



# The address of reality as the voice of God in theological interpretation

**Author:**Rick Benjamins<sup>1,2</sup> **Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup>Protestant Theological University (PThU), Amsterdam and Groningen, Netherlands

<sup>2</sup>Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

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**Corresponding author:**

Rick Benjamins,  
hsbenjamins@pthu.nl

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The relationship between theology and the sciences can be studied from a hermeneutical point of view. Essential to religion are experiences in which reality calls or addresses us. Ingolf Dalferth and John Caputo have reflected on such a call in various ways. This article claims that the call of reality shows the world to be 'more' than it is, as has been elaborated in the work of Jörg Lauster and Richard Kearney. In theological interpretation, we can identify the call of reality as the voice of God. With reference to Bruno Latour, both theology's correspondence and distance to the sciences are explained in the wake of this identification.

**Contribution:** This article explores the relationship between theology and the sciences and contributes to a hermeneutical understanding of reality's call as the voice of God. It concludes that theology's approach to reality is more close, intimate, or resonant than a scientific approach.

**Keywords:** theology; science; hermeneutics; Dalferth; Caputo; Lauster; Kearney; Latour; call; voice of God.

## Introduction - the address of reality

### Reality speaks to us

It is the author's firm belief that theology, like the sciences, starts with reality and the experiences we gain from our surroundings in daily life. This may sound like stating the obvious, but it is not. For theology to start here implies the denial that we have to start with God revealing Godself in nature, scripture, tradition, or elsewhere, like many theologies of revelation do. Even though the author does not wish to discard the category of revelation nor deny its importance for theology, the author would like to suggest that we do not start with God but with our life experiences and our experiences of reality. In order to expand on this and clarify the point, it will be helpful to distinguish two different hermeneutical approaches represented by Ingolf Dalferth and John Caputo.

In many books and articles, Ingolf Dalferth clearly made the point that understanding God is not the same as understanding something else. '*Gottverstehen ist kein Fall des Verstehens von etwas*' (Dalferth 2020:58). The author agrees to this, but while Dalferth excludes the idea of God being an object – an extra entity added to all the other things that make up the world – he still sticks to a theology of revelation. According to him, God reveals Godself in addressing us through Jesus Christ. In Christian faith, we understand Jesus to be God's address or call [*Anrede*] to us. God cannot be localised spatiotemporally and should not be conceived of as an object or an entity, but God can be identified as the subject of the address directed to us in Jesus. Those who receive the address understand themselves in a new way and are redirected in their life orientation as beings related to God, which is as much about understanding oneself as learning about God (Rohls 1990). Dalferth argues that the occurrence of the Word of God in this way is an event that explains itself. That is, God communicates God, relating Godself to those who receive the communication, which occurs precisely as a result of their new self-understanding as God's creatures. As such, this event of revelation, which is the event of the Word of God, is a language-event, clearly different from events as described by Badiou, Zizek, or Marion, precisely because the event of God's revelation explains itself (Dalferth 2013).

Like Dalferth, John Caputo wholeheartedly accepts the idea of an address or a call. But contrary to Dalferth, he denies that the address or the call are related to a subject of the call. There is no one calling, nor is there an entity behind the call. In fact, the call comes from the world itself, calling

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us in the middle voice with the promise of a better world. We respond to the call because we hope for the realisation of a better world and feel called to contribute to it. More precisely, we hope for the events of justice, gifting, hospitality, and forgiveness, which can change the world as it is and open us up to new possibilities. Instead of a subject of the call, Caputo thus argues for a call that is related to the promise of the world (the world itself includes the promise of a better, richer, more fulfilled life) and to our desire for the event that may break open our world [and invite us to a better world]. In his view, God is a name for the event, and the events of justice, gifting, hospitality, and forgiveness are embodied by Jesus in the gospel (Benjamins 2023). However, if we respond to the call for more or a better life, we take an enormous risk. We hope for the best, but the worst may come true. We do not know what will happen when we respond to the call that is promising us the event, because the event cannot be foreseen, managed, calculated, or controlled. Consequently, it may bring us heaven or hell. The event, therefore, cannot be identified. ‘... the event is precisely what always and already, structurally, exceeds my horizons’ (Caputo 2013:10).

This highlights the differences between Dalferth and Caputo. Dalferth claims that the reality of Jesus speaks to us and allows us to identify God as the subject of this speech. According to Caputo, there is no subject to the call. He insists on the call of an unidentifiable and unpredictable event always beyond our horizons. With regard to these different views, the author is hesitant to fully agree with either one. The author agrees with the idea of an address or a call. Yet, it seems that Dalferth is too exclusively focused on being addressed through Jesus. There may very well be other experiences that make us conclude that we are being addressed by something beyond, behind, or under the phenomena at stake. Caputo, on the other hand, does not allow for any identification of the call, which seems to make the call too elusive in my opinion, as it is removed from phenomenological appearance and appropriation. Therefore, the author would start with the rather plain and simple finding that reality can speak to us.

With the rather metaphorical phrase that reality speaks to us, the author simply means to say that reality is more than just bare facts, in that it does something to us, wants something from us, acts upon us, engages us, or however else you want to put it. The reality or the world addresses the author with an appeal that cannot be evaded. Or confronted by something sacred, which commands absolute respect. Anyone who has ever experienced a deathbed knows what the author means. No relativising remarks, no winks, and no sighs are appropriate at that place; only a reverent silence is appropriate for witnessing what takes place. Or reality encompasses us. We feel part of reality or the world, which makes us feel both very small – a fluff in the universe – and very big because we are connected to the whole cosmos. Theology begins there, with a reality that is more than just bare facts, as it acts on us, does with us, and speaks to us. Hartmut Rosa caught this

relationship in the world under the striking term resonance. He claims that modernity ‘stands at risk of *no longer hearing the world*’ as it ‘has lost its ability to be *called*, to be *reached*’ (Rosa 2020 28).

## The world is more than it is

The conception that the world speaks to us and is ‘more’ than just bare facts has been the object of hermeneutical reflections, which were much enhanced by the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. As we always understand something *as* something, or understand it metaphorically *as if* it were something, phenomena generate a surplus of meaning, which points to a surplus of being (Helenius 2012). This means that reality can always show itself differently and can always be interpreted anew, which implies that it encompasses more or is richer than we have understood thus far and is not exhausted by our understanding. The world is ‘more’ than it is and includes a transcendent dimension in this respect. This transcendent dimension appears in the interplay between the world of objects and its subjective understanding. This transcendent dimension plays an important role in the hermeneutical theology of Jörg Lauster and the hermeneutical philosophy of Richard Kearney and can be illustrated by their work.

In Lauster’s work, experiences of transcendence take a central place. If we experience transcendence, reality impresses us in such a way that we interpret our experience of reality as the disclosure of a transcendent, divine, or supernatural dimension of reality. In Christian religion, for example, Jesus was or is experienced in such a way that the encounter with him implies the encounter with something beyond the ordinary, the human, and the comprehensible. Similar experiences of transcendence can be acquired in the field of art, in nature, or in daily life. The crux of these experiences, according to Lauster, does not consist in something divine or supernatural showing itself to us, which would be a very naive way of dealing with reality, but is related to our consciousness. In interpreting and articulating the experience, we are using expressions of an exceptional kind like ‘divine’, ‘transcendent’, or ‘sacred’ in order to put our experience of what is beyond our grasp into words. An experience of transcendence therefore takes place in the subject’s consciousness. Yet, the subject feels invited or provoked to interpret the experience as an experience of transcendence by something from outside. Thus, the experience of transcendence is not the experience of an object from beyond space-time but a self-experience in which we experience ourselves as affected to such an extent that we feel legitimised to use transcendence while interpreting the experience (Lauster 2005). Experiences of transcendence matter to Lauster because they give rise to looking at life in a new light.

Whereas transcendence and the subject belong together in Lauster’s hermeneutics, transcendence and the other are related in Kearney’s work. Like Lauster, Kearney draws attention to a transcendent dimension of reality that shows itself as a surplus of meaning (Kearney 2010:xiv). This surplus

is specifically manifested to us by the other or the stranger. This conception is connected to the fundamental notion running through all of Kearney's work that the subject only becomes a self in its relations with others and strangers, who can open up the subject's mind and life world if it receives the other as a host, after which the subject can be hosted by the other, which implies a transformation of both. Generally speaking, God is an Other that appears as a transcendent dimension of the other, which never occurs independently of the other. Thus, in *The God Who May Be*, Kearney argues that the *persona* of the other appears in the person of the other:

Persona is the in-finite other in the person before me. In and through that person. And because there is no other to this infinite other, bound to but irreducible to the embodied person, we refer to this persona as the sign of God (Kearney 2001:17–18).

In *Anatheism*, Kearney argues in a similar way that we receive God – the transcendent, the other – if we receive the stranger. 'The stranger is sacred in that she always embodies something *else*, something *more*, something *other* than what the self can grasp or contain' (Kearney 2010:152).

## Voice of God

In the author's opinion reality speaks to us through our experiences. We have to exclude the experience of being addressed by Jesus as a unique and incomparable experience from other experiences [unlike Dalferth]. Neither does the author think that we have to keep the call or address directed to us safe from identification [unlike Caputo]. The author would rather argue that being addressed by reality shows reality to be 'more' than bare factuality, which can be conceived of as a dimension of transcendence that appears in the interplay between us and the world, indifferently whether we relate this primarily to the subject (Lauster) or the other (Kearney). From here, the author would like to argue that what we call the 'word' or 'voice' of God is related to this dimension of transcendence. Because of that, it makes sense to think of religion and theology as ways to approach reality, just like the sciences do, albeit differently.

First of all, it may seem very risky from a Protestant perspective to identify the address of reality as the word or the voice of God. Yet, this risk has nothing to do with their identification as such. From a traditional Protestant point of view, it may seem safe to find or hear the word or the voice of God exclusively in the Bible and deny their applicability to other events, addresses, or words directed to us by other people, but such a division will not hold. In Biblical literature, it is precisely the address or the event of reality that is identified as a word or an act of God, for example, when Isaiah calls the Persian king Cyrus God's anointed (Is 45:1). Similarly, a theologian such as Karl Barth admits that we can hear the voice of God speaking to us through current events. 'God may speak to us through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog. We do well to listen to Him if He really does' (Barth 1975:55). The risk of identifying an address of reality as the word of God, therefore, is not in the identification as

such but always in the identification of this particular instance as an instance in which God 'really does' speak, as Barth calls it.

In the author's opinion, there is no ultimate and uncontested authority – like the church or Scripture – to give a verdict on the question of whether God really speaks, which leaves the matter open for an always ongoing discussion in which persons and groups should be willing to account for their acceptance of an address as an address by God. In these accounts, tradition plays a major role. It is from tradition that persons or groups most likely draw their arguments, and it is in conversation with tradition that they make up their minds. It is tradition, moreover, that is built, shaped, and transformed by conversations and discussions about God, the voice of God, the way we are called by God, and the particular instances in which this happens.

The question of whether we can identify an address of reality as the voice of God thus appears to be related to the question of whether we want to engage with a tradition that uses terms such as God, voice of God, and call of God. This question inevitably leads to the question of why it would be useful to do so. The objection could easily be that an interpretation of reality speaking to us with the voice of God would merely amount to a duplication and confusion of terms that were better left out for various reasons. The term or concept God, for example, may be inextricably linked to some metaphysical order that is completely unfit to articulate a tenable view of the world's reality. Or it might be linked to a discourse in which authority and power are involved with regard to the acceptance and legitimisation of an interpretation. In these cases, resonance with reality might be better off without references to God and God's call. Still, the authors think that it is useful to use the term God or the voice of God precisely to identify or qualify reality addressing us. The author thinks so for three interrelated reasons.

## Naming reality's address as the voice of God

The first reason to identify the address of reality with the voice of God comes from the fact that 'God' functions as a pattern of perception and interpretation, a so-called [*Deutungsmuster*], which allows us to 'see' transcendence and 'hear' reality speaking to us at all. As Kant famously wrote, intuitions without concepts are blind. Religious traditions offer us the concepts to see something 'more', something 'else', or something 'other' in reality than we would probably do without them. Of course, discussion immediately arises about whether these traditions and their concepts, among them the concept of God, are meaningful. It is obvious that the religious concept of God does not come from experience immediately, as if God were an object of experience. God is a concept derived from experience, handed down by tradition, and used to structure and interpret our experience of reality.



Thereby, it allows us to perceive aspects of reality. It is also obvious that not every meaning attached to 'God' or other concepts is useful, helpful, or acceptable. In fact, tradition – and it is clear that the author is speaking from the Christian tradition with which the author is familiar without confining the argument to only this tradition – includes many discussions about the ways concepts can or cannot and should or should not be used, including the present-day discussion about using the concept of God after God. The point here is not to clarify in what way and with what precise meaning religious terms are properly used and are adequate to structure our perception, but rather to assert that religious traditions do offer us concepts to structure our perception and thereby help us to 'see' transcendence.

To clarify this point, it is important not to take concepts as descriptions of reality but as performative constructions. Conceptual constructions of reality allow us to see something as something. As constructions of reality, concepts are not opposed to reality but allow us to approach it. The more concepts we have, the more reality we perceive (Caputo 2013:200ff.). A short reference to the work of Bruno Latour can clarify this point. In his study of laboratory life in cooperation with Steve Woolgar, Latour argued that science is not about discovering facts and describing reality but about the construction of facts according to methods and procedures that validate their existence (Latour & Woolgar 1986). Scientific findings are constructed but real, albeit that their constructed reality depends on a structure of ideas, equipment, and attitudes.

In several works, Latour wrote about religion from a religious point of view, especially in *Rejoicing*, complaining both about a scientific approach to religion and religion's defence (Latour 2013). The common scientific model presupposes a hidden reality behind our experiences that is simply there and ready to be discovered, which is believed to be performed by scientists uncovering what is really real. Religion is often measured according to this model and is thereby proven to understand reality wrongly as it makes false claims about reality. In turn, religion's defence often reads that its beliefs are adequate descriptions of what exists truly and objectively. Latour's point is that the opposition between science and religion is fallacious, that religious speech is not about the transfer of information, and that the construction of reality is similar in science and religion (Golinski 2010, Herrnstein Smith 2016). Both in science and religion, a practice of representation installs and sustains the existence of facts and figures, whether they are particles or gods. Still, even though the truth-regimes of science and religion are comparable, there is a difference, according to Latour. Science brings near what is far – pictures of galaxies, for example, and graphics of DNA strands – whereas religion is focused on what is near to us. In religious talk, we 'redirect attention away from indifference and habituation, to prepare oneself to be seized again by this presence that breaks the usual, habituated passage of time' (Latour 2005 45–46).

Latour's writings on religion are provocative, exciting, puzzling, and ambiguous in their endeavour to communicate religion to 'moderns', as he calls them. Even though his conception of religion can be criticised, the author wonders how exactly to interpret and assess it. The author is rather attracted than offended by the idea that religion proceeds in such a way that it installs and calls forth the existence of entities or objects it adheres to (cf. Latour 2013 141). To interpret reality as addressing us as the voice of God, then, does not amount to the claim that there is an object called God or voice of God that we discovered, but rather means that we install the voice of God. We do it in religion as we do it in science: we produce facts and figures, which does not mean that they are unreal. We establish the voice of God and thereby can 'see' transcendence and 'hear' reality speaking to us in the sense that this concept shapes and directs us to the 'more' of the world.

A second reason to keep using the word God for naming the address of reality is related to the traditions in which this word functions. These traditions – religious traditions, obviously – offer us discourses that allow us to reflect on the use of the term God. The author will surely not deny that traditions have often been mistaken in taking the wrong persons, the wrong political movements, and the wrong ideas for representations of God's voice. But the point is that traditions still offer us the means for critical reflection. Precisely because they have identified words, events, persons, or movements as words of God or as responses to the word of God; these traditions offer us the material to reflect on what we identify as the voice of God, to discuss the criteria we use for such identifications, to ask about the consequences we link to hearing this voice, and to beware of the dangers related to such identifications. There is wisdom collected in religious traditions that can be useful and helpful to us in our attempts to wisely respond to the address of reality. To really profit from these traditions, we should not have too narrow conceptions of them as always our tradition, legitimising our ways and proving us right. Religious traditions are broad and usually consist of discussions, opposing views, conflicting arguments, and changes over time. That is exactly what makes them useful, as they prevent simplifications and straightforward equivalences but are still committed to recognising the voice of God.

It seems to me that there is a certain similarity between religious traditions and scientific communities that can be exposed in the wake of Latour's ideas on the production of facts. Just like scientific communities consist of a plurality of groups with a broad variety of perspectives, opposed schools, and conflicting arguments trying to establish facts by means of debate and discussion, religious traditions consist of different groups with a variety of perspectives trying to determine and thereby establish the voice of God. In both cases, organisations and structures largely influence and direct the debates, which admittedly may have an impeding effect on communicative freedom. Besides, traditions tend to overrule the interests of the individual. This gives ample reason to be critical of tradition but should

still not prevent us from critically engaging with it. At present, the importance of religious traditions is often discarded and seems futile because of what is called 'believing without belonging' and the wish to keep religious beliefs private behind the front door – at least in my country, the Netherlands. It is quite clear to me that we need a sound separation between politics, science, and religion, and that it should be individuals making use of tradition and not the other way around, but still, religious traditions matter in my opinion, because they are equipped with the apparatus to discuss the address or the call of reality as the voice of God and our responses to it. In order to make this apparatus function properly, the author thinks it is necessary to have religious studies and theology as part of our universities. Their participation in academic discourses allows for critical reflection on religious traditions as well as a distinct voice in the scientific community.

A third reason to identify the call of reality with the voice of God is related to theology's distinctive voice and marks its distance from the sciences. The term God can help us be 'close' to reality. It may seem remarkable to talk about closeness, as if we had immediate access to reality, which cannot be the case because we always come to understand something as something and rather construct than discover facts, as argued by the author before. Yet, the word God can be of great help in finding a close or resonant attitude towards reality. We always need intermediary language to relate to reality and God-talk can help us do so in an intimate way. It seems to me that Latour was also pointing to this when he wrote that religion directs our attention to some sort of presence that breaks our habituated outlook, as quoted here.

In science, we try to know reality in a distant way through observation. It is part of the rules of science that those observations can be controlled and repeated and are not tied to the observing person. In religion and partly in theology, it is precisely how people in their particular circumstances unrepeatably understand, have understood, or perhaps should understand the voice of God that is being theorised. In that respect, people do not relate to reality in a detached way, as in science, but are intimate with it by tuning into the voice of reality through God-talk. In this way, we do not try to master reality but let it in in a passive or receptive mode. Friedrich Schleiermacher poignantly wrote about this in the second speech of *On Religion*, in which he defines religion as 'sense and taste for the infinite' and characterises religion as openness, receptivity, and responsivity. Religion, Schleiermacher writes, is 'the immediate experiences of the existence and actions of the universe' (Schleiermacher 1996 26). In this way, religion and theology provide an addition to and a deepening of our relationship to reality in comparison to science.

In the author's view, then, both theology's correspondence and distance to the natural sciences can be underlined. Both theology and the sciences respond to reality, not by discovering facts or describing them, but by constructing

it without thereby being untrue to it. Both of them rely on plural communities, either a scientific community or a community of tradition, for their practice of representation. Theology differs from the sciences in that it enhances a close relationship with reality, whereas science is marked by distant observations. Consequently, theology will not offer a metaphysical worldview that competes with a scientific outlook in any respect but rather presents an additional approach to reality that is more close, intimate, or resonant with the world as we experience it.

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It is an honour to contribute to the Festschrift of Johan Buitendag on an important theme, namely the relationship between theology and nature or theology and the natural sciences. Admittedly, my prime interest may be slightly different from his, as my focus is on hermeneutics more than natural theology or the sciences, but we still share common interests, and it may be valuable to look at the relationship between theology and the natural sciences from a hermeneutical point of view. It is from this point of view, then, that I would like to underline both theology's correspondence with and distance from the natural sciences.

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