

The iconic significance of the Psalms as a literary genre for speaking about God: A phenomenological perspective

Author:
Daniël P. Veldsman¹

Affiliation:
¹Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to:
Danie Veldsman

Email:
danie.veldsman@up.ac.za

Postal address:
Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, Lynnwood Road, Hatfield 0083, Pretoria, South Africa

Dates:
Received: 21 Sept. 2010
Accepted: 20 Jan. 2011
Published: 28 Oct. 2011

How to cite this article:
Veldsman, D.P., 2011, 'The iconic significance of the Psalms as a literary genre for speaking about God: A phenomenological perspective', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67(3), Art. #960, 6 pages.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i3.960>

To explore the impossible impossibility of speaking about God and to address, on the one hand, the unacceptable modernistic rational robe of totalisation and the return of the subject in postmodern contexts, on the other, this article pursued the phenomenological approach of Jean-Luc Marion's hermeneutic of the icon. His approach is connected in a creative manner to the literary 'eyes' of the Psalter, focusing on the distinction of idol-icon by Marion in his understanding of the gaze of the worshipper and the subsequent conceptualisation of the infinite God in finite human terms. It was finally argued that the literary genre of the Psalter, viewed from a hermeneutic of the icon, presents not only an exciting perspective on the threshold of the '[im-]possible' for speaking about God, but also on the return of the subject in the broadened horizon of the 'unsayable' and 'unrepresentable'.

Introduction

Theology – understood in general terms as discourse or speaking about God – is seriously wriggling¹ itself in Western 'post-modern'-sensitive theological contexts from the tight-fitted modernistic rational robe of totalisation. In its hermeneutic 'wriggling', it is taking on new ways (read: configurations) in different contexts of disenchantment to deal and cope with the shadowy rests of modernism and – in psychological terms – the return of the repressed,² as well as to deal and cope with the (impolite?) return of the subject. The 'returns' are presenting themselves in multivarious ways within a broadened horizon³ of reflection, challenging all absolutist and reductionist rational approaches to the self, to knowing and meaning, and to reality. The 'return' of the subject will be the focus of my exploration. Perhaps one might ask in astonishment: 'But was the subject ever missing?' The answer: 'Yes, indeed'. The influential and successful rational strategy of the natural sciences reduced instrumentally the place and role of the subject to the prescriptive conditions of sensory observation and experiments in a logical-positivist manner, thus (ideologically) bracketing the (contextually determined) knowing subject and his or her role in knowing and the disclosure of meaning (cf. Clayton 2005; Deane-Drummond 2005). The subject has now 'in-deed' returned – but then it must immediately be added: in a qualified and different manner.

I aim to explore the above mentioned hermeneutic wriggling of the contemporary theological enterprise by focusing on a specific dimension of the 'return of the subject', namely on the subject in his or her speaking of God. My question follows from one of the dimensions of the broadened

1. With the term 'seriously wriggling', I have in mind the description of the Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdson (2010:179) who writes with regard to a new appreciation of religiosity and reason: 'If human reason no longer holds out any promise to be absolute in the sense that it would be able to transcend all conditions of language and history, there are no longer any absolute reasons to claim that the possibility of a religious existence ceases to be an option for serious, thinking human beings.' And this can be substantiated aptly in the flood of literature on the current significance of religion and/or the return of religion. To mention but a few: *God is back: How the global revival of faith is changing the world* (2009) by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *Postsecularism: The hidden challenge to extremism* (2009) by Mike King, *The plot to kill God* (2008) by Paul Froese, *Reason, faith and revolution: Reflections on the God debate* (2009) by Terry Eagleton, *The Palm at the end of the mind* (2009) by Michael Jackson, *Do we need religion?: On the experience of selftranscendence* (2008) by Hans Joas (translated from German). Two older but still very relevant publications are, *The fragile absolute, or why the Christian legacy is worth fighting?* (2000) by Slavoj Žižek and the collection of essays, *The future of religion* (2005), edited by Santiago Zabala. An important publication in the South African context, published in 2006 by the Research Institute for Theology and Religion, is the collection of essays with the title, *Secular spirituality as a contextual critique of religion*, edited by Cornel du Toit.

2. The so-called surprising 'return of religion' in the 21st century is described by various authors in different ways. The sociologist Peter Berger (1999:2) remarks that the world today '... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever'. Jonathan Benthall (2009:3) writes in *Time Magazine*: 'In spite of science and secularism, religions are gaining strength...' Even the well-known British Marxist, Terry Eagleton (2004:100) says: '...To speak of a post-religious age is to speak a good deal too hastily.' Sigurdson (2010:185) insightfully states: 'Perhaps no part of the world is as surprised over the recent upsurge of religious movements across the globe as Europe. In Europe more than anywhere else, it has been taken for granted that modernity and progress more or less means the decreasing importance if not the eventual disappearance of religious faiths.' Interestingly, the British theologian Graham Ward (2009:131) chooses not to speak of a return of religion, but of 'resurgence' of a new 'visibility of religion'. In his opinion, three traits of this resurgence can be identified, namely Fundamentalism (2009:135ff), the 'deprivatization' of religion (2009:139ff) and the commodification of religion (2009:147ff).

3. Three particular dimensions come into play with regard to the broadened horizon, namely (1) the role of the 'unsayable' and the 'unrepresentable' as it both constitutes and ruptures all that is said and presented, (2) the self as divided, multiple and therefore never self-enclosed, but always open unto that which transcends its own self-understanding and (3) the movement of desire, initiated and fostered by the other. The 'place' where the three interlace is the body (cf. Ward 2005:325).

reflective horizons, namely the role of the 'unsayable' and the 'unrepresentable' as it both constitutes and ruptures all that is said and presented: is it still possible, in one way or the other, to speak of God and, if yes, how? This 'how' is motivated by the basic dilemma that God is infinite, yet our languages (i.e. the concepts that we utilise) are finite. How can one speak of that which is incommensurate with language? Is the phenomenon not reduced to the measure of the concept, thus violating the phenomenon and transcendence?⁴ Furthermore, do the concepts not become a means of domination, seizure, encompassing, such that one who has the concept of the thing has the thing in one's grasp?

In venturing to answer these questions, they will be approached from a phenomenological perspective, taking the iconic significance of the Psalms as a literary genre for guidance in speaking about God in our 'new' historical situatedness. Firstly, a few remarks must suffice on my phenomenological approach and my reason for choosing the Psalms specifically. Secondly, I will explore the meaning of the icon and the importance I attach to it, following the French theologian Jean-Luc Marion. Lastly, I will propose a few suggestions for contemporary attempts in speaking about God.

Hermeneutically undressing the robe of totalisation

If our contexts of theological reflection can vaguely and loosely be characterised as postmodern, a few preliminary remarks must suffice: our grappling with contexts should, in my opinion, not be with the secular implications that postmodernism wishes to summon theology too,⁵ but with the broadened horizon itself, asking what the broadened horizon entails theologically, that is: to explore the limits (philosophically) to which postmodernism draws our attention. In the words of Graham Ward⁶ (2005):

The theological horizons beyond philosophy (which postmodernism opens up) can be read as the theological fissuring and refiguring of the human, the mundane, and the metaphysical which ... has consistently been the task of theology to investigate.

(Ward 2005:329)

Given the aforementioned 'refiguring', my choice to focus on the Psalms came almost spontaneously, prompted by the (translated) words of Luther (cited in Mülhaupt 1959) in his second Preface to the German Psalter (1528):

There you look into the hearts of all the saints [*Du siehst da allen Heiligen ins Herz*] as into a beautiful gay garden, indeed, as into heaven; and in that garden you see spring up lovely, bright, charming flowers, flowers of all sorts of beautiful and joyous thoughts about God and his mercy [*allerlei schönen fröhlichen*

Gedanken gegen Gott um seiner Wohltat]. Again, where do you find words expressing more deeply and picturing its misery and wretchedness more tellingly than the words that are contained in the psalms of lament? Here you look once more into the hearts of all the saints as into death, indeed as into hell; how dark and gloomy is it there, because of the grievous spectacle of the wrath of God [*betrübttem Anblick des Zorns Gottes*] which has to be faced in so many ways! Again, wherever they speak of fear or hope, they use such words that no painter could portray either fear or hope with equal force and no Cicero or orator could fashion them in like manner. And the very best thing is that they speak such words about God and to God ... [*solche Worte gegen Gott und mit Gott reddem*]. This explains, moreover, why the Psalter is the favourite book [*allerheiligen Büchlein*] of all the saints, and why each of them, whatever his circumstances may be, finds in it psalms and words which are appropriate to the circumstances in which he finds himself and meet his needs as adequately as they were composed exclusively for his sake [*um seinetwillen so gesesst*], and in such a way that he himself could not improve on them nor could find or desire any better psalm or words ... To sum up: if you want to see the holy Christian church painted in glowing colours and in a form [*Farbe und Gestalt gemahlt*] which is really alive, and if you want this to be done in a miniature, you must get hold of the Psalter, and there you will have in your possession a fine, clear, pure mirror [*hellen reinen Spiegel*] which will show you what Christianity really is; yea, you will find yourself in it and the true knowledge of yourself [*Gnothiseauton*], and God himself and all creatures too.

(Luther, cited in Mülhaupt 1959:4–5)

My choice is a response to the rhetorical question Luther poses:

Where do you find words so expressive, so deep, so alive and so telling; words so picturing that no painter can portray; a pure mirror ... Words about God and words to God.

(Luther, cited in Mülhaupt 1959:4–5)

Luther's rhetorical question is at the same time the clue to the utilisation of the word 'icon'. But before attending to this word, a brief remark has to be made on my phenomenological approach. In qualifying my approach as phenomenological, I take my stance from its general description, namely as an approach that places the emphasis on the structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed towards something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions.⁷ Yet, many difficulties can be raised from this brief and oversimplified description, the most important of which, within this context, is surely regarding the structure of intentionality, that is, the experience that is directed toward an object. Can God, as such, be regarded as an (intentional) object? I will have to return to this question later within this article because its answer lies on the 'other side' of my exposition of the significance of the 'icon' in the theological contribution of Marion.

4. James Smith (2002:4) remarks: 'This concern regarding the violence of concepts is a distinctly postmodern matter, in the simple sense that it is only a "modern" concept which makes claims to totalization'.

5. Such a summoning of theology in my opinion – following Ward – is misplaced, as it can only lead to theological bankruptcy, dispersing its metaphors and converting its sacred space into a theme park (Ward 2005:329).

6. Professor of Systematic Theology, University of Manchester, England.

7. An explanatory note on the 'appearance' (or phenomenon) can be helpful in this regard. Within the context of experience, the question arises as to what experience allows and excludes, that is, to what may or may not appear and let itself be seen (the phenomenon). Furthermore, one can ask how – in turn – is a phenomenon defined? Marion (2007:21), following Kant and Husserl, states: 'A phenomenon is defined through the adequacy of an intuition (which gives and fulfils) to a concept or meaning (which is empty and to be filled and validated)'.

Marion, the idol and the icon

Marion (2007:37) asserts that the '[im-]possible for God lies within the stone-hard human heart'. In his theological reflection, Jean-Luc Marion⁸ distinguishes between theological and metaphysical thinking. Metaphysical thinking about God is, for Marion, a product of modernity that conflates God, Being and Reason. What has been forgotten here, according to Marion, was that what Anselm and Aquinas precisely did not forget in their conviction of 'theology as seeking understanding', namely the priority of faith and a God beyond both Being and Reason. Taking his cue from the so-called architect of modernity, Descartes, and his basic dictum of *cogito ergo sum* (i.e. the notion of the self-determining *cogito*, the *I* which determines the nature of any object though its consciousness and the creation of ideas), Marion emphasises that the gaze of the *cogito* in Descartes exists both in harmony and in conflict with a second gaze, namely the gaze of God. In harmony, the *cogito* is a reflection of *causa sive ratio* of God. In conflict, it is independent. An irreducible ambivalence emerges in Descartes's analysis of the *cogito*, for Descartes refuses to reduce the operation of consciousness upon the world either to anthropology or theology. Descartes, then, opens up the question of epistemological and ontological foundations, a question concerning infinity and the unknown (Ward 2005:330). These are the very ambivalences of modernity that Marion wishes to address. He therefore proposes a theo-logic, that is, reflection on faith and God that proceeds along a different track and according to another logic. How can the theo-logic of Marion be briefly summarised?

Of God we have neither an intuition nor a concept at our disposal and therefore Marion (2007) states emphatically:

... [I] cannot ... legitimately assign any concept to God, since every concept, by implying delimitation and comprehension, would contradict God's sole possible definition, namely that God transcends all delimitation and therefore all definitions supplied by my finite mind. Incomprehensibility, which in every case attests either to the weakness of my knowledge or to the insufficiency of what is to be known, ranks, here and here only, as an epistemic requirement imposed by that which must be thought – the infinite, the unconditioned, and therefore the inconceivable. *Ipsa incomprehensibilitas in ratione infiniti continetur.*

(Marion 2007:22)

For Marion (cf. 2007:22), the concepts that we assign to God, as with so many invisible mirrors, send us back the image that we make up for ourselves of divine perfection, which are thus images of ourselves. Our concepts of God turn out, in the end, to be idols – idols of ourselves. But how is such a conceptualisation then after all possible?⁹

For Marion (2007:24), the *causa Dei* represents something that cannot be described,¹⁰ but nevertheless: the question of God

8. Professor of Philosophy at the University of Nanterre, France. In the following exposition of Marion's viewpoint, I have gratefully made use of the work of Smith (2002) and the short reflection by Ward (2005) on Marion.

9. For Marion (2007:24), this question has to address three impossibilities, namely that with regard to intuition, that with regard to the concept and that to experiencing the slightest phenomenon.

10. Marion (2007:24) carefully qualifies his statement: 'Even on the supposition that a transcendental illusion is involved or that the question is ill-framed, we must still confront it, and confront it all the more'.

survives the impossibility of God. Reason itself therefore requires that we give a rational account of this paradox, that is, to explain how the impossible endures as a possibility. How is the possible impossibility to be understood, to be conceptualised? In recognition of the God privilege (i.e. God, and God alone, lets himself be defined by impossibility as such), precisely at that limit the question is made possible: 'In God's case, and in God's case alone, impossibility does not abolish the question but actually make its possible' (Marion 2007:25).

For Marion, the only possible pathway to God emerges in, and goes through, the impossible (cf. Mt 19:26; Mk 10:27; Lk 18:27). Whatever is impossible for us is possible for God. How then – and this is the crucial argumentative movement – is the impossible converted into the possible when we pass from man to God? This threshold – that is, the conversion of the impossible for us into the possible for God – is crossed by mentally considering what remains incomprehensible for us and that which is irreducibly impossible for us can and could become possible in its own right if we were to pass over to God's standpoint:

We must mentally conceptualize what remains incomprehensible for us – namely that God starts where the impossible translates into the possible, precisely where the impossible appears as though it were possible.

(Marion 2007:27)

Thus, the impossibility of experiencing God has only meaning for us alone who are capable of experiencing the impossible – it has no meaning for God since impossibility is impossible for God. We thus conceive of God insofar as he is not confused with us and insofar as the difference is forever drawn. Marion (2007:28) captures his conclusion (i.e. of the inversion of the possible and the impossible) with the term the '[im-]possible'. Based on this conclusion (i.e. the impossible as self-contradictory), Marion (2007:32) creatively moves to the *impossible as advent*. Preceding the self as defined by *ego cogitans*, is the *emerged I*, that is: 'Birth, or rather *my* birth, precedes any thought of my own'.

In this sense, that which delivers me (the event), bears me into the world and makes me, happens without me, without my consciousness, or my concept. Marion (2007:32) employs the word 'advent' to describe the 'birth without me', and subsequently states: 'My birth advenes to me in the form of a directly effective impossibility', thus providing me in the case of my birth with the experience of radical possibility (i.e. by becoming effective precisely as an impossibility, my birth has unlocked possibilities for me which are defined, not by my concepts, but by my birth – and which therefore unlock as many concepts in its wake). How then is an '[im-]possible' for God to be imagined based on the '[im-]possible' that is my birth? Marion subsequently draws the analogy of my birth and creation, stating that what birth accomplishes for each living being, creation brings about from God's standpoint. In his own words:

... [For] me, creation starts always and only with my birth. Yet by the same token my birth exposes me to the whole of creation, giving me access to every [im-]possible in its primordial [im-]

possibility. God, the master of the impossible, effectuates creation by making the [im-]possibility of each birth effective, starting with my own.

(Marion 2007:33)

Marion (2007:33–38) argumentatively ties his phenomenological viewpoint ultimately together in his understanding of the characterisation of God's relationship to radical possibility.¹¹ It is a 'tying together' not in terms of omnipotent efficiency, but in terms of forgiveness,¹² that is, that God 'wants only what it becomes him to want – which is to say only what comes from him and answers to his love' (Marion 2007:35).

Marion has thus – in my opinion¹³ – provided us with a (suggestive) phenomenological positioning of our theological discourse within the broadened postmodern horizon of the 'unsayable' and the 'unrepresentable' as it both constitutes and ruptures all that is said and presented. It is a positioning on the threshold of the '[im-]possible' to speak – with our finite language – of the infinite God in such a manner as to respect God's transcendence (and not to privilege immanence over transcendence), nor to reduce God violently to the measure of the concept, so that our concepts do not become a means of domination, seizure, encompassing, such that one who has the concept of the thing has the thing in one's grasp. It is a re-thinking of our concept of concepts otherwise, in the sense that they rather point than grasp! It is ultimately a re-thinking of our concepts that they do not turn out, in the end, to be idols – idols of ourselves. This re-thinking – for Marion (1991:8ff) – can all be captured in the term *icon*. I therefore now turn to his understanding of the icon.

For Marion (1991:8ff) the idol is a matter of constitution, that is, no object or sign is inherently idolatrous but is rather constituted as such by a subject which intends the object as either that which will absorb its aim or gaze (the idol), or that which will deflect the gaze beyond itself to that to which it refers (the icon). As manners of being for beings – and not as two classes of being – the difference between the two lies in the *way* in which they signal that to which they refer. It

simply means: they signal in different ways! The 'signalling' is not dependent upon the subject, but the way in which they are constituted by the 'gaze' of the subject: 'The gaze makes the idol, not the idol the gaze' (Marion 1991:10). Both idol and icon are fabrications – that is not the issue at stake! How then is the difference in terms of signalling to be understood in which both are fabrications? In the idol, the worshipper's gaze is satisfied by the idol itself; it finds its end in the idol and fails to be referred beyond it. Thus the gaze settles for immanence and finitude and it is this operation of the gaze which constitutes the idol:

For the fabricated thing becomes an idol, that of a god, only from the moment when the gaze has decided to fall on it, has made of it a privileged fixed point of its own consideration; and that the fabricated thing exhausts the gaze presupposes that this thing is itself exhausted in the gazeable. The decisive moment in the erection of the idol stems not from its fabrication, but from its investment as gazeable, as that which will fill a gaze.

(Marion 1991:10)

Whereas the idol is thus constituted as idol, as it no longer refers to a transcendence but has become an immanence or presence which satisfies the gaze of the worshipper (and allows no invisibility!); the icon points beyond itself, refers the gaze through and beyond it to a transcendence which cannot be made present. The icon presents a different mode of being which stands in antithesis to the way human consciousness makes the world present to itself. The icon's purpose is to (ap)present that which cannot be made present, that which is absent. Put differently: the icon is a visible indicator of the invisible in which the gaze is to overshoot and transpire itself (Marion 1991:11) and not to collapse (i.e. not respecting) the distance (or difference) between that which is not present and that which is captured in conceptual thought. The icon provokes a vision of the invisible (which is a gift of the other) and the infinite, and to receive it in its own excessiveness. For Marion (1991), we are drawn by the icon beyond a world created in the human consciousness by human ideas to the condition of reality 'out there'. With regard to our unavoidable utilisation of concepts, this implies for the re-thinking of the concept of the concept otherwise (i.e. for the 'conceptual icon') the following:

It is not a question of using a concept to determine an essence ... but of using it to determine an intention – that of the invisible advancing into the visible and inscribing itself therein by the very reference it imposes from this visible to the invisible. The hermeneutic of the icon meant: the visible becomes the visibility of the invisible only if it receives its intention, in short, if it refers, as to intention, to the invisible ... Visible and invisible grows together and as such: their absolute distinction implies the radical commerce of their transference.

(Marion 1991:23)

From this hermeneutic of the icon as framework, I now finally turn to what I have called the iconic significance of the Psalms as a literary genre for speaking about God.

The iconic significance of the Psalms

The connection that I make regarding the significance of the Psalms follows almost spontaneously from that of Luther, if they can be understood as he described:

11. In a much earlier article, Marion (1996) developed this 'radical possibility' in terms of 'God's donation', characterising it as a 'saturated phenomenon'. His earlier exposition is helpful to make better sense of what the 'radical possibility' entails. He explains that 'in the experience of God' we encounter a phenomenon which is not a phenomenon, not because it cannot measure up to the law of appearance, but because it exceeds and overwhelms such conditions, that is, that it struggles to 'appear' because it gives itself too much, excessively, more than the ego can handle, more than the concept can expose (Marion 1996:112ff). God in this sense represents a 'saturated phenomenon' which can be characterised by being (1) 'invisible (unforeseeable)', that is, it is something that cannot be aimed at (1996:113ff), (2) 'unbearable', that is, it overwhelms perception by its intensity (issues in bedazzlement!) and is consequently not bearable (1996:114), (3) 'unconditioned (absolved from any horizon)', that is, it bears no analogy to any other phenomenon or experience (1996:115ff), and (4) 'irreducible to the "I"', that is, it is 'incapable of being looked at' because it cannot be constituted as an object – not because of lack of intention, but because of its excess (1996:119).

12. Marion (2007:38) elaborates on forgiveness by stating 'that it is impossible for man to forgive or even to ask for forgiveness, and that on the contrary this is only possible only with God, as the prerogative of his radical transcendence'.

13. Whilst I have found Marion's argument useful, there are others – such as David Wood, professor of Philosophy at the Vanderbilt University – who are not at all comfortable with Marion's approach (see the chapter 'A concluding Roundtable', in Caputo & Scanlon 2007). For Wood (in Caputo & Scanlon 2007:220), Marion's argument is wholly unconvincing and it reeks of a new scholasticism. Also, Richard Kearney (in Caputo & Scanlon 2007:222) finds Marion's understanding of the impossibility of forgiveness unacceptable, because, for Kearney, the forgiveness of God should be something that enables us to forgive rather than something that teaches us its impossibility. For Catherine Keller (in Caputo & Scanlon 2007:222), professor of Constructive Theology at Drew University, Marion turns impossibility into a Christian doctrine! Given the limited space and focus of my article, I will not address their criticism here, but suffice to say that I especially value Marion's ability to conflate logic, epistemology and ontology in his phenomenological viewpoint and thereby addressing key modernistic rational dimensions of totalisation.

a *fine, clear, pure mirror* [DPV] which will show you what Christianity really is; yea, you will find yourself in it and the true '*gnothi seauton*' ['know thyself'], and God himself and all creatures too.

(Luther, cited in Mühlhaupt 1959:5)

This is substantiated further by Hans-Joachim Kraus (1978:78) when he writes the following in his commentary on the Psalms: 'Nicht die immanente Heiligkeit, das magische Durchdrungensein vom Numinosum ist es, was die Beter suchen. Sie treten ein in die Begegnung mit der majestätischen Person Jahwes'.

The encounter 'Beter – Jahweh' that finds literary expression ('mirrored') in Psalms, is well captured by Craigie (2004) in its literary significance when he writes:

A recognition of the poetic form of the psalms is important for their interpretation, for poetry is a special kind of language ... Whereas the language of prose is utilized primarily towards direct communication, poetic language is characterized by a more transcendent quality. There are aspects of human experience, and aspects of knowledge of God, for which the mundane language of prose cannot provide adequate expression. Poetry is, among other things, an attempt to transcend the limitation of normal (prosaic) human language and to give expression to something not easily expressed in words – indeed, it may ultimately be inexpressible in human terms.

(Craigie 2004:35–36)

Thus the connection that I find (with the cue given in concepts such as *mirror*, *Begegnung*, *inexpressible*) is that the (poetic) literary genre of the Psalms can be understood creatively and explored within the philosophical framework of a conceptual icon as put forward by Marion. The Psalms – as the 'gaze' of the worshipper ('Beter') – 'take place historically' ('*Begegnung*') on the very existential threshold where humanity is confronted by the '[im-]possible', where the finite encounters the infinite and longs to voice his or her contextually tainted relationship to transcendence, but precisely in such a manner that transcendence is not collapsed into immanence, that the distance is respected, and that the excessiveness is received and witnessed to! To take, amongst others, – the wording of Psalm 24:1–4 as example in which God's donation or excessiveness or distance or encounter or idol-icon all come into wordplay:

To YHWH belongs the earth and that which fills her;
the world and everything existing on it.
For he has founded it on the seas
and establishes it on the rivers.

Who may ascend the mountain of YHWH?
Who may stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart;
Who does not treat me as an idol
Nor swear an oath calling on misleading ones.¹⁴

As such, the Psalms in their iconic significance entail not only important implications in relation to all the other literary genres (historical and/or prophetic literature, law, wisdom, gospels, letters) within the biblical texts, but also

to theological discourses in particular.¹⁵ Do we still need to ask why the Psalms have not only been at the heart of the religious practices of Israel, have nourished the spirit of the Jewish people for so many centuries, but have also sustained the devotion of the Christian Church since its foundation? I do not think so and I share personally in this sense-making appreciation of the Psalms.

For theological reflection and discourses, especially also within my own field of study, namely Systematic Theology, the iconic significance of the Psalms entails important implications which cannot be bypassed in a polite manner. If in our present (postmodern) contexts we are wriggling ourselves from the tight-fitted rational robe of totalisation, addressing disenchantment in the broadened horizon of the 'unsayable', the 'unrepresentable', then the return of the subject can be celebrated with re-enchantment along the following tentatively formulated lines:

- Respect for the threshold of the '[im-]possible'.
- The constant incorporation of the nature of the gaze (and thus the dimension of God's donation, of givenness), as well as the historical-social context of the worshipper into our efforts to formulate and to reflect on that which 'happens' on the existential threshold, and that which is captured subsequently in conceptualisation.
- Because the Psalms ooze affection, it follows without saying that the affective dimension (that of which Blaise Pascal wrote, namely that the heart knows of reasons that reason itself does not know) must find its rightful and integral place within the rational explorations of our (finite) viewpoints on the relationship to the (infinite) God. In short: the affective dimension must address the bloodless (read: in-affective) abstractions characterising much of theological reflection. Consequently the 'gaze of the subject' – with the emphasis now also strongly on the subject – will have to broaden our understanding of rationality and that which we deem to be our rational strategy (thus – apart from mere 'seeing' – will have to incorporate hearing, feeling, touching, tasting, smelling) in the return of the subject.
- In my closer reading of the Psalms in their diversity, I distinguish at least three constitutive existential dimensions that come from the 'gaze' of the worshipper in his or her relationship of faith to God. These will have to be explored in the broadened horizon of the (affective) return of the subject, namely: re-membering, imagination and hope.¹⁶

As in Luther's conception of 'Words about God and words to God', theological reflection can do well in a postmodern context of serious hermeneutic wriggling. Taking the iconic

15. I will not pursue this statement any further, but what I have in mind is a hermeneutical understanding of – for example – the Torah, in such a way that it is appreciated from the perspective of the conceptual icon and that its existential value (within its historical evolution and layered constitution) be creatively explored along the restrictive, but also bedazzling conditions of the worshipper's gaze.

16. Rich, dense, layered and diverse aspects of being a religious person before God as articulated in the collection of the psalms are bundled together and summarised by the three constitutive concepts that I have identified (e.g. *Re-membering*: to be part of a tradition, memories, forgiveness etc.; *Imagination*: making the absent present, the invisible 'visible' etc.; and *Hope*: 'breathing' in articulated form which humans pursue in making sense of contingency etc.).

14. The translation of Psalm 24 from the original Hebrew was taken from an unpublished paper presented on 28 August 2010 by Sakkie Spangenberg at ProPent, Bass Lake, Pretoria.



significance of the Psalms as a literary genre seriously to guide theological reflection in contextual witness to an historical life, *coram Deo* can restore the harassed relationship between theological vision and transformative religious experience.

References

- Benthall, J., 2009, 'Beyond belief', *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 December, p. 3.
- Berger, P.L., 1999, 'The desecularization of the world: A global overview', in P.L. Berger (ed.), *The desecularization of the world: Resurgent religion and world politics*, pp. 1–18, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Caputo, J.D. & Scanlon, M.J. (eds.), 2007, *Transcendence and beyond: A postmodern inquiry*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.
- Clayton, P., 2005, 'Theology and the physical sciences', in D. Ford (ed.), *The modern theologians*, pp. 342–356, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Craigie, P.C., 2004, *Psalms 1–50, Word Biblical Commentary*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN.
- Deane-Drummond, C., 2005, 'Theology and the biological sciences', in D. Ford (ed.), *The modern theologians*, pp. 357–369, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Du Toit, C., 2006, *Secular spirituality as a contextual critique of religion*, ed. C. Mayson, University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Kraus, H.-J., 1978, *Psalmen 1–59, Biblischer Kommentar*, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn.
- Eagleton, T., 2004, *After theory*, Penguin Books, London.
- Eagleton, T., 2009, *Reason, faith, and revolution: Reflections on the God debate*, Yale, London.
- Marion, J.-L., 1991, *God without being*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL.
- Marion, J.-L., 1996, 'The saturated phenomenon', *Philosophy Today* 40(1), 103–124.
- Marion, J.-L., 2007, 'The impossible for Man – God', in J.D. Caputo & M.J. Scanlon (eds.), *Transcendence and beyond: A postmodern inquiry*, pp. 17–43, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.
- Mühlhaupt, E. (ed.), 1959, *Martin Luther's Psalmen Auslegung*, vol. 1 (Psalmen 1–25), Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Sigurdson, O., 2010, 'Beyond secularism? Towards a post-secular political theology', *Modern Theology* 26(2), 177–196. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2009.01593.x>
- Smith, J.K.A., 2002, *Speech and theology*, Routledge, London.
- Ward, G., 2005, 'Postmodern theology', in D. Ford (ed.), *The modern theologians*, pp. 322–338, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Ward, G., 2009, *The politics of discipleship: Becoming postmaterial citizens*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.

