

Aesthetics, mysticism and the art of living

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This article analyses aesthetics and mysticism in the writings of Albert Geyser, the prominent South African theologian who is mostly known for his brave, uncompromising struggle against the apartheid system. In the first part of the article, brief introductory comments are made about Geyser's theological and political role in South Africa in the light of his Protestant context and his opposition to apartheid. It is then investigated how his reputation as a Biblical scholar and his protracted, much publicised stance against apartheid obfuscate his remarkable interest in aesthetics and mysticism and explains why his other theological interests and especially his interest in mysticism have not yet been researched. In the second part of the paper Geyser's mystical interests are investigated by analysing his comments on church architecture, worship, music, liturgy and his pioneering translation of Thomas á Kempis' *Imitatio Christi*.

An outstanding theologian and political activist

Albert Geyser (1918–1985) is a South African theologian who was one of the most prominent opponents of the South African regime during the apartheid era. As a result of his struggle against the political system, he fell out of favour with his church, became a controversial public figure and was persecuted by the political authorities.¹ Eventually dismissed in a questionable way from his professorship, he had to take recourse to the courts of the land to be reinstated. He won the case after a trial that was front page news in the national and international media for days on end. He influenced the course of history in South Africa and transformed society in an irrevocable manner through his fearless struggle. And yet, his name and reputation tragically disappeared from the collective memory and is virtually a forgotten person.

Geyser is one of a minority of Afrikaners who became dissenters in the apartheid era. This is special, given that he belonged to the smaller 'Hervormde' (Reformed) Church (to be distinguished from the larger Dutch Reformed [Nederduitse Gereformeerde] Church), which was one of the conservative supporters of the apartheid ideology. With its roots in the history of the Boer Republics who fought the British in two liberation wars, the church is known for its requirement that practically excluded non-Afrikaans and, therefore, African people from membership. The exclusion of others ensured that the membership of the Church comprised whites only. Moreover, Geyser stemmed from one of the communities from the deep countryside that tended to be more conservative. He was a brilliant student and graduate in Biblical Studies. He soon drew the attention of the church to such an extent that he was appointed to the professorship in New Testament Studies at the church's official training centre in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria at the youthful age of 28.

He began his career soon after the Second World War when the British Empire began to fall apart and the British were under pressure to yield power to their colonies. In 1948 the Afrikaners won elections, whereafter the new authorities began implementing its apartheid policy. During the following years, Geyser dared to oppose the policy of the state and church in public. He became a widely recognised but deeply resented public figure. He was marginalised and eventually victimised when the church found him guilty of heresy and removed him from his position, as was mentioned above. Even more sensational was his role in the demise of the Broederbond (Brotherhood), a powerful secret society with extraordinary political power. He obtained their confidential documents and passed them on to the media. Over the following years many members resigned as their identity was made known in media all over the country. With its secretive nature gradually being undermined, and also its often unethical activities more and more revealed, the organisation lost so many members that it eventually retained a shadow of its former power and influence. There is little doubt that Geyser's initiative eventually led to the breaking up of the powerful grip of this group on the socio-political discourse in South Africa.

1. Compare Van Aarde, De Villiers and Buitendag (2014) for a more detailed discussion.

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Whilst he was involved in these events, Geysers also made a name for himself as a theologian. He completed research in the Netherlands under some of the most prominent New Testament scholars. Because of his academic standing he was, for example, the first South African to become a member of the exclusive New Testament Society (SNTS). He was also a respected and honoured member of the New Testament Society of South Africa, where his full participation in all activities of the society continued despite his political activities.

Geysers and mysticism

Given this context, it comes as a surprise that Geysers also wrote about mysticism and aesthetics - themes that are not normally associated with his discipline and interests. Even more striking is that he did so as early as 1954 in a Protestant context when these themes were not really a research focus. In one of the most insightful writings from his pen, he wrote an article in his church journal (*Die Hervormer*) about mysticism and aesthetics.² What is also remarkable is that this article reflects a strong awareness and confirmation of his Protestant identity, suggesting that he saw no tension between Protestantism and mysticism and did not share Protestant prejudices against mysticism.

The article was a short (one page) obituary to J.H. Neethling, a well-known architect and member of his 'Hervormde Kerk' who died tragically at the youthful age of 31 after a freak car accident. Neethling was the designer of several church buildings for his church. In this article, written in impeccable and even poetic Afrikaans, Geysers lauded Neethling's architectural designs for churches and praised his profound and creative representation of the true spirit of Protestant worship services in these physical buildings. Geysers also reveals his interest in aesthetics, referring to Neethling's unique appreciation for art ('seldsame kunssin'). But he further recognised and recommended Neethling's daring, unconventional approach to architecture, stating that Neethling brought about a new phase in South African church architecture. This experimental approach is, in turn, then linked with Early Christian traditions. Geysers points out how Neethling engaged with these earliest traditions by using the motif of the cross as point of departure for his designs, planning high arches, soft lighting and a well-balanced liturgical centre.³ This approach, Geysers wrote, revived old and well-established forms of Protestant worship services. It is at this point of his discussion on Neethling that Geysers makes the tantalising observation that (1954:24), 'The Protestant worship service is not without mysticism'.

This fascinating obituary is important because of several reasons. He links the history of Christianity, Protestantism,

2. I am grateful to Van Aarde (1992:162) whose article brought my attention to this aspect of Geysers' work. He wrote about Geysers' teaching of Practical Theology: 'Wat die liturgie betref, maak hy in *Die Hervormer* (Geysers 1954:24) die opmerking dat ook die Protestantse erediens "nie sonder mistiek" beskou moet word nie'. Van Aarde then called for more careful research on this and other thoughts of Geysers on Practical Theology. This aspect of Geysers' work indeed deserves more attention.

3. 'Sy tipiese kerkgeboue met die kruismotief as grondslag, die hoë gewelwe, lae beligting en 'n gebalanseerde liturgiese sentrum is niks nuuts nie, dit is teruggegrëp op die oorspronklike vorm van die Christelike Kerkboukuns'.

worship and church buildings with mysticism and aesthetics. Geysers insightfully mentions aesthetic attributes such as order, balance and harmony in his reflections. More intriguing is how Geysers developed his remark about the mystical nature of Protestant worship. His description matches the general understanding of mysticism as the consciousness of the divine presence.⁴ It reflects an experiential reality in which humanity stands in awe before God, acknowledging and celebrating the divine presence. Geysers singles out adoration and worship of God as the heart of Protestant worship, explaining that adoration elevates the worshipper towards God. His comments imply the yearning of the spiritual pilgrim to become one with God and an ecstasy that speaks of losing oneself completely in the relationship with God. Also mystical is his understanding of God. Adoration, supported by the physicality of the church architecture, is about the transcendent God who upholds a transformative relationship with humanity that is focussed on intimacy and closeness. Through the high arches and the delicate lighting, Neethling created an atmosphere of infinity and an experience of upward moving, ever lighter lightness ('opwaartse veryling'). The soft, dusky lighting in the arches of his churches ('skemerlig in die gewelwe') follows, so to speak, the worship and adoration of God.

This view on Protestant worship is striking not only because of its mystical contents, but also because of the vital role of aesthetics in the mystical experience. The link with adoration and the role of the aesthetic will come as a surprise to those who associate (Protestant) worship more with themes like preaching, teaching and evangelising. At the same time buildings are often seen as functional, providing a space where a preacher addresses a community. Here architectural design is seen not only as creating a space where a community may experience the mystical union with God, but also as promoting that experience.

In this short obituary to Neethling that is infused with Geysers' intellectual and rational arguments, he provides something else than the widely held view on the cerebral character of Protestant worship. Teaching and preaching are ultimately transcended by adoration and celebration of the divine. Key notions in Spirituality and Mysticism are used to express the experiential reality of worshipping God. Equally striking is the eloquent, spiritual manner in which Geysers describes the mystical nature of the liturgy in terms of aesthetics. Significant in this regard are words such as 'well-adapted', the upward movement towards union with God, infinity and adoration that all suggest ritual, celebration, awe, ineffability and intimacy.

One has to place this obituary in context to appreciate its full implications. Geysers wrote these words in the early stages of his long career as the incumbent of the chair in New Testament

4. There are many attempts to define mysticism. Compare for example McGinn (2008) for a helpful discussion. Krüger (2006:9) offers as description, 'the yearning of the human spirit for utmost transcendence and utmost integration; as awe before the ultimate mystery of the source of things; as the experience and the expression of the communion, union, or non-difference with, of commitment to, that source'. It is used in this article to indicate the consciousness of God's presence. This would imply such aspects as longing for the divine, becoming aware of the divine touch, of one's own nothingness and of becoming one with God. It would also indicate mutuality and conformity.

Studies. It may well be that these remarks reflect his responsibility for teaching Practical Theology, but there are no indications that this theological discipline had interest in aesthetics and mysticism in those days.

Geyser's interest in mysticism can be linked with the awakening of his political activism. During this time Afrikaner nationalism grew stronger with many attempts to promote Afrikaner interests and culture. The churches were actively involved in these attempts. They supported the drive for Afrikaans schools in a massive attempt to educate communities. They revised the Afrikaans Bible translation. Geysers, as an expert in Greek and the New Testament, participated actively in this revision. He considered himself as part of his community and supported their interests. But for him there was nothing exclusive about his Afrikaner identity. Already at this early stage he strongly opposed attempts by the apartheid authorities to separate the different races in the country. He criticised the apartheid government for their attempts to remove the coloured vote from the voter's role.⁵ He also began to distance himself from his church's policy to accept only Afrikaners as members. In contrast to the exclusivist thinking behind all those developments and events, he had an inclusive mindset, determined by his mystical insights. He saw himself as part of a large tradition and a long history that can be traced to the earliest forms of Christianity and regarded the divine relationship with the whole of humanity as the most basic characteristic of Protestantism. No one is excluded from this relationship because of race. His reflections on the mystical function of architecture evince his deeper consciousness that the purpose of worship is to create a space where the worshipping community can experience the presence of God like and together with believers of all times and places. It is a subtle indication of the theology that determined his life and work.

It may seem a bit precarious to speak of the mystical insights of Geysers based on this short obituary. But there is another surprisingly unknown part of his life and work that deserves a closer look because it sheds light on his obituary to Neethling. This framework illustrates his interest in mysticism and provides a vital insight in the creative and energising power that drove his commitment to a more humane world and a transformative theology.

The *Imitatio Christi*

Geysers' interest in aesthetics and mysticism is also evident from another major publication. In 1952 Geysers, then already a New Testament scholar, found time to translate Thomas à Kempis' *Imitatio Christi*, one of the most famous classics in world literature into Afrikaans.⁶ It is indeed intriguing that a Biblical scholar is involved in such a translation. In this

5. He was a co-signatory of a group of academics who protested these events in an open letter - much to the chagrin of his colleagues and the church folk. Compare De Villiers (2014).

6. Geysers published an article about this translation. Compare his remarks on the necessity of revising the Afrikaans translation of the Bible in Geysers (1949–1950:34–43, 119–135) and his article (1944–1945:187–190). Geysers' academic excellence is illustrated by his insight, unusual for that time, that the *Textus Receptus* represented an inferior version, which is one reason why a revision of the Afrikaans translation was needed. Elsewhere Geysers (1953f:33–34) noted with appreciation that the University of Pretoria became Afrikaans.

publication, now almost completely forgotten, Geysers wrote an introduction (1952:xiii-xx) that reveals a number of important aspects of his life and work.

Wisdom

Geysers' introduction to the *Imitatio* reveals his erudition and expertise on the complexities of its form, style, history, composition and authorship.⁷ His analysis shows how he appreciated not only the book's aesthetical qualities, but also its spiritual contents. He understood that the book was intended to inspire its readers to seek wisdom in times of crisis and to guide them to a deeper spiritual wisdom. Geysers investigates the historical context in which the book was written. He describes with insight how Thomas was part of the *Devotio Moderna*, a 14th-century movement in the lowlands that sought to reform the church in a time of spiritual decay, empty religiosity and endemic corruption.⁸ In this dire situation Thomas reflected on the need for spiritual transformation and regeneration. Thomas' carefully designed book was, therefore, not about empty knowledge, but about an existential reality that threatened the well-being of the community. It was about wisdom that could counter this situation at that time and deepen the community's relationship with God. The book is, therefore, in itself a daring undertaking; Thomas was criticising the spiritual leaders in his community who had great power by unmasking the corruption in the church.

Geysers' translation of the *Imitatio* was in itself also daring. This becomes clear especially when one analyses the translation within the difficult and dangerous political context in which it was undertaken. Geysers translated the *Imitatio* in a time and context that opposition to the political developments in the country was not tolerated. Dissenters were ostracised, vilified and branded as enemies of the people. The political authorities did not take criticism kindly. This is even more so the case with church leaders who had great influence in social matters and relationships. In Geysers' situation, the state and church worked together in a symbiotic relationship to protect a political hegemony that was still young and frail. When the Roman Catholic Church with which Afrikaans churches had had good relationships for many decades criticised the actions and decisions of the apartheid rulers, Afrikaans churches turned against them with vehemence. A new, unhappy situation developed in which the relationship broke down. Old enmities were resuscitated. The opponents were attacked for being heretical, although the real reason was that their criticism was against the political system. In these times the infamous notion of the 'Roomse gevaar' (Roman threat) was developed to stir up emotions against the Roman Catholic Church as a spiritual

7. He spends another two pages (1952:xvi–xviii) on discussing Thomas' dubious authorship of the *Imitatio*. He regards Thomas as the author since he found that there was no decisive evidence to the contrary.

8. He wrote, (1952:xiv), '...die vervlakking van die godsdiens ... het geleidelik tot geestelike armoede en die veruiterliking van die vroomheid'. He strikingly quotes *Imitatio* 3.43.2: 'To some I speak what is plain to all; to others, what is for them alone. To some I make myself known sweetly in symbol and metaphor; to others, I reveal my mysteries in striking clarity'.

danger to the Christian faith.⁹ This went so far that the reformed scholar, B.J. de Klerk, wrote a book in 1952 with the title 'Die Roomse Gevaar'. This book, ironically, was published by HAUM, the same publishers of Geysers' *Imitatio*. This indicates how close Geysers was to the fire.

Geysers translated the *Imitatio* in this context. The criticism was soon to follow. The reformed ('Gereformeerde') theologian, Duvenhage (1954:28), later on an influential academic in the Reformed ('Gereformeerde') Church, took over the infamous notion of the 'Roomse gevaar' to attack the *Imitatio* as containing enough 'Roman yeast' to lead 'Calvinist people' astray.¹⁰ He explicitly referred in a footnote Geysers' translation of the *Imitatio*.¹¹ Readers of the book would not miss the subtle stab at Geysers.

This was the highly politicised context in which Geysers translated the *Imitatio*. The mere fact that he made this first translation of a world classic into Afrikaans is already impressive. But that he did so in this context illuminates Geysers' fearlessness, creative mind and especially his spirituality. He was, as his introduction reveals, well aware of the negative sentiments about the *Imitatio*. It is his defence of the *Imitatio* against the pettiness of his colleagues that is so impressive. Unperturbed by their exclusivist prejudices, he motivated his translation by describing the *Imitatio* as part of the common tradition of the whole Christian church before the major split between the various confessional traditions in the 15th century. For Geysers the book was an heirloom of the profound heritage of the universal church. He had a vision of the larger, inclusive nature of his traditions which bring people together. For him his Christian traditions transcend borders between groups and reveal the common bond between them.

There is another important aspect of this translation that deserves more attention. Geysers was keenly aware of the daring nature of Thomas' decision to write the *Imitatio*. He investigates the nature of the group within which the book originated. He spells out the serious challenges and consequences of their quest for a transformative faith and a struggle against superficiality. Stressing that the *Devotio Moderna* was a reform movement, he explains how Geert Grote, the founder of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, paid a high price for his reform when ecclesiastical authorities ostracised and persecuted him.

Geysers' comments indicate how he resonated with this situation. He sympathises with the important moment when the well-being of the church requires reformation and he asks the fearless leaders not to be intimidated by stereotyped,

9. How political this notion really is, is shown by two other similar notions that were used in those days. One was the 'swart gevaar' (the black threat), referring to other groups in society, and the 'rooi gevaar' (red threat), referring to communism.

10. Die vraag is of hierdie sogenaamde 'Gulden Boeske' nie genoeg Roomse suurdeeg in hom dra om 'n nadelige uitwerking te hê op 'n Calvinistiese bevolking nie.

11. Compare also Kearney (2009) for the political reasons behind the vilification of the Roman Catholic Church. He discusses the unfortunate break in the relationship between South African Protestants and Roman Catholics as to a large extent the result of the anti-apartheid activism of the Roman Catholic Church in 1952.

authoritarian positions.¹² He found himself at home with literature that unmasked corrupt forms of religion and brought the church to a renewed understanding of its identity. But his comments also reveal his full awareness of the consequences of challenging powerful church structures. If the translation of the *Imitatio* in 1952 was not an indication of Geysers' rejection of the underlying exclusivist ideology of apartheid, it certainly contains the basic tenets of his theology that would later make him a fearless opponent of an evil, unjust system.

Geysers' spiritual approach is especially evident also in his reading of the *Imitatio* as a book of wisdom that transforms and inspires the spiritual journey. He shows no sign of sharing the Protestant misunderstanding that the book reflects a moralistic arrogance because it claims one can 'imitate' Christ.¹³ He regards (1952:xiii) it as an accessible text book on the 'most important and most elevated lesson and discipline, namely the Christian art of living'.¹⁴ This is a key phrase in his Introduction to the translation, representing an apt description of the nature of the *Imitatio*. He writes about the edification, consolation and guidance offered in it ('stigting, troos en leiding') to people from different levels of society - the simple or educated, poor or wealthy.¹⁵ His reference to the 'art of Christian living' offers a special insight in the nature of spirituality. It is the language he used when he spoke of Neethling's appreciation of art in his church architecture that promoted the mystical nature of the liturgy. These mystical remarks reflect the aesthetical nature of Thomas' book.

The term 'art of living' indicates the desire of spirituality to seek true life, filled with the beauty of an integrated existence. Mysticism, as an integrated part of spirituality, is about the ultimate and integrative meaning of life before God; it is about the yearning for a relationship with God and with others that brings beauty into creation and heals divisions and enmities between people. The aesthetical connotation in 'the art of living' rightfully points towards mysticism's beauty, goodness and joy. It emphasises the creative nature of spirituality, expressing the unique way in which pilgrims, individually and as groups, express the beauty of the divine presence in their lives. In those critical moments when faith is under threat, the spiritual journey will require wisdom from the pilgrims to challenge evil and to earnestly seek healing

12. How inclusive is to be seen in the very first paragraph of his introduction (1952:xiii): He insisted that the classical nature of the book is evident from the fact that it was read with appreciation and for own benefit by Protestants, Roman-Catholics and, significantly, 'believers and non-believers'. It could hardly be different, he adds, because the *De Imitatione Christi* is one of the finest, if not the finest heirlooms of medieval Christianity. Geysers' irenic outreach is illustrated in several ways. He (1947/1948a:86-95), for example, contrasted synagogues with the universal nature of early Christian households and stressed the importance of the ecumenical movement (already in 1951b:9). He also lauded the establishment of the World Council of Churches (1953a:5) after a visit to Europe in 1952.

13. Aalders (1969:192) notes such apprehension when he refers to the accusation that mysticism represents 'zelfwerkzaamheid' and promoted 'zelfrechtvaardiging'.

14. Geysers (1952:xiii) describes it as: "n leerboek in die vernaamste en mees verheewe leerrigting, die Christelike lewenskuns". Insightfully, Geysers also stresses that the *Imitatio* is not a learned (geleerde) book, thereby recognising its lay spirituality (Waaiajan 2002).

15. Geysers (1952:xiii), 'Dis nie 'n "geleerde" boek nie, wel egter 'n boek van lering, verstaanbaar en genietbaar vir eenvoudiges en ontwikkeldes, armes en rykes'.

and restoration that they experience in God. The *Imitatio* is not a self-help text about moralism or arrogance, but about a transformative life before God. This now needs careful reflection in dialogue with seminal insights about the *Imitatio* as a mystical book in recent research.¹⁶

The aesthetical quality of the *Imitatio Christi*

The *Imitatio Christi* has resonated with many readers over a long period of time to such an extent that it is now regarded as a spiritual classic. Its fame is reflected in the oft repeated statement that it is the most read book after the Bible. There are several reasons for its fame, some of which have been suggested in the previous discussion. One of the important reasons is its aesthetical beauty with which readers resonated so strongly.

The *Imitatio* is a singular example of the wisdom that determined the educational ideals and practices of the *Devotio Moderna*. This movement sought to bring education to those who could not afford it. This education was, in the classical sense of the word, about seeking a transformative wisdom and was developed in conscious opposition to the educational ideals in scholastic circles that excelled in clever speculation. Caldecott (2009:12) noted the educational ideal of classics which rested on major authors like Boethius, Augustine, Plato, Socrates and Pythagoras and that was focused on instilling a wisdom that recognised the beauty of creation and celebrated form, interiority, relationship, purpose, harmony, majesty, order and loveliness (Caldecott 2009:16–17). Through this wisdom beauty was praised, goodness was served and truth joyfully contemplated. This was also important to Thomas, as is clear from the *Imitatio*. Though interested in knowledge and insisting on proper understanding, he offers much more to his readers. He writes about wisdom, but then in an aesthetically pleasing manner. What he is writing is as pleasing as how he is writing it. This is a key reason why his readers resonated so strongly with his book.

The aesthetical character of the *Imitatio* deserves more attention. Geysers' introduction to the *Imitatio* is one of the few texts that discuss its aesthetical aspects. Geysers was himself a product of a classical training. With his advanced knowledge of the classics,¹⁷ he could recognise the *Imitatio's* well-designed composition and language.¹⁸ He points out, for example, how the open, flexible language structure of Latin enabled Thomas á Kempis to compose his text rhythmically in metrum (as is evident in his use of a trochee

16. Compare e.g. Waaijman (2006) and Van Dijk and Waaijman (2008).

17. He majored in Greek and Latin (with distinction) and obtained a Master's degree in classics (1943; cf. Engelbrecht 1988:40). This training characterised Protestant theological education in languages that preceded and was required for theological studies until recently. His interest in the arts is also obvious from Geysers (1951a, 1951b).

18. His sensitivity for language is evident from his translation approach and technique (1952:xvii-xix) and the ease with which he takes over (1952:xviii) technical jargon and represents them in Afrikaans as 'metrum', 'taktiele' and 'trogee'.

[~] and dactyl [-~]) to arrange its form and parts.¹⁹ This flowing, attractive language played a powerful role in communicating his message.

Recent research confirms Geysers' insights. It is noted how the aesthetical quality of the *Imitatio* is enhanced by stylistic features and devices such as alliteration, rhyme, anaphora, parallelisms and ring composition. Thomas' use of style is further matched by the careful planning of the book's chapters and contents in a harmonious structure.²⁰ He was so meticulous in developing its rhythmic diction that he even pointed out the breaks between phrases and sections.²¹ Aesthetical form was so decisive that he did not hesitate to force grammar to present the text in an aesthetically pleasing manner. This aesthetical precision helps explain, as Hofman (2003:30) points out, why Thomas wrote the *Imitatio* over a period of 20 years.

The mystical nature of this aesthetical approach is illuminated in a decisive manner by the function of the *Imitatio*. In recent research it has been pointed out that its literary techniques were aimed at promoting a meditative reading (Becker 2002:224; Hofman 2003:30–42).²² Thomas wrote his text to be read, recited slowly and even memorised in the sense of *lectio divina*. This was important because of two reasons that were clearly mystical in nature: His book served as a mystagogical instrument for his readers' spiritual journey and to inspire them to a prayerful and contemplative life. They should, therefore, be motivated to read it like Scripture, with careful attention (*lectio*), precise understanding (*meditatio*), with prayerful involvement (*oratio*) and with an openness for the divine intervention and visitation (*contemplatio*). The aesthetic attributes of the *Imitatio* were not merely an aid, it was in itself meaningful. Müller (cited in Otten & Pollmann 2007:6) notes how the 'poetic mode allowed for improved mnemotechnic effects, facilitated the incorporation of diverse learning material, allowed for new ways of presenting biblical stories and finding new meanings in them'.

19. The late medieval Latin text of the *Imitatio*, he observes (1952:xviii), differs from quantitative meter (*kwantiteite*) of classical Latin and is more like Germanic poetry that is shaped according to accent. Geysers perceptively notes inconsistencies in the rhythm. He concludes that Thomas often writes rhythmic prose rather than rhythm according to the usual metrum.

20. Hofman (2003), for example, shows how Thomas designed the last five chapters of book 1 (21–25) to work towards a climax. Chapter 21 discusses the *compunctio cordis* or the compunction of the heart, with a negative view on earthly life. In the following chapter he contrasts those who are stuck in the earthly life with others who could distance themselves from it. Chapter 23 discusses the uncertainties of the future which necessitates the strive for perfection. In chapter 24 punishment in hell is said to wait on those who do not do so, whilst the triumph of those who do is described as well. Chapter 25 offers a positive conclusion to the first book.

21. Hofman (2003), for example, points out how Thomas inserts a paragraph sign at 1.24.5 to indicate a new section and to emphasise a new thought.

22. Compare also Van Dijk (2008:40) who argues that the book shares the genre of a *raparium* (a collection of wisdom traditions and sayings). Hofman disagrees with this hypothesis. He also writes that the use of anaphora as figure of style that facilitates memorising shows that Thomas intended that these passages should be used for meditation ('Het doelbewuste gebruik van de stijfgevoerde anafora, die memorisatie vergemakkelijkt, in deze beide secties en het in de vierde sectie redelijk consequent volgehouden binnenrijm wijzen erop dat Thomas deze beide passages als meditatief bedoeld kan hebben'). And, also, that the formulation and composition of both sections reflect careful planning ('Het moge duidelijk zijn dat over de formulering en opbouw van beide secties zorgvuldig is nagedacht'). Also Becker (2003:222) referred to ancient and medieval mnemonic theory to explain the nature of the *Imitatio* as a book designed to be memorised. He notes how Thomas used 'a set of special signs to indicate the length of pauses between phrases and to the extensive use of rhymed short phrases to aid memorising. Some knew the book as *Musica Ecclesiastica*, with parts that remind of fugal composition as taught in musical academies. This would include inversion and augmentation. Also relevant may be the use of scripture to stimulate the desire for God' (223).

This has other ramifications. The mystagogical function of the *Imitatio* underlines the essential place of aesthetics in the experience of the divine. Aesthetics can powerfully break open the closed human existence to a waiting openness for the divine mystery. It creates space for the gracious self-revelation of God so that readers may understand their unique calling (Waaajman 2002:858).

Thomas wanted to avoid excessive, ornate language that strove to impress others – a characteristic of scholastic theology in his times. He often rejected idle talk and stressed that one can talk intelligently about God without having a transformative relationship with God. He uses mystical language to motivate this position. To know the whole Bible and philosophical teachings means little without the love of God and grace, which he insists in the very first lines of the book (1.1.10). Echoing Paul, he observes, rhetorically in 1.2.4, how empty and useless it is to know all that there is to know, without being in love (in caritate). What use is there to argue profoundly about the Trinity, he asks in 1.2, if one lacks humility (humilitate)? Consequently, the *Imitatio* is not about objectively knowing God, about proving the resurrection of Christ, about speculative study that leaves us, in the words of Maurice Blondel (1870), ‘with nothing but a phantom and an idol in our hands’. His book was truly about the art of living in more than one way; he wanted to share with his readers in an aesthetical manner spiritual friendship that would inspire and bring them to live meaningfully. Most importantly it was the art of living in love.

Thomas’ mystagogical aim is evident also in the arrangement of the four different sections of the *Imitatio*. Other than that is often thought, and of special importance, is that the book does not end with the Eucharist as is often thought (which is really part 3), but with the book of inner comfort and consolation with its mystical dialogue between God and the pilgrim about the love relationship between God and the pilgrim. Thomas writes his text in order to guide his readers towards such a dialogue with God.

In Blondel’s words, then, Thomas writes his book in a spirit that is about experiencing God with a ‘freshness of heart and the unrest of love’.²³ The mystical nature is prepared from the beginning of the book where he insisted that one should read Scripture and its words about Christ with the spirit of Christ. The loving, listening disposition of the reader is, however, not enough. A virtuous life (*virtuosa vita*) is decisive. The virtuous life, the art of living, is found in the presence of the divine love. It is about being *coram Deo*. The first prayer in the *Imitatio* (1.3.10-12) reads, ‘O God, who are the Truth, make me one with you in everlasting love. I am often worn out by all that I read and hear. You are all that I wish for and desire. Let all teachers hold their peace; let all creation be silent before You. You alone speak to me’. This is what Geysler recognised when he translated the *Imitatio* and wrote his introduction.

23. Quoted in <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/an-introduction-to-hans-urs-von-balthasar.html>

Finally, it is helpful to note also the valuable insights of the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga in the composition, reading and writing in the time of Thomas.²⁴ He refers (1919) to philology as the mother of all interpretive endeavours. One finds in reading and writing a collective ritual that channelled human passion into beautiful forms. Speaking of ‘play’ in the wide sense of the word, he explained how it was expressed with the aid of the noblest qualities that human beings can perceive and express in objects: rhythm and harmony that coincide with proportion and balance. These aesthetic qualities were the meaning of life, the significance of culture and the purpose of art (Otterspeer 2010:122–124). Play was connected:

with ritual, always being a sacred act; its relationship to, or correlation with, the divine is always fundamentally present; as soon as play serves to express that relationship, it becomes a form of veneration, ritual, liturgy; it may even become ‘mysterium’. And this sacred act created style, ‘that indefinable, pure and sublime quality of style that art and society sometimes crave in vain. Rhythm, repetition, cadence, refrain, closed forms, chords and harmony, all attributes of play, they are likewise constituents of style’. (Otterspeer 2010: 123–124)

These seminal thoughts illustrate the link between aesthetics and mysticism. Societies crave aesthetics. Where it is found, as in the *Imitatio*, it creates space for the deepest needs to be experienced and fulfilled. Thomas understood this when he carefully composed his text for meditation on the divine. Geysler recognised its power when he spent so much attention to the aesthetical qualities of the book.

Conclusion

This article investigated the remarkable interest of Albert Geysler in mysticism. It provided not only examples of his understanding of mysticism in Protestant worship, but it also drew attention to his translation of the *Imitatio* and his mystical understanding of that book.

Geysler knew well that texts provide much more than mere information. They create life, inspire, motivate and influence people, challenge evil, remove tyrants, destroy abusive authoritarianism and inspire people towards change. They can bring understanding in times of confusion, concern and desperation and, then, bring people to joy. Texts are about life, but also give life, especially when they have been designed in an aesthetically pleasing manner and represent the art of living.

Many authors desire to write such powerful texts. The classics in the history of humanity survive their times because they are powerful texts that excel in their aesthetical quality. The *Imitatio* is such a text. It continues to be read because of its wisdom and the beauty with which it is communicated. Geysler understood this well when he decided that his own community also not only deserved to be introduced to its

24. Compare his *Homo Ludens* (1938). He analysed play as an aesthetic phenomenon not only in sports and games, but also ‘unexpectedly, in religious practices, judicial proceedings, war, philosophy, poetry, and other “serious” activities within the social and political forum’ (Slethouh 1993:67).

wisdom, but also need to be made attentive to the unique aesthetic quality of the *Imitatio*. He wanted his readers to see how the beauty of its wisdom is to be found in what it said *and* how this was said.

Geysers may not have been an expert on mysticism. The extensive research on Thomas' mysticism is of a later date and time. But he had an intuition for the mystical quality of Thomas' work. His translation, remarkable for its time and quality, reveals a neglected face of theology and the church which was in that time a wretched political dispensation that separated groups and tore a country apart. He understood that there was a greater mystical unity between these groups that had to do with the greater wisdom that all shared a common humanity before the creator of life. He fought against those who closed their eyes for this. What he wrote about Neethling and Thomas reveals the inner disposition of a lover of beauty and fighter against those who destroy it.

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