

The use of the Bible in theology: Theology as a 'lived experience' of God

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If the theme of this special edition can be reformulated as a question (what was and is the current use of the Bible in theology?), it would be challenging and very difficult to answer the question because of a diverse usage of the Bible throughout history and today, stretching in a continuum of both vertical and horizontal probabilities: vertically, theism vs. atheism and horizontally, worldliness vs. holiness. The objective of this essay is to argue for the incorporation of the 'spiritualities' of divine immanence and divine transcendence in the composition of theologies, facilitated by a comprehensive and multidimensional reading of the Bible and the acknowledgement of contributions from the sciences. In this research, the reasoning will address the following relevant aspects: (1) taking into account the epistemology of the 'Bible' and 'Theology'; (2) the consideration of postmodernity, post-secularism and spirituality and (3) the composition of neo-theologies.

Contribution: This article pleads that biblical analyses should play a more comprehensive and determinative role in the composition and formulation of theology, pointing more explicitly to the transcendence and immanence of God. The reading of such theologies then must create different lived experiences of the immanence and transcendence of God.

Keywords: theism; atheism; worldliness; holiness; postmodernity; neo-theologies; bible; theology.

Introduction

What does the Bible say? This is undoubtedly not an easy question to be answered straightforwardly. The answer will always be influenced by another question, *what is the Bible?*¹ In theological doctrine, a person's perception of the origin and nature of the Bible play a fundamental role. To answer the question, *what is the Bible?* we are forced to take recourse in the Bible itself. Then in this recourse, we have to reiterate the opening question, namely *what does the Bible say?* This double questioning indubitably has a progressive effect towards a better comprehension of both what the Bible is and what the Bible articulates.

As a supplement to these questions, it can be conceded that the Bible is the book that probably evokes the most diverse responses ever. Over centuries politicians, Christian counsellors, evangelists, church leaders, theologians and Christian denominations, Judaism (OT) and Islam (OT) appealed to its fundamental authority. Then we also find the variety of translations and interpretations of the Bible and the many conflicting claims made on its behalf. A question often raised is: 'is it possible that biblical authority can be cited for widely divergent verifications?' (Johnson 2002:1). The variety of Bible translations and interpretations resulted in divergent theologies: Orthodox, Catholic, Reformed, Pentecostal, Lutheran, etc. Added to these assumptions the question, 'how can we speak about a being who is beyond any method of verification?' a being nobody has ever seen (Jn 1:18; 1 Jn 4:12).² Related to all this is the struggle to make sense of the Bible as a document that was written over a time interval of some centuries, a few millennia ago. Vast differences exist between the Semitic and Hellenistic societies and cultures in which the Bible was written, in comparison with the postmodern Western technologically based world today (Johnson 2002:2).

1.The use of Bible in this article refers to the 66-books (39 OT and 27 NT) as they occur in the Protestant Bible. This is because of my reformed church tradition as the space where memory is cultivated in a way that generates meaning and provides norms, a space into which the members of a group may (Schnelle 2009:48) repeatedly enter to receive assurance, answers and orientation (Schnelle 2009:49).

2.The Bible is not congruent with itself on this point. Jacob claimed, for example, in Genesis 32:30 that he saw God face to face. According to the wholistic picture of God from the Bible, we can say that a finite being will never see or even comprehend an infinite being.

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

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Irrespective of these conundrums, the opinion of most of the Christians today is that reading the Bible brings them closer to God. Many also confess that the Bible helps them to grow spiritually and direct their lives. For them, the Bible is not only written by human authors, it can also be regarded as the 'Word of God'. This authority is claimed by them because of the following texts: Mark 7:13; Matthews 5:18; Luke 24:44; John 20:22; 1 Corinthians 2:13-14; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21; 3:15-16 (also cf. Ps 119). For them, these texts constitute their testimony that the Bible is 'the Word of God' (Johnson 2002:2). Only God can reveal God, 'just as a person can only become known when that person decides to reveal his or her inner feelings, spirit, will, or intention to another' (Oden 2001:4).

According to Johnson (2002:2), the interpretation of these books assumes one basic principle: *all the books in the Bible must have had meaning for their first readers*. The identification and respectful treatment of the characteristics and historical context, intentions, concerns, thought complexes of each literary genre and theological rhetoric of each author can still make it possible to hear the biblical writers afresh to make it even possible today for Christian believers to respond to the Bible content and message in an appropriate and responsible way (cf. Johnson 2002:3).

From a theological perspective, the objective of this article is to argue for practical incorporation of the 'spiritualities'³ of divine immanence⁴ and divine transcendence⁵ in the composition of theologies. Such an incorporation should be facilitated by a comprehensive and multidimensional reading of the Bible and the acknowledgement of the contribution of the sciences. In this research, the reasoning will address the following relevant aspects: taking into account the epistemology⁶ of the 'Bible' and 'Theology'; (2) the consideration of postmodernity, post-secularism and spirituality; and (3) the composition of neo-theologies.

Two phenomenological questions

What kind of document is the Bible?

Nürnberg's (2016:21) remark about the *human awareness of God* opens the door for perceiving the nature of the Bible. According to him, the:

[O]n possibility in which humanity can have an awareness of God is by a transcendent God having revealed Godself – an act of self-disclosure which becomes the immanent transmission of transcendental information.

A segment of this self-disclosure of God comes through his communication via the Bible. The Bible originated as a

3.'Spiritualities' refer to and is an explanation of 'lived experiences' (of the divine). See Schneiders 2002:133–142; Sheldrake 2000:21–42; Waaijman 2002.

4. In this article, 'immanence' refers to divine manifestation in the material world – in the lives of people. It refers to the presence and closeness of God. God then becomes accessible to people in various ways.

5. In this article, 'transcendence' is used in the sense of God's incomprehensible otherness. It refers to God's nature and power. God is wholly independent of anything in this universe, God is majestic beyond all known and unknown physical laws.

6. The Bible 'has plenty to say about the subjects, objects, nature, and scope of human knowledge'. <https://www.proginosko.com/2009/04/a-biblical-epistemology/>.

sacred scripture within the circles of two religious traditions. The Old Testament originated from the ancient Israelites (and Jews), and the New Testament originated from the early Christians. According to Paul, it is a kind of discourse under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (χαρισθέντα, 1 Cor 2:13, 14; θεόπνευστος, 2 Tim 3:16) to write down how the Israelites and later the Christians experienced the unseen God (Jn 1:18; 1 Jn 4:12, 21). It was written by many authors and compiled by many editors. Although written by humans in human languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek), for the majority of Christians it would be more reasonable to describe the 'greatest part of the Bible in terms of "indirect" divine authorship' (Vanhoozer 2010:192), even though it was written within a varied worldview.

It is evident from the Bible that it depicts instances of divine dialogue. This occurs, in particular, in the Old Testament and is in itself one of many modes of divine communication, sometimes directly and at other times indirectly. From the texts (both Hebrew and Greek), it is also apparent that divine communication occurs not merely in the content. Even the modes of biblical discourse can constitute divine communication⁷ – modes such as metaphors, symbols and the various literary genres in the Bible (cf. Vanhoozer 2010:193; also Wright 1977:450f.) Together they accommodate God's divine communicative action. God is 'not only a character in the plot but its implied author' (Vanhoozer 2010:194). In the Bible, many Christians see the Great Rhetorician at work (Vanhoozer 2010:194; also cf. Wright 1982:652).

On the one hand, the author of 2 Timothy 3:16 indicates how the nature of 'all Scripture' should be interpreted in his usage of the adjective, θεόπνευστος ['God-breathed']: 'All Scripture is given by inspiration (θεόπνευστος) of God and is profitable for ...'. When interpreted as an active mode of communication, it can imply that all Scripture has an inspiring effect, or when interpreted passively in meaning, it can suggest that all Scripture has its origin in God to be a product of the breath of God. In Greek, the suffix (τος) sometimes can suggest having a passive meaning (e.g. ἀγαπητός, 'loved [by God]', Rm 1:7). The adjective in 2 Timothy 3:16 seems to be passive in its meaning.⁸ If this notion is correct, then θεόπνευστος explains that God has breathed some 'understanding' into Scripture so that it is inherently inspired (cf. Lea & Griffin 1992:237).⁹ What the author of 2 Timothy seems to communicate is that the origin and distinctiveness of the Scriptures are from God himself. In asserting God's breathing of Scripture, the author of 2 Timothy acknowledged the fact without discussing the process of how it ensued. The affirmation of the breathing of Scripture leads to a discussion of its usefulness (cf. Lea & Griffin 1992:237). *On the other hand*, by using metaphoric and symbolic language, within their human idiom, and ancient

7. In the discipline of Christian spirituality, the perception exists that God can speak (reveal) to believers also through texts. See the work of Porter (2012, *Mapping metaphorical discourse*); Waaijman (2002:689–773); Iser (1978, *The act of reading*); Shantz and Werline (2012, Linking text and experience).

8. Lea and Griffin (1992:237) verify this choice in reference to the use of the passive in 2 Peter 1:21 to describe men 'carried along by the Holy Spirit' as they communicated God's word in Scripture.

9. Lea and Griffin (1992:237) uses the word 'character' of God which I replaced with 'understanding'. This will become clear later in the article.

worldview, the biblical writers talked about God within their socio-historical circumstances and experiences. They refer to how they experience God's presence, God's involvement, God's guidance, God's forgiveness, God's love, God's grace, God's protection and God's provision in it all. The human idiom enabled humans to talk about God, to talk with God and to experience this God.

Calvin asserts that scripture communicates God to humans via anthropomorphisms. According to Calvin (2006), 'such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like'. These forms communicate knowledge about God in accordance with the slight capacity of human comprehension (p. I, 13, 121). Therefore, God is using language to make Godself known.¹⁰ The Bible portrays God as a communicator. God then communicates with humans (Israel and followers of Christ)¹¹ through events and also repeatedly with words (Vanhoozer 2010:193).¹² God made use of literary forms in the Bible to communicate Godself adequately, yet not exhaustively, but to the comprehensibility of humans. God presents Godself in the biblical text. 'God appropriates human forms—language, literature, the humanity of Jesus—in order to disclose Himself [*Godself*] in dialogical interaction with His [*God's*] creatures, being fully Himself [*Godself*], wholly other' (Mladin 2011:224).

The Bible consists of a number of writings in a variety of genre that are the faith expressions of believing communities of both the writer and the community within which and for which the author was writing. This caused these writings to become the authoritative scripture of the Jewish (OT) and Christian (NT) communities, from antiquity, throughout history, until today. The members of these communities found in these writings an expression of their faith which unites them in their devotedness to God and to one another. The Bible guides them in their acceptance of it and in obeying the intention it contains.

How then should we approach the Bible practically and theologically today to offer a realistic solution? According to Heyns (1974:172), two kinds of truth occur in the Bible: central truth¹³ and peripheral truth.¹⁴ If both of these truths are treated equivalent to one another, then the revelation of Scripture is damaged.¹⁵ We are very much aware that the Bible writers looked at their world and lived in their world without the facilities of postmodern technology such as: microscopes, stascopes, telescopes, electricity, computers, cell phones, tablets, etc. Their perceptivity was independent

10. Here, we can distinguish between God's 'general' (creation and history) and 'specific' (Bible and Christ) modes of revelation.

11. From the perspective of Christianity.

12. See God's dialogue with Abraham, Moses, Samuel, the prophets and the Logos.

13. According to Heyns (1974:170), 'central' refers to the centre of convergence. This is the focus point of attention. It is the key that unlocks every text in Scripture. A central truth is an unchangeable truth, emanating from the Bible as a life core.

14. For Heyns (1974:170), each truth is predominantly culturally connected and signifies the ancient worldly context. These truths cannot be abandoned, for the principles rooted in these truths are even today relevant to believers.

15. *Everything* in the Bible is in some way or the other attached to the central truth. This then implies that *everything* in the Bible is significant. 'Central' truths then accentuate 'the organic character of Scripture' (Heyns 1974:172).

of a systematic and well-ordered postmodern understanding of physics, mechanical science and the human sciences. The Bible writers experienced a reality which they formulate in the idiom of immanence and transcendence. Hence, God's revelation did not fully appear to humans in timeless or eternal truths. These truths were not free-standing doctrines (Heyns 1974:173). 'This implies that central truths should be respected while peripheral truths be reconsidered and reinterpreted according the principles embedded in these truths' (Van der Merwe 2015a:176). The task of theology is to facilitate such an endeavour. This, then, leads to the question, what theology as an intellectual enterprise entails. Such an approach should be based on both faith and 'lived experiences' (Nürnbergger 2016:n.p.).

Understanding the nature of theology

If we accept that Christian theology is Christian God-talk, then the diverse ways of God-talk illustrate the pluralism that intrinsically arises when theology is defined (cf. Jones 2004:xii). It must be realised that 'the terrain of God's relationship with the world looks different when seen from different perspectives, and that consequently different maps will be appropriate for different people in different situations' (Jones 2004:xvi). This then is the result of how the Bible has been read, interpreted, understood, practised and been used from various perspectives in various contexts for various purposes.

Different ways of defining theology

Owing to the fact that there are so many different definitions to *define theology*, I will only refer to the definitions of Vanhoozer (2010), Bird (2013) and the systematic theologian Klaus Nürnbergger (2016).¹⁶ The following definitions will guide us about understanding the nature of Christian theology.

For Kevin Vanhoozer (2010):

Theology is a species of biblical thinking and reasoning. 'Thinking' indicates that mental faculty whereby we do not merely perceive things or react to them by instinct but make judgements about them; 'reasoning' indicates those mental procedures whereby we give grounds for the judgements we make. Judgements are cognitive acts that concern a thing's nature (what is it? what is it like?), as well as the distinctions and relations that render it the same or different from other things. We express in language the judgements we make in thought each time we construct meaningful sentences composed of subjects and predicates. Biblical reasoning is a matter of forming the same judgements about God (e.g. doctrines) in terms of present-day conceptualities as those expressed in Scripture in terms of conceptualities that may no longer be extant. (p. 188)

Michael Bird (2013)¹⁷ interprets theology as:

the study of God. It comes from the word *theos*, which is Greek for 'God', and from *logos*, which is Greek for 'word'. It is the

16. Also see Augustine (*Civ.* 8.1), Ladd ([1974]1993:21), Oden (2001:5) and Culver (2005:2). On theology as drama, see Vanhoozer (2005).

17. Also see Bird (2013:65) for referring to other definitions of theology: Compact Macquarie Dictionary, Ryrie (1986:9), McGrath (2001:137), Barth ([1932]2004:1, 11) and Pelikan (1971:1).

attempt to say something about God and God's relationship to the world. It is thinking about faith from faith. In a sense, theology is very much akin to the study of philosophy, worldview, religion, ethics or intellectual history; it is a descriptive survey of ideas and the impact of those ideas. [It] is not the study of ideas about God; it is the study of the living God. Theology is speaking about God whilst in the very presence of God. (pp. 66–68)

Klaus Nürnberg (2016) defines:

[T]heology as the disciplined reflection of believers on what they believe. To be more precise, it is a reflection on what Christians should believe and what they should not believe in responsibility before the God in whom they put their trust. It is faith analysing its own assumptions and certainties before God. ... theology is faith in search of understanding, *fides quaerens intellectum* (quoted from Anselm of Canterbury). (Google books)

According to the above discussion and *the above definitions* on theology, we can conclude that:

- Theology is the studying of the Bible and everything that relate to God. It attempts to communicate something about God and the relationship of God to the world.
- Theology endeavours to discover and understand the faith expressed and embodied in the biblical writings.
- Theology describes the dynamic interaction between God and the children of God. To do theology implies describing 'the God who acts, to be acted upon, and to be an actor in the divine drama of God's plan'. (Bird 2013:68)

A person's view and understanding of hermeneutics definitely determine the theological starting point and theological perception of that person.

Different ways of doing theology

This essay refers briefly to only three forms of theology as they occur as separate disciplines in most tertiary seminary institutions.¹⁸ Systematic theology, practical theology and biblical theology. A fourth and essential theology in some academic circles, public theology, will also briefly be referred to.¹⁹ The objectives of these theologies are different, whilst in the case of 'Church' related theology, the doctrines of the different churches, because of different interpretations and understandings of the bible, affect their differences. This approach is necessary to create an environment for perceiving the proposals in the final section of this research.²⁰

Systematic theology

Systematic theology encompasses the systematic organisation of biblical doctrines under particular themes. It is sometimes referred to as *dogmatics*, indicating that it is the well-ordered arrangement of the teachings of a specific comprehension of

18. Seen from a South African perspective.

19. Then there are also the variety of the Oxford Handbooks of Evangelical theology, Philosophical theology, Sacramental theology, Systematic theology, Catholic theology, Theological ethics and Theology and modern European thoughts. And it still goes on.

20. Composing neo-theologies.

Christianity. It attempts to state what the Christian faith as a complete system of doctrine comprises with regard to all aspects of Christianity. What do Christians believe about God, Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, eschatology and more? Systematic theology attempts to respond to the question, 'What is the Christian faith?' (Goldsworthy 1991:30; cf. Pannenberg ([1991]2004) for a thorough and comprehensive discussion on the nature of systematic theology). According to Nürnberg (2016:google books), also a systematic theologian, theology is not the study of God, because God is transcendent. For him humans cannot study God as such. They can only study the message that reconstitutes the relationship between God and humans. If God then has made Godself known to humans, they can then ask how it happened within the realm accessible to them and what is it that God has made known to them.

Practical theology

According to dictionaries, the root of the word 'practical' is *praxis*, action. Practical theology, then, entails theology of action. It might be described as the investigation of how the gospel is interpreted in action – 'visibly, institutionally, as well as verbally' (Deschner 1982:10). As a result of its focus upon 'living the gospel', it might well be that branch of theology which has most to do with the contemporary situation. It can be seen 'as the interpretation of the Christian message in action' (Deschner 1982:10). It involves the practical application of the gospel in every aspect of the Christian life. The centre part of practical theology comprises a theology of ministry and embraces its procedures, gifts, operational function and influence. It must constitute a biblical perception of being human, in general, and of Christian existence, in particular (Goldsworthy 1991:31). It also reflects on all present-day church practices and activities to determine their success according to their criteria derived from biblical and theological doctrines (Grimes 1977:38).

Biblical theology

The objective of this discipline is 'to understand the various voices within the whole Christian Bible, New and Old Testament alike, as a witness to the one Lord Jesus Christ' (Childs 1993:85). In other words, biblical theology focusses on the distinctive voices in Scripture that point to the divine reality in their diverse modes. The intention is to do justice to the witnesses of both the Old and New Testaments. Both Testaments witness to the one Lord in distinctive ways from different perspectives. This occurs at 'different times, to different people, and yet both are understood and rightly heard in the light of the living Lord himself, the perfect reflection of the glory of God' (Heb 1:3; Childs 1993:85, 721). Biblical Theology communicates both descriptively and constructively its subject matter and consequently 'functions as a bridging discipline to dogmatic theology' (Childs 1993:721).

The venture of Biblical Theology is to generate, through belief, perception of the divine reality. The divine imperatives are not chained in the past. It continues to confront

the contemporary believer as truth. Biblical theological contemplation is certainly not timeless speculation about the nature of living a good life. Contrarily, it concerns the struggle of life and death of the physical historical Christian communities. Their objective was that they attempted, in their own particular historical contexts, to live faithful to the imperatives of the gospel. These early Christians regarded this as the primary task as part of their mission to the world (Childs 1993:86). Many different approaches occur in Scripture.

Public theology

Dewey (1934:83), nearly a century ago, already commented that certain religious impulses increasingly developed outside the vocabularies and precincts of organised religion. Then in 1981, Tracy (1981:16) called on theologians to 'join other humanists in the demand for a more comprehensive understanding of rationality'. For him, public theology was 'the recognition of the historicity and contextual dimensions of public forms of reason'. According to De Vries and Sullivan (2006:9), religion continues to escape pre-established contexts and concepts in such a way that 'the inspiration, motivation and effectuation, of political theologies no longer lie within the cultural and institutional, ecclesial or communal heritage of the major religions'.

Two years later, Van Aarde (2008:1213) comments more specific and practically on public theology in his description on the nature of public theology. He accommodates in theology both the 'professional academy and the public square'. He correctly contextualises spirituality not to be earmarked only for 'people longing for God within the context of today's mass consumerist populist culture'. Religion and spirituality intersect. '*Public theology does to an extent overlap with ecclesia and contextual theology*' [*my italics*].

Cady (2014:294), some years later, strongly associated public theology with issues and values of a person's communal life and no more restrained to the personal and private domain of a person's individual life. He regards public theology as a corrective of the privatisation of the Christian life.²¹ For him (Cady 2014:295), the aim of public theology is not merely the safeguarding of wider social influence, but rather the adoption of forms of reasoning that were compelling to those outside the boundaries of the traditional Christianity. This aim causes a reaction from two perspectives simultaneously: on *one side*, it means resistance from both confessional and authoritarian practices of reasoning. On the *other side*, it innovatively challenged the contracted paradigm of reasoning, dominating the academy.

Supporters of public theology reasoned that for the extension of theology to a wider audience, it was imperative to move 'beyond the technical jargon that rendered it' (Cady 2014:295). This facilitated the expansion of it to a wealth of genres that started to articulate theology (Cady 2014:295). According to Cady (2014), should public theology, which

21. If Cady is understood correctly, then his reasoning referred to here is incorrect with regard to the Christian life. How will he explain the mission activities of the church?

desires 'a more public role, should take up the challenge of exposing the ideological work of a bipolar religion-secular template' (p. 310). It should also analytically be involved with the religious tides operating beyond its religious boundaries.

Conclusion (Contextual influence / Public theology)

For many centuries, Christianity was influenced by different 'contexts' (social, religious, church, world, etc.) and 'world cultures' (pre-modernism, modernism and postmodernism)²² that determined the outcomes of the 'composition of theologies'.

This certainly has a function in the composition of (Christian) theologies. Strongly influenced by postmodernity, with its resistance to both totalitarian and confessional forms of Christian reasoning, as well as vetoing the Bible as a fundamental source to be used in the dialogue, public theology should be cautious not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Each religion, as Christianity, has its own identity and confession, which certainly has to be respected, even in the public arena.

In this essay, Christian theology is regarded as a mode of understanding the Bible²³ to conceive God's design of salvation in its course of evolvment whilst experiencing God's immanence and transcendence in it. It additionally relates to God's communication with Christian believers in a variety of literary forms as it appears in the Bible (cf. Goldsworthy 1991:29). Pannenberg refers to Scotus who maintained that God is the object of theology. According to Scotus, all human theology is dependent on God's knowledge of Godself ([1991]2004:4; see also Schreiner 2008:23). Then Pannenberg ([1991]2004) takes it further, stating that:

[I]f God is the object of theology then it is evident from the majesty of this object that it can be known only if of itself it gives itself to be known. (p. 5)

We must bear in mind that each religion has its own peculiarities, doctrine and confession. A 'One World Religion' will never be constituted and realise. The monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) will never conform with any other religion. For Christianity, in Christ the transcendent God has become immanent. This doctrine distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. Therefore, any New Testament theology will have to respect and incorporate the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This message shall have to be adapted into the contemporary idiom to address the spiritual needs of postmodern people.

22. The reference to 'world cultures' has been used with the understanding that it featured, in particular, in the West with its influence unfolding worldwide.

23. This then implies that there is meaning in the biblical text. Therefore, it can be accepted that theology has to do with meaning, because theology concerns interpretation. It has an 'interpretive dimension'. Interpretation, again, has a theological dimension. Therefore, the title of the book of Kevin Vanhoozer, 'Is there a meaning in this text?', is a valid theological question. This implies that theology can be regarded as a 'text centered science'. Doctrines are the effects of the interpretation of the Bible over the two (to three) millennia of Church history (Vanhoozer 1998:29).

Considering postmodernity, post-secularism and spirituality

This section reflects on how the world cultures²⁴ (or philosophies) influenced theological perceptions. The current world culture – referred to as postmodernism – perceptibly contests theologies (cf. Geaves & Chryssides 2007:59). Beyers (2014:2) notes that ‘one way’ of perceiving reality is substituted by ‘heterogeneity, fragmentation and pluralism’ in postmodernism.²⁵ King (2009:202) declares that in effect ‘it [postmodernism] pursues a sceptical deconstruction of all systems of thought’; it queries all unyielding and permanent rationalisations, doubts the requirement of reason as the major *en route* to human knowledge. Postmodernism notifies that all theology is particular, circumstanced and time bound. It allows for no absolutes and no essence. Postmodern-oriented people are sceptical about any truth claim, of ‘getting it right’ (Vanhoozer 2003:11). Postmodern theologians caution that no ‘universal theological statements’ occur. Such statements are mere abstractions that can be regarded as both ‘oppressive and irrelevant’ to human beings and cannot be applied to all times and places. For postmodern theologians, any feasible and beneficial theology in postmodernity will be acknowledged to reflect and shape the beliefs and behaviour of today (cf. Epperly 2011:1).

Originally the church measured postmodernism sceptically. It was regarded to threaten the church’s witness and the believer’s confession. Owing to the fact that postmodernism pioneered multiple ways to reasoning, it also releases innovative options for Christian theology (King 2009). It improves the awareness for spirituality and extends the opportunities for constructing ‘new perspectives, interpretations and meanings’ (King 2009:202).²⁶

Post-secularism originated from postmodernism. Opposite to postmodernism that discards traditional metaphysical thought (Adams 1997:n.p), post-secularism acknowledges the exploration of sacred texts. The consequence is the manifestation of a ‘post-secular philosophical tradition that refuses to reject spiritual texts, spiritual word views, and meaning-making as anti-philosophical’ (Davis 2010:73). Habermas (2008, 2010) and later Charles Taylor (2011) attempted to formulate post-secularism *philosophically*. For Hovorun (2013:423), post-secularism was originally understood as a *social* phenomenon. Additionally, *theologians* participated in the discourse. Their interest was to identify how believers could gain from it (Hovorun 2013:423). Hovorun (2013:423) goes so far to regard the name ‘post-secularism’ to be a successful for the new interest in religion. In religious circles, ‘some people mean that religion is returning to public life [*the revival of spirituality*]; some – the

excessive clericalism and clericalisation of societies; some – religious renaissance; some – the phenomenal success of Christian Charismatic movements’ (Hovorun 2013:424).

Traditional mythic forms and doctrinal expressions continue to lose rational and traditional power. To link theology closely to any form of established theology, it necessitates to become reactive to this increasing course (Cady 2014:305, 306). For Cady (2014:307), the relationship between *religion* and *secularism* needs rethinking and reconfiguration (Cady 2014:307). Dewey (1934:83) is of opinion that one of the following can happen when any change in theology takes place: it can either decline terribly in almost everything that justly has a religious value, according to traditional Christian theologies, or it can provide a chance for expanding theological qualities ‘on a new basis and with a new outlook’ (cf. Dewey 1934:83). Therefore, in resonance with Dewey’s statement, this article attempts to expand the use of the Bible in theology in the sphere ambit of spirituality, the existential ‘lived experiences’ of God’s immanence and transcendence in everyday life.

Institutional Christianity cannot remain untouched by the dialogue between post-secularism and theology in the public forum. The status quo cannot simply be maintained in this post-secular world. Therefore, Van Aarde (2009) reasons that:

[T]he logical consequence, however, would not necessarily be that religion must come to an end and be replaced by spirituality. By being religious, we have, in the words of Jacques Derrida, returned (‘religare’) to the roots of our (Christian) religio (Caputo, Hart & Sherwood 2005:33), and it has happened not in a metaphysical-theistic sense ‘out there’, in another sphere of time and space, but right here in our world (*saeculum*). (p. 6)

Although religion will not be substituted by spirituality, spirituality (‘lived experiences’) should play a more prominent role in the Christian religion!

In the existing postmodern era, Christian spirituality is experiencing a massive interest. This manifested in the huge quantity of both scientific and popular *publications*. An increasing composition of *academic programmes* on spirituality is introduced at tertiary institutions worldwide (Van der Merwe 2019:3).

Therefore, Christian spirituality should play a more prominent role to equip (Christian) believers to address and manage the spiritual needs of believers and also be incorporated in the composition of theologies. This will equip Christian believers with clarity on their enquiries for an improved well-being and their lived experiences of God in everyday live. These questions and lived experiences will, in particular, relate to their immanent and transcendent experiences of God. An encouraging effect about post-secularism is that it drives Christians to believe sensibly (Hovorun 2013:429).

As a result of the occurrence of numerous definitions of *Spirituality*, I deem it fit to define Spirituality as to be

24.As a result of the uncertainty of referencing (era, cultures, worldview and philosophies), I will refer to cultures. Actually, the context in which it is used as reference will determine the choice.

25.Also see Adams (1997), Kyser (2007), King (2009) and Beyers (2014) for more specific characteristics of postmodernism.

26.Preachers who preach from a postmodern point of view should be cautious not to underplay the truth and certainty of the word of God.

employed here. For the purpose of this essay, the definition posed by Schneiders is the best tailored. According to Schneiders (2000:254), spirituality can be defined as 'the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life, in terms not of isolation and self-absorption, but of self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives'. She then supplements her definition by referring that this particular *ultimate value* is determined by the person. In this context, it will be God.

In this essay, the application will fall on defining spirituality as a 'lived experience of God' to be resonated with a believer's transformation in a human-God relationship (cf. Waaijman 2002:312). This interpretation and application also resonate with Hanson's understanding of spirituality. He (2000:244) points out that spirituality as an object of study focusses not 'on the outward forms of religion or faith but on the lived reality'. This does not infer that spirituality can exist without any outward form. Outward forms are definitely important 'as means of inculcating and expressing the inward reality'.

About 20 years ago, Bernard (2000:229) already pointed out that there is a need to compose a systematic theology of the spiritual life as lived in the church where personal experience is crucially fundamental. For Bernard (2000):

[T]he indicative of revealed doctrine is the norm for the imperative of moral theology and the basis of spiritual experience. Therefore, all the methods proper to the human sciences can and should, *mutatis mutandis*, be applied to spiritual theology. This calls for interdisciplinary studies that can integrate the data of Revelation and theology with the scientific data from psychology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics and all the other sciences. (pp. 231, 235)

In conclusion, old fixed answers (messages), configurations of worship, church structures and conventional confines no longer address the believer's needs, well-being and relationship with God today. Postmodernism and post-secularism have prompted Christian theology with new challenges (cf. Vorster 2012:208). Taylor (2007:57–76) is correct that secularisation did not cause many people to turn their backs on the church.²⁷ Post-secular people are more attracted to demonstrated and experiential faith. For them, the traditional conduct of simply reading the Bible and listening to sermons on Sundays is not satisfying their spiritual needs anymore. Postmodern thinkers are more attracted to images and symbols. Even experiences and participation interest them. Many Christian still have high expectancies from the church – the anticipation of new and different things. This, consequently, culminates in one thing – a neo-comprehension²⁸ and application of the Bible, a neo-integration of Christian spirituality and a neo-theological composition.

27. Taylor (2007) also said that *nor have many become religious* (pp. 57–76). Distinguish between the Northern and Southern hemispheres. Where the Northern hemisphere became more secularised, the church is growing stronger in the Southern hemisphere.

28. 'Neo' is 'a combining form meaning "new," "recent," "revived," "modified," used in the formation of compound words: *neo-Darwinism; Neolithic; neoorthodoxy; neophyte*' (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/neo>).

Composing neo-theologies (Faith expression / Integration of historic-exegetical reasoning / Integration of early-Christian spirituality / Integration of other disciplines)

Thiselton (2007) has published a magisterial book on *The hermeneutics of doctrine* and Lonergan ([1973]1990) on *Method in Theology*. This essay can never substitute both publications but endeavours to present some perspectives to be considered when new theologies are composed.²⁹

The essential purpose of theology is to study Scripture and to compose a coherent expression of the Christian faith³⁰ that should also be made relevant in the contemporary idiom. The primary task is to provide a clarification of the understanding of faith itself, the ground on which it stands³¹ (Oden 2001:5–6), its relevance for today and its spirituality.

No biblical theology, however, can be regarded as correct to its biblical foundations unless it respects with utter seriousness both exegesis of specific passages and the relevant historical context. A biblical source has usually been written in a particular historical situation 'by a particular biblical author and directed to a particular audience' (Thiselton 2015:13).³²

From the previous subsection, it became evident that Christian spirituality became worldwide a dynamic interest for two reasons: seriously devoted Christians desire to experience God in their daily life, whilst less devoted Christians want to be spiritual but not involved in any form of being church.

At this point, the church shall have to consider critically to incorporate other disciplines in the composition of theologies, especially the natural and human sciences.³³ Excellent scientific research and scientific publications over the past few decades proved how the sciences and theology complement one another (see Davies & Gregersen 2010; Polkinghorne 2007, 2009).

Integration of experiencing God's transcendence and immanence:
The focus point of this essay is the suggestion to incorporate

29. In this article, as a result of length constrain, the subsection 'Neo-theologies' will not include contextual theologies like Ubuntu and other African theologies.

30. Schreiner (2008:10) refers to the two approaches of writing a New Testament Theology: the investigation of the books separately or a thematic approach. He then discusses the advantages and disadvantages of both and opt for a thematic approach. For Schreiner (2008:23), 'NT theology is God-focused, Christ-centred, and Spirit-saturated, but the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit must be understood along a salvation-historical timeline'.

31. The *incarnation* of the Logos, the *cross* and *resurrection*, as well as *ascension*, have to be regarded as the fundamental pillars on which a theology should stand.

32. The development of the science of biblical interpretation, as a part of the general science of all hermeneutics, has changed and improved theological reasoning. This is a quest for the further improvement of biblical hermeneutics.

33. This statement does not insinuate that it has not happened so far. Such incorporation has already taken place in the language sciences where contemporary language research has been applied to the task of reading and interpreting the Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible.

spirituality as a 'lived experience of God' in Biblical theology,³⁴ to focus not only on theory but also to incorporate experience. The culmination point of this process is reached in considering the *transcendence* and *immanence* of God.

Theology as exegetical reasoning and divine experience

According to Vanhoozer (2010:80), any theological interpretation of the Bible is to acknowledge 'that Scripture is both from and about an extratextual and extra-communal reality known as God'. It is God's voice speaking from the Bible that requests the reader to reinterpret and understand the biblical message and to respond to it. The interpretation of the Bible is to participate in the foreign world of the Bible. By investigating the Bible that person comes to know both God and the self simultaneously. Thus, when investigating the Bible, God is experienced and the investigator will respond to God's word (Vanhoozer 2010:80).

Over the past few decades, substantial development occurred in biblical hermeneutics. Numerous articles and books were published on 'biblical hermeneutics' (Van der Merwe 2015b:1). Significant developments in hermeneutical theory occurred (Tate 2011; Virkler & Ayayo [1981]2007:13; cf. Hays 2007:10; Osborne 2008:15–16), and '... continues to grow more complex and differentiated' (Oeming 2006:ix). Efforts to interpret texts became interesting and challenging and encompass aspects, such as 'the author, the text, the reader, the subject matter in the text and the dialogical process' (Van der Merwe 2015b:1). Each of these aspects is crucially important and necessary for the composition of theology (also cf. Beale 2011:1–24).

This subsection argues, *on the one side*, for a comprehensive hermeneutical approach when biblical texts are investigated and all the above-mentioned aspects are incorporated. Today, many scholars are committed to this methodology. See the publications of Virkler and Ayayo's ([1981] 2007); Montague ([1991] 2007); Robbins (1996, 2002, 2010); Osborne (2008); Tate (2011); Deppe (2011); Köstenberger (2012). The Socio-Rhetorical Criticism approach of Vernon Robbins encapsulates this comprehensive approach very successfully (cf. Van der Merwe 2015b:7).

On the other side, Schnelle (2009:57) argues that if the New Testament is understood as articulating early Christianity's all-encompassing capability and practices of *meaning formation* and *identity formation*, the departing point should then be Jesus of Nazareth. His ministry and preaching composed of a 'symbolic universe, evoking meaning-formations both prior and post Easter' (Schnelle 2009:57). For the authors of the New Testament, these *meaning-formations* surely became their fundamental guide. Therefore, in composing a theology, the initial focus should be the explanation of Jesus's own thought world. Of all this, the incarnation, cross-and-resurrection and the ascension events

34.This applies also for Practical and Systematic theologies.

should be central. Jesus' resurrection from the dead was a revelatory event. It exposed the meaning of his life. These events (death and resurrection) appealed for enactments of meaning formation from those who believed it! All early Christian writers were faced with the task to communicate and formulate 'the unique events of the cross and resurrection, which transcended the boundaries of everyday life, into a theological meaning structure' (Schnelle 2009:54-55). This significant intellectual accomplishment enables them to interpret and narrate the history of Jesus Christ in a particular way. By doing so, they ascribed particular roles (allotting titles) and a particular status to him. By writing 'hi(s)-story', they construct their own new religious world. The history of the earthly Jesus then is retrieved from the perspective of the present reality of salvation, caused by the Risen One. These historical events decisively established the capacity for meaning formation and new identity formation. Although identity formation ensues within such a context, it always remains dynamic and comprises a process and is bound to changing situations (Schnelle 2009:55).

Integration of Christian spiritualities

This essay also argues for a multidimensional reading of texts (Van der Merwe 2015b:1) to facilitate the fostering of spiritualities when reading the Bible and theologies. This can serve as preparation for the immanent and transcendent lived experiences³⁵ of God in everyday life. The multidimensional reading of texts is also recommended by Gadamer (1975), Ricoeur (1973, 1976), Schneiders (2002), Waaijman (2002) and Vanhoozer (1998). As a result of the linguistically polysemous character of linguistic texts, contemporary interpreters can draw richer meanings from texts that were unavailable to the earliest readers (see Gadamer 1975:300–307). In such an approach, the consciousness of the potential spirituality that a text can foster should become part of the comprehensive hermeneutical approach. The spiritualities, fostered through a multidimensional reading of the texts, lead to commitment and liberation. Therefore, the request that spiritual exegesis (research) be incorporated in both the *hermeneutical process* of reading the Bible (cf. Kourie 2006:20) and the *composition* of theologies is a mechanism to foster divine experiences. This phenomenon asks for a contemplative reading of biblical texts – the merging of inductive impressions with deductive activities of imaginative exegesis. In his book, *Spiritualiteit: vormen, grondslagen, methoden*, Waaijman (2002:690–770) discusses the blueprint for hermeneutic spirituality research.³⁶ This way of reading the biblical text (and theologies) should assist the believer to become more and more aware in particular of the immanence (and transcendence) of God.

35.According to the Gospel of John, 'when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak' (Jn 16:13).

36.Confer Van der Merwe (2015b) for a more thorough discussion on and application of the multidimensional approach, which relates to the 'Praxis of spiritual reading' approach of Waaijman (2002:690–770).

Integration of other the disciplines (sciences)

Many people today are still of the opinion that we are living in an era of two conflicting metanarratives, which influence our lives. Nevertheless, in a scientific-oriented age, the church shall decisively have to integrate the sciences in verbalising its message of the Bible and the message of theology to make any sense and have any impact. The church³⁷ has to work in an interdisciplinary manner. With this perception in mind, theology and science need not be opposed enemies, but rather complementary allies with one another (Van der Merwe 2019:5). Theology has to collaborate with the all-inclusive knowledge, which embraces all the sciences. Pannenberg (1993:16) believes that:

[I]f the God of the Bible is the creator and ruler of the universe, it becomes unthinkable to comprehend fully or even appropriately the processes of nature without any allusion to the sciences. (cf. Polkinghorne 2009:11–12)

This entails that the intellectual approaches of the sciences and theology will respect one another.

So far, the reasoning has been very clear that *statements* made about God by Christianity exceed undoubtedly any ascertainment of the human reason (cf. Ward 2002:11). If Christianity wants to claim the truth of any of its assertions, then it shall have to provide a more inclusive understanding of the existing nature of this remarkable universe (Ward 2002:12). Many recent publications and opinions pointed out that it appears to be convincing that the third millennium of Christianity is on course for a new integration between scientific and theological thought. This development of integration designates the advancement of an emerging global spirituality – which has regularly been underemphasised or discounted. In many new scientific publications (see, e.g. John Polkinghorne, Paul Davies), scientists agree that the sciences verify more than ever before the wisdom, power and awesomeness of God as Creator of the universe. An awareness of this can foster transcendent 'lived experiences' of God, which can postulate confidence and happiness in the lives of believers (cf. Ward 2002:16).

Integration of experiencing God in the immanence and transcendence of God

On a more dynamic experiential (spirituality) level, the focus will shift to fall on probably the two most loaded qualities of God: the immanence and transcendence³⁸ of God. These two qualities should be incorporated explicitly here, making 'biblical' theology moving away from theory to experience. These two attributes should saturate the accounts of biblical theology. The church understands the immanence and transcendence of God as referring to God who is both known and unknown.

37. Church is used, here, to refer collectively to academics (who are members of the church), to pastors who are also supposed to be involved in continuous research and even to devoted Christians who want to study the Bible.

38. The language we use in connection with God is by far inadequate. It cannot attain the full mystery and transcendence of God.

Experiencing the immanence of God

The Bible characterises the immanence of God with biblical vocabulary such as forgiveness, guidance, 'creating, commanding, loving, promising, comforting, righteous, light, peace, truth, holy' and more (cf. Vanhoozer 2010:3). From a Christian perspective, the application of these attributes to God are absolute; they are considered to be intelligible and definite. They are rationally comprehensible, can be explored, even be described from a Bible perspective, *can be experienced* and can be regarded as fundamental qualities of God. These few references about God demonstrates how the Bible³⁹ has been used to communicate to some degree something about this mysterious being. It enables believers to witness about God, to talk with this God, to experience this God and live (experience) in the presence of this God every day.

Where seeking of God is absent in the lives of people, they will not experience God's immanence. To them theology will only remain as a theory. They will not find or experience the continuous self-revelation of God. Critically important is that it requires a specific mindset. Rahner verifies this understanding in his argument that the revelatory experiences of the mysterious God can be experienced in the most common experiences of life. Only those who are receptive for God's revelation and insight allow an opportunity and a place for God to speak. The immanent revelation of God should not be sought in the extraordinary or the miraculous. In fact, God's revelation of Godself may be already present within the person (cf. Burke 1977:43).

Simultaneously, parallel to God's immanence, God also emerges to be incomprehensibly transcendent. Conradie (2013:51) claims that even though believers might not comprehend what the divine transcendence consists of, it is the transcendence that permits believers to become aware of and understand the divine immanence from another perspective. 'Our experience of the transcendent is always immanent' (Conradie 2013:39, 41; also Hick 1997:57). In addition to Conradie's claim, Bentley (2018:2) explains life to be an expedition of continuously seeking the truth and the understanding of reality. This life is all about this expedition self (immanence), not the destination (transcendence), although the destination permits the believer to be grateful, to experience and to understand the journey.

Experiencing the transcendence of God

Many Christians think that God can only act according to the faith proclamations as defined and explained in theologies. However, both ancient and contemporary theologies acknowledge the incomprehensible transcendence of God. The experience of transcendence is always immanent (cf. Conradie 2013:39, 41). Du Toit prompts that in the divine-human relationship, there are some boundaries that may never be crossed. What may exist beyond such boundaries may probably never become knowledgeable and may

39. From the Old Testament, these are the following metaphors: 'Deliverer, Rock, and the always-present Shepherd to his flock', and more (see Burke 1977:37).

be termed the 'transcendent' (a noun). Du Toit termed the common experience of crossing the frontiers as one of transcendence (or, transcending, a verb) (cf. Du Toit 2011:2). Transcendence, then, can be explained to relate with certain moments where human experiences and knowledge are loaded with faith acknowledgements, that deeper unexplainable dimensions occur. Such moments denote the incomprehensible dimensions of the nature, existence and work of God. Consequently, in particular, 'Christian believers cannot afford to try to negate the transcended origin of transcendence' (Nürnberg 2011:198).

Therefore, in the many irrational or unexplainable incidents, of things happening, in everyday life, dedicated believers will discover and realise that they are experiencing 'Someone' different to be appropriately expressed as a *mysterium tremendum* (Otto 1936:12). Kearney (2010), in his book, *Anatheism. Returning to God after God*, refers to this 'mysterious Being' as 'the Other' (p. 8, 11), 'the Stranger' (p. 15) and 'the Guest' (p. 15). It is for Christians not so farfetched, strange and definite that the perception of 'divine nature or essence stretches far beyond any knowledge and consequently all human linguistic expression is absolutely inadequate' (Strezova 2012:176).

The use of the Bible in theologies should take advantage of both the immanence and transcendence of the mysterious God to implement these two qualities of God in the writing and practising of biblical theology. It should more explicitly saturate the thinking about God to make the Bible message more acceptable and comprehensible and applicable today in a postmodern world. By doing so, ascension of Jesus must feature as the centre to express both God's immanence and transcendence, which will foster different kinds of spiritualities.

Conclusion

The composition of theologies, until recently, appears not to have utilised biblical analyses sufficiently, other than to justify a particular dogma or theological thought. The result has often been the abandonment of a transcendent God experienced immanently, resulting in theology as coded revelation collapsing into the -isms of the 20th and 21st centuries with their post-counterparts. If the use of the Bible in theology stimulates and augments lived experiences of the revealed Godself in and through its texts, fundamental biblical concepts potentially expand to confront and rescue all those -isms from an abyss of God abandonment. The key is to allocate a greater role to, and continuously explore and be challenged by, all reading and interpretation perspectives of biblical texts through comprehensive and multidimensional parameters, in as much as they expose how theology is lived as spirituality, or, conversely, how the transcendent God is experienced immanently. In this way, the historicity of the Bible can be respected in the church and considered along with the sciences to be part of 'God-talk' and to 'live in the presence of God' (cf. Johnston 1997; Nürnberg 2016) and arrive at functional neo-theologies.

God has made Godself active and present in this world for believers to develop a relationship with God. Although we will never completely comprehend God, the challenge of the use of the Bible in formulating new theologies will remain open-ended to explore more and more who this divine being is and how this divine being is involved and present in this divine being's creation.

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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