scripture and Christian tradition. (p. 9, 10)¹¹

Theology in the 21st century is therefore a contextual dialogue with the Bible as the word of God, being the foundation of our belief systems, and between the children of God within their circumstances and the people around them, with the practices and dialogues of the church through the centuries as guidelines. It is very important to understand the Bible as a compilation of books originating mostly from the ancient Near East, and not presenting it, as many preachers do, through a Western lens (cf. Bevans 2011:11).

The church should therefore constitute a dialogue between the ‘ways, themes and methods of theology’ in the Bible, and our ‘culture, ethnic identities and social locations’

¹⁰Though space does not allow to elaborate on it, it is very important to take note that the contextualisation of the Bible is done based on its fourfold weight, that is, its historical, cultural, canonical and theological (cf. Welker 2013).

¹¹This correlates with the perspective of practical theology, as explicated by Swinton and Mowat (2016:24): ‘Practical Theology is a critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring faithful participation in the continuing mission of the triune God’.

(Bevans 2011:11). Theology should not be regarded as a sacrosanct phenomenon, preserved for a chosen few highly trained academics at universities or seminaries, but it should be made available, understandable and transparent to the congregants of the church. Theology should be 'democratised' (Green 2009:x), implicating that the church congregants should become 'the real theologians' (Bevans 2010:2; cf. Green 2009:4), as the way in which theology should be practised and presented is in the first place *practically* focussed on the congregants and the people 'out there', and not *academically* on a few students sitting in the classroom and becoming preachers.

Normativity and relativity of the word of God

The Bible should be regarded as the norm of our Christian living and our outreach to 'the others'. However, is this word of God normative in itself, and therefore 'independent of its actual relevance' or does this 'actual relevance' regulate its normativity? (Kaufmann 1999:281). If we look through history, we discover that the Christian gospel was always inculturated within every changed context (cf. Dreyer 2004:5; Kaufmann 1999:281), mostly without losing its unique identity. This should also be applicable for today (cf. Dreyer 2004:5) as we need to innovate our interpretation of the Bible within our new contexts, still listening to and applying the Bible to our contexts. If we do not innovate our interpretation and application of the Bible, we run the risk of creating an ideology, ending up in distorting the message of the Bible (Dreyer 2004:7). However, when we adapt our biblical interpretations to our current circumstances and situation, we must take care not to do eisegesis,¹² but still do exegesis. Our aim is therefore to 'renew our religious or Christian traditions' and to relate the Bible's normativity to our context (Dreyer 2004:11). When looking at our central theological task, it should be executed with a critical hermeneutic framework within our empirical research, keeping both critical and empirical perspectives in a balance (Dreyer 2004:11; cf. Ziebertz 1993:229).

In the South African context, we need to get back to these fundamentals, to have a balanced view on the normativity of the Bible. However, currently, the 'normativity' of the Bible is mostly captured within the stern dogma of most of the mainstream churches; most Reformed churches are very strict on singing 16th-century hymns, which are for them the norm of praise and worship. The charismatic and Pentecostal churches are strict on adult baptism and glossolalia, according to their interpretation of the Bible. The Seventh-Day Adventists are strict on keeping the old Sabbath and to avoid eating meat, holding it as a norm for Christian living. The Roman Catholic Church mostly accords a very special position to Mary, the mother of Jesus, in their worship, while the African indigenous churches (AICs) put their customs and traditions firstly and adopting from Scripture what and how they think fit.

12. Eisegesis is a (sometimes very) subjective and non-analytical reading of a Bible verse.

This kind of dogma is a soldier and a killer. A soldier fights everyone that does not agree with her or his ideology – a soldier fights to kill. Instead of fighting the real enemy, that is, the devil, instead of bringing the good news to people who do not know (enough about) Jesus, the dogma soldier fights her or his own people who do not share their narrow-minded ideology. With futile allegations used as sword, the dogma soldier 'kills' her or his fellow soldiers, which she or he regards to be the enemies. However, if we go back to the words of Jesus in John 3:16 (*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*), we detect no dogma in it, only the plain truth – the normativity. Dogma, as depicted in this paragraph, has, in fact, nothing to do with normativity and, sadly, also nothing to do with our salvation in Christ. It is almost like something used by the devil to break up or split the church.

To my mind, the normativity of the Bible is all about presenting the Bible with all its truths, soaked with the will of God and with Jesus who came to earth; also including the so-called grey areas where people differ on the understanding thereof, presenting the people on earth with what *God* intends them to have. It should therefore be presented in such a way that the people will accept it. However, currently, some preachers 'discover' more and more 'grey areas' in the Bible and present it to their congregations and the masses in a 'world-friendly' way – a way that is more acceptable to the world, interpreting the content of the Bible to give the people what *they* want, thereby adjusting it to make the people feel at ease.

With reference to the relativity of the Bible – already in the 5th century CE, Augustine has detected the relativity of the Scriptures when he made the following remarks in his *De Utilitate Credenda* 13 (free translation) (cf. ed. Schaff 1885):

[B]elieve me, whatever there is in these Scriptures, it is lofty and divine: One will only find truth in it, and a system of teaching which is most suited to refresh and renew minds, and clearly, if someone is looking for something in it, they will find what is enough for themselves, with the condition that they approach it with devotion and piety, as true religion demands.¹³ (p. 745)

It is impossible to read Scripture without interpreting it from one's 'own frame of reference' (Garrison 1953:426) – as the proverb states, 'so many people, so many minds'. However, this does not imply that one can interpret the Bible randomly. Augustine gave a condition for 'finding enough for oneself' inside the Bible, and that is that the interpreter must approach the Bible with 'devotion and piety' – invariably also very subjective terms.

The relativity of the Scriptures is a given, which should be addressed with much caution. In the back of our mind, we must remember that every book in the Bible was written

13. In the original Latin: '*Quidquid est, mihi crede, in Scripturis illis, altum at divinum est: inest omnino veritas, et reficiendis instaurandisque animis accommodatissima disciplina; et planè ita modificata, ut nemo inde haurire non possit quod sibi satis est, si modò ad hauriendum devotè ac piè, ut vera religio poscit, accedat*' (Marriott 1876:113).

by men of God who *interpreted* God's word¹⁴ into their own words. Our interpretation of any given text in the Bible is therefore an interpretation of their interpretation of the 'real' or 'true' word of God. There is, however, a difference between our interpretation of a specific verse or section of the Bible and the interpretation of the authors of the Bible. The text in the Bible was 'God-breathed' (2 Tm 3:16), giving it authority, whereas ours lacks authority to a great extent.

The relativity of the Scriptures does not take away what God intended to convey to his children through specific people who wrote the books of the Bible.¹⁵ The relativity of the Scriptures also does not permit us to delete pieces of the Bible which we think are outdated, like the offerings being recorded in the Old Testament, especially in Leviticus. It also does not mean to question or criticise the Bible because of discrepancies that we have detected in, for example, the four Gospels. The answer is also not found in a mix of the Gospels, wishing away the discrepancies. The relativity of the Bible wants to teach us that we have not arrived at the final answer relating to a specific text; it wants to teach us to make room for other interpretations that differ from ours but can still be derived from the Bible. It means that we as different churches should start to take hands and work together, despite our 'little' differences. This action will prevent us from doing eisegesis or exalting our dogmas to normativity.

Despite its authority and normativity, no one on earth can ever discover the final or 'whole truth' in the Bible (cf. Garrison 1953:426). Despite its relativity, the word of God will always be the norm of life for his children.

An epistemology of the dialectical aesthetics of a flourishing life

As a church, we need to admit that we must apply both a kataphatic theology (using positive terminology to describe or refer to God, i.e. terminology that describes or refers to what God is believed to be) and an apophatic theology (more negative terminology), as both these approaches are (Volf & Croasmun 2019):

[I]ndispensable elements in a carefully and systematically curated dialectical strategy whose purpose is both to articulate the nature of God and to acknowledge through language God's infinite transcendence of all articulations... As the dialectics of apophasis and kataphasis implies, there is 'unknowing' in all our knowing of God, and there is 'untruth' in all our legitimate truth claims about God. (p. 94)

As we do not know God in full, and therefore we speculate about him in some way, also because he is much more and greater than we are (cf. Is 55:8–9, 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways', declares

14. This refers to the inspiration by the Holy Spirit that the men of God experienced when they wrote the books.

15. For the interpreter, it is very important, when doing exegesis of a specific pericope, to also stay within the rules of semantics, especially with reference to illegitimate totality transfer (cf. Barr 1961:218; Louw 1982:41; Osborne 2006:84) and root fallacy (Osborne 2006:85) – methods of interpretation bringing many 'lay' preachers to amazing but untrue explanations of the word of God.

the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'). Within this scenario, God creates the context for a flourishing life for his children on earth.

This heading has in mind to cursory investigate some ideas and opinions about the viability, as well as the nature and appreciation of the flourishing life in Christ. The flourishing life is the 'kingdom of God in its fullness, the realized hope of Israel's prophets' (Volf & Croasmun 2019:76; cf., e.g. Is 40:9–11). This involves the 'tripartite question of how the true life is led well, goes well, and feels as it should' (Volf & Croasmun 2019:153). Paul summarises this in Romans 14:17 with *righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*. Volf and Croasmun (2019:153) interpret it as follows: 'Righteousness (or justice) is the substance of life led well. Peace is the substance of life going well. Joy is the substance of life feeling as it should'. Revelation 21:3 refers to it in the following words (with the words of the covenant [although in a reversed order as referred to above] being part of it): *Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God*.

When looking at texts like Revelation 21:3, as well as those already mentioned, it can be suggested that the 'home of God' is the 'overarching metaphor for developing a theology of flourishing life' (Volf & Croasmun 2019:149). Having had the eternal life in mind, Jesus, while on earth, referred to the 'Kingdom of God' (cf., e.g. Mk 1:5; 14:25; Lk 4:43), which constituted a dwelling place of God – here on earth and also in heaven (cf. Oliver & Van Aarde 1991:379–400).

As Christians, we should seek to have a *life to the full* (Jn 10:10) and a *life that is truly life* (1 Tim 6:19), although there may be a variety of interpretations within it. Many Christians believe that this flourishing life excludes a life that does not *always* 'go well' or does not *always* 'feel as it should'. However, a thorough reading and interpretation of Psalm 23:2–4 indicates that the poet refers to both the good times (*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters*) and the bad or sad times (*Even though I walk through the darkest valley*) of being a child of God – the one does not exclude the other. Even Paul, the apostle of the Lord, had many bad times in his life as is quite clear from 2 Corinthians 11:23–28 (horrific times) and 12:7 ('thorn in his flesh'). In a sense, this suffering is necessary because it makes us look forward to one day be in the physical presence of God.

According to Volf and Croasmun (2019:81), a theology of the flourishing life should satisfy three requirements to experience it in its fullest. Firstly, it cannot be separated from the world and specific contexts in which we are living. It must therefore always be contextual – connected to reality. Secondly, it must be presented as a viable or plausible way of living, notwithstanding, but also in cooperation with the non-theological sciences. The last requirement concerns the adaptability of the vision of a flourishing life, in that it should

perfectly fit the lifestyle of all the generations of people in the congregation.

The answer to the question about the viability of the flourishing life is a very subjective one. Once a Christian, someone will immediately have a positive answer to it, having experienced it in their religious life. However, the non-Christian, atheist or agnostic will frown at it and have a myriad of excuses and counter-arguments, based on, *inter alia*, the relativity of the Bible, the 'suffering' that goes along with Christianity, the multiplicity of churches together with different interpretations of the Bible in the world and the inhabitants or citizens of the 4IR who do not need the Divine anymore – referring back to Nietzsche's 'God is dead' (cf., e.g. Nkomo 2015).

In line with Bevans (2011), to contextualise the Bible and for that matter, theology, the church needs a 'new agenda for its theologising' (Bevans 2011:12), an agenda that will address the current circumstances of people in a specific locale. It will also have to investigate the burning questions that the people in that location have. It implies that the content of the Bible should be conveyed in an enthusiastic and understandable language within the culture, tradition and circumstances of a given group of people (cf. Bevans 2011:13). This 'new dialogue' (Bevans 2011:15) must not be confined to the borders of the church but must reach out and be applicable to other religions as well. In this way, (contextual) theology will become a transformative theology (Green 2009:ix) – changing people and situations, 'making the transformation connections between our real-life issues and the fundamentals of our Christian heritage' (Green 2009:x). By doing this, contextual theology will offer 'the church a new look at *itself*' (Bevans 2011:17; original emphasis) and at the flourishing life in which it finds itself.

What we need is a (Volf & Croasmun 2019):

[B]iblically rooted, patristically guided, ecclesially located, and publicly engaged theology, done in critical conversation with the sciences and the various disciplines of the humanities, at the center of which is the question of the flourishing life. (p. 82)

It should be descriptive like a science, instrumental like a technology and normative as mere advocacy (public support for a cause or policy) (cf. Volf & Croasmun 2019:83).

What's in it for me?

Every individual can be understood and defined by her or his dialogical character (Taylor 2003:37). One acquires true humanity, a real capability of understanding (oneself and others) through an 'acquisition of rich human languages of expression', which is made possible in one's dialogues with 'significant others' (Taylor 2003:37). These dialogues cause one to adopt a specific set of ideas or knowledge for a specific time, based on the (her or his) 'complexity of contemporary hermeneutical issues' (Smit 2015:176). Therefore, a question that people ask most of the times when being presented with

something is: How will it benefit me to have it? How can I gain from having it? Especially within the wake of the 4IR, these can be regarded as existential questions to a certain extent.

Within the 4IR, theologians (in the wide sense of the word – therefore not only academics) should think twice before just presenting the word of God to a post-postmodern society. In the 4IR, all knowledge is fluid, and people are not keen to agree with others without good reasoning. Nothing remains the same for too long. We must implement that into theology. Although the 'facts' of theology will never change, we must innovate constantly, without distorting the biblical truths. We will have to make sure that we present the word of God as normative, and as true to the Bible as possible (according to our interpretation of the Bible – cf. Smit 2015:176). By doing this, we must not try to be 'more clever' than the Bible. This may sound very orthodox, but it is true. For example, as Christians and academics at a theological faculty or seminary, we should not contradict the basic truths in the Bible (e.g. God as creator of everything and the Holy Trinity) to be more acceptable to the people, as this does not bring anything constructive to the presentation of the Bible.

In her or his dialogue with congregants – be it during a church service while preaching, or in a (Bible study) group, or face-to-face – the preacher must always take care to act as the 'significant other', making such an impression on the individual as to assure that the Holy Spirit will help this person to adopt a new or better set of ideas, leading to a flourishing life. Preachers must stop presenting theology as if it has nothing new to offer and nothing compared with the other sciences which discover new things almost on a daily basis. Before conveying the word of God to others, preachers should ask themselves: 'What *does* theology [really] have to offer?' (Volf & Croasmun 2019:45). What is in it for me, for the congregant, for a post-postmodern individual in the 4IR?

Theology should be put in the hands of ordinary (and well-informed) Christians to actively put our faith back 'in touch' with life (Green 2009:4). Theology should find itself in 'stories, films, popular music, spirituals, poetry, handicrafts, computer-gaming, dress, etc' (Green 2009:5) to break it out of its 'verbal captivity' (Green 2009:5). Added to this, we should learn to actively practise what we preach (Francis of Assisi Rule 17.1 – Robinson 1906:50; *contra* Green 2009)¹⁶:

[S]o we will not be espousing a more participatory and practical way of doing theology just because it is educationally more sound (although it is), nor simply because it will help people to grow personally in the faith (although it will), but because it will address today's issues and allow the Kingdom of God to beckon us forward, so that we might participate in the transformation of society... Christianity ... should be an agency for promoting an active commitment for justice and peace on earth, 'as it is in heaven'. (p. 6)

16. Many scholars wrongly assume that St. Francis told his followers, 'Preach the gospel to all you meet. Use words only if necessary', which he never did (cf. Milton n.d.; Stanton 2012).

Presenting the word of God in this way, with enthusiasm and conviction, could touch the heart of the independent and self-serving 4IR individual to such an extent that it might lead to a change of heart.

Conclusion

People living in the dawn(ing) of the 4IR are very critical, regarding themselves as ‘masterminds’, knowing ‘everything’ as they have all the information they need at their disposal (mostly on the Internet) and being emancipated – free from the ‘shackles’ that bind them to a dependent life. With reference to religion, they are no more dependent on a preacher to tell them what the Bible says, dependent on faith *per se*, and for that matter, dependent on the Divine. People have become their own masters, living in a ‘post-religious era’ (McGregor 2016) and, for that matter, in a ‘post-Christian era’ (Williams 2014). When confronted with Christianity, the first thing these ‘masters’ want to know is how they can benefit from that. Talking to them about things that they do not (want to) believe in or ‘cannot’ believe in, like the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, not to mention his virgin birth and life after death, sound so hollow when it echoes back from their economy-filled, egocentric and post-postmodern way of thinking and reasoning. For a moment, the theologian (be it an academic, preacher or layperson) may wonder if this is really worth the while anymore. Are these masters not right?

In this article, the aim was to show the dialectical as well as the dialogical way of reasoning about the normativity and relativity of the Bible, finding itself presented within a 21st-century contextual theology, offered to students (academia), congregants (the church) and the world ‘out there’. The Bible, being filled with ‘old knowledge’, should be presented in the present-day context of the congregants or people ‘out there’, in a fresh and innovative way – talking passionately about old knowledge and facts in a brand new and interesting way. Amidst a visible moral decline in society, we should keep a positive vision and attitude about God and Christianity in general.

With all that has been said here, we must admit that it is easy to criticise and to point out everything that is and that went wrong. However, to come up with a viable solution is less easy.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this research article.

Author’s contributions

W.H.O. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Barr, J., 1961, *The semantics of Biblical language*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Bevans, S.B., 2010, *Contextual theology*, viewed 17 January 2020, from https://www.eiseverywhere.com/file_uploads/ff735620c88c86884c33857af8c51fde_GS2.pdf.
- Bevans, S.B., 2011, ‘What has contextual theology to offer the church of the twenty-first century?’, in S.B. Bevans & K. Tahaaf-Williams (eds.), *Contextual theology for the twenty-first century*, pp. 3–17, Pickwick Publications, Eugene, OR.
- Brown, J.S., 2013, ‘Learning in and for the 21st century’, in E.L. Low (ed.), *CJ Koh Professorial Lecture Series No. 4*, pp. 1–30, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
- Brown-Martin, G., 2017, *Education and the fourth industrial revolution*, Groupe Média TFO, Toronto, viewed 25 April 2020, from <https://www.groupemediatfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/FINAL-Education-and-the-Fourth-Industrial-Revolution-1-1-1.pdf>.
- Deist, F., 1984, *A concise dictionary of theological terms*, JL Van Schaik, Pretoria.
- Dreyer, J.S., 2004, ‘Theological normativity: Ideology or Utopia?: Reflections on the possible contribution of empirical research’, in J.A. Van der Ven & M. Scherer-Rath (eds.), *Normativity and empirical research in theology*, vol. 10, pp. 3–16, Empirical Studies in Theology, Brill, Leiden.
- Garrison, W.B., 1953, ‘The necessity and relativity of Biblical interpretation’, *Interpretation* 7(4), 387–403. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096435300700404>
- Green, L., 2009, *Let’s do theology: Resources for contextual theology*, Bloomsbury, London.
- Kaufmann, F-X., 1999, ‘Normativity and context in sociological perspective’, in F. Schweizer & J.A. Van der Ven (eds.), *Practical theology – International perspectives*, pp. 273–288, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main.
- Louw, J.P., 1982, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, GA.
- Marriott, C. (ed.), 1876, *S. Aurelius Augustinus, Episcopus Hipponensis, de Catechizandis Rudibus, De Fide Rerum quae non Videntur, De Utilitate Credendi*, 8, Augustini Opuscula quaedam, 3rd edn., Apud Jacobum Parker et Socios, London.
- McGregor, M.N., 2016, ‘The language of spiritual literature in a post-religious era’, in K. Garcia (eds.), *Reexamining academic freedom in religiously affiliated universities*, pp. 87–96, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Milton, M.A. n.d., ‘What does it mean to “use words only if necessary” when sharing the Gospel?’, *Christianity.com*, viewed 13 January 2020, from <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/church/what-does-it-mean-to-use-words-only-if-necessary-when-sharing-the-gospel.html>.
- Mohapi, T., 2017, ‘How do we get Africa’s youth ready for the Fourth Industrial Revolution?’, *Mail & Guardian*, viewed 19 January 2020, from <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-07-21-00-how-do-we-get-africas-youth-ready-for-the-fourth-industrial-revolution>.
- Nealon, J., 2012, *Post-postmodernism: Or, the cultural logic of just-in-time capitalism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Nkomo, Z., 2015, ‘God is dead and we have killed him’, *Early Engagements*, viewed 06 March 2020, from <https://earlyengagements.wordpress.com/2015/07/15/god-is-dead-and-we-have-killed-him/>.
- Oliver, E., 2019, ‘The great emergence: An exposition’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(4), a5398, 12 pages. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5398>
- Oliver, W.H. & Oliver, E., 2018, ‘God as one’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(1), a4959, 12 pages. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.4959>
- Oliver, W.H. & Van Aarde, A.G., 1991, ‘The community of faith as dwelling place of the father’, *Neotestamentica* 25(2), 379–400.

- Osborne, G.R., 2006, *The Hermeneutical spiral: A comprehensive introduction to biblical interpretation*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL.
- Penprase, B.E., 2018, 'The Fourth Industrial Revolution and higher education', in N.W. Gleason (ed.), *Higher education in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, pp. 207–228, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.
- Robinson, P., 1906, *The writings of Saint Francis of Assisi: Newly translated into English with an introduction and notes*, The Dolphin Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Schaff, P. (ed.), 1885, 'Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers', *On the Holy Trinity; Doctrinal Treatises; Moral treatises (St. Augustine)*, Series 1, vol. 3, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Smit, D., 2015, 'Reading the Bible through the ages? Historical and hermeneutical perspectives', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1(2), 175–194. <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2015.v1n2.a08>
- Stanton, G., 2012, 'FactChecker: Misquoting Francis of Assisi', *The Gospel Coalition*, viewed 13 January 2020, from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/>.
- Sundkler, B. & Steed, C., 2000, *A history of the church in Africa*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Swinton, J. & Mowat, H., 2016, *Practical theology and qualitative research*, 2nd edn., SCM Press, London.
- Taylor, C., 2003, *The ethics of authenticity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Van den Berg, D., 2015, 'Gamification, the new Black', *TEDx*, viewed 13 January 2020, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pf5N8D-r0wM>.
- Veldsman, T.H., 2019, 'Higher education institutions need to face up to the future', *Mail & Guardian*, 29 June 2019, viewed 19 August 2020, from <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-06-28-00-higher-education-institutions-need-to-face-up-to-the-future>.
- Volf, M. & Croasmun, M., 2019, *For the life of the world: Theology that makes a difference*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Welker, M., 2013, 'Sola Scriptura? The authority of the Bible in pluralistic environments', in B.A. Strawn & N.R. Bowen (eds.), *A God so near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in honor of Patrick D Miller*, pp. 375–391, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, IN.
- Wikipedia, 2019, *List of Christian movements*, viewed 21 March 2020, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christian_movements.
- Williams, R.D., 2014, 'Britain in post-Christian era, says former archbishop of Canterbury', *The Guardian*, viewed 21 March 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/27/britain-post-christian-ex-archbishop-canterbury-williams>.
- Ziebertz, H.G., 1993, 'Komplementarität von Forschungsmethoden', in J.A. Van der Ven & H-G. Zieberts (eds.), *Paradigmenentwicklung in der Praktischen Theologie*, pp. 225–260, Kok, Kampen.