Chris A.M. Hermans, Kobus Schoeman (Eds.)

Theology in an Age of Contingency

LIT

Contents

NAMING GOD

RESPONSE

Foreword

Rantoa Letšosa

A necessary truth is one that could not have been otherwise. It would have been true under all circumstances. A contingent truth is one that is true, but could have been false. A necessary truth is one that must be true; a contingent truth is one that is true as it happens, or as things are, but that did not have to be true. In Leibniz's phrase, a necessary truth is true in all possible worlds. If these are all the worlds that accord with the principles of logic, however different they may be otherwise, then the truth is a logically necessary truth. If they cover all the worlds whose metaphysics is possible, then the proposition is metaphysically necessary. If a proposition is only true in all the worlds that are physically possible, then the proposition is true of physical necessity.

A permanent philosophical urge is to diagnose contingency as a disguised necessity (Leibniz, Spinoza), although, in the 20th century in particular, there have been equally powerful movements, especially those associated with Quine, denying that there are substantive necessary truths, but instead regarding necessity as disguised contingency.

Contingent entities and events do not have to exist or occur. Contingent propositions do not have to be true. Metaphysics held that created things are contingent and that God, by contrast, is 'necessary'. God alone exists of necessity (absolutely independently), having the quality of aseity. For St Thomas of Aquinas and other medieval thinkers, 'contingent' means 'able to be generated and able to perish in the course of nature'. This account allows for the creation of necessary things. Contingent beings are created; not every being can be contingent; there must be a necessary being to cause contingency. The concept of contingency has been invoked in versions of the Ontological Argument and the Cosmological Argument. Ursinus and Williard (1888), in their fourth objection relating to liberty and contingency, indicate that what is done by the immutable decree of God cannot be done contingently and freely, but necessarily. God is unchangeably and necessarily good; yet he is simultaneously most freely good. The devils are unchangeably and necessarily evil; yet they are evil, and do that which is evil with the greatest freedom of the will. The ontological argument of Anselm, if convincing, could demonstrate God's logical necessity. By contrast, philosophers since Hume and Kant have claimed that all logically necessary truths are uninformative. Hence, that 'God exists' is, at best, a contingent truth.

Regarding human contingency, existentialist thinkers have given prominence to the mystery of human contingency as an element in what is, in their view, the meaninglessness of human life. The Bible, by contrast, gives the recognition of such contingency as one reason for awe, reverence, humility, and thanksgiving

(Ps. 90:12; 100). In 1998, Peter Murphy wrote an article on the age of contingency, with the main focus on modernity. In his article, he argues that a person in the modern age is a contingent being living in a world of contingency. In the premodern/traditional age, Christians had to deliberate in order to choose how and when to observe norms. They had a freedom of conscience, but choice was not the centre of their existence. Choices were made for them defining their character. Yet modernity led to a culture of contingency, and choice that was freedom centred. It was the duty of the premodern world to mobilise vast ideological resources to shield social arrangements against the awareness of contingencies. The implication is that for whatever people choose to do, love, read or see, they are aware that there are always alternatives and they can choose to do other things. For this reason, contingency was not viewed as a philosophical construct, but rather as a life experience for the modern person, a vexing, threatening, but also promising experience. The age of contingency stands for what the traditional attitude would reject: for every particular social arrangement, there exists an alternative and people are no longer ascribed to "allotted via birth" a certain kind of lifestyle or future destiny. Irrespective of those allotted with destiny of poverty, suffering or hardship, in a contingency world, one can still choose to improve one's life for the better. This book examines the meaning of contingency in light of practical theology. It challenges our modern existing theologies on the who God is and his relationship to human beings in a world and a culture of contingency. It also explores the benefits and the threats of these contingencies and how awareness of this could have a positive effect in the field of practical theology.

Prof. Rantoa Letšosa
Dean: Faculty of Theology and Religion
University of the Free State
Bloemfontein
South Africa

Introduction

Chris Hermans & Kobus Schoeman

Contingency refers to an event that may be happening in future, but that may also not happen (Oxford Dictionary). The truth claim is undecided and there is no means to decide whether it is right or wrong. The concept plays a major role in all academic disciplines and has a long history dating to Aristotle who defined contingency as that which is possible, but not necessary. The concept of contingency and related concepts such as free will, the rejection of essentialisation and priority of the possible poses a major challenge to theology in the 21st century. If these concepts reflect a paradigm shift in the coordinates of our interpretation of the world, we need to rethink all the concepts that frame our theologies. The problem facing theology can be expressed in the following dictum: either we hold the position that the grace of God dismisses the autonomy of human beings, or we should act as human beings as if God does not exist (etsi Deus non daretur).1 The challenge for theology in the 21st century is to rethink our theological concepts of God in relationship to human beings who are defined by contingency, free will and the priority of the possible.

The book addresses this challenge from the perspective of practical theology. In doing so, it connects to the general debate in theology on naming God, hermeneutics, human agency, and methodology. The book is the result of a research project related to the inaugural lecture of Chris Hermans as auxiliary professor in practical theology and missiology at the University of the Free State (UFS). This also explains the structure of the book. The opening chapter by Chris Hermans, *Theology in an age of contingency*, is an elaborated version of his inaugural lecture held on 27 February 2019. All the chapters of the book are responses to this opening chapter as part of a research project that critically reflects on doing theology in an age of contingency[2].

---

[1] See for a more elaborate account of this challenge: Ruhstorfer, K. 2018. *Freiheit – Würde – Glauben Christliche Religion und westliche Kultur* [Freedom – dignity - faith. Christian religion and western culture]. Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh. WINTZEK, O 2017. *Gott in seiner allwissenden Vorsehung auf dem Prüfstand der Kontingenz. Eine motivarchäologische Kritik des theologischen Kompatibilismus* [God in his omniscient providence put on the test of contingency] . Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet.

[2] All the chapters in this book went through a double-blind peer-review process under the guidance of prof D.F. Tolmie, Faculty of Theology and Religion, Univesity of the Free State.

This opening chapter is structured according to the four tasks of practical theology: theological-normative, hermeneutic, pragmatic, and empirical. It starts with a conceptualisation of contingency from four perspectives: sociological, epistemological, ontological, and ethos. The outline of the chapters in the book follows the structure of the four tasks. Some authors address more than one perspective. The articles are positioned in the section where they have their main focus.

Three chapters address the theological-normative task in relation to the challenge of contingency. In *Re-imagining God in an era of contingency,* Rian Venter starts questioning whether contingency is the appropriate marker that defines our era. He describes the way in which three theologians (Torrance, Tracy, and Moltman) deal with the concept of contingency. He questions Hermans' conceptualisation of contingency, and suggests alternative routes in theology.

In *Practical theology and the human person in an age of contingency: A pragmatic hermeneutic perspective*, Jaco Dreyer positions the concept of contingency between the rejection of essentialisation and the rejection of postmodernism. He elaborates on human agency and contingency in relation to Ricoeur's concept of 'capable man'. He advocates a theological informed, pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on the human person as a viable option for theology in the 21st century.

Next, in the chapter entitled *In the shadows of things to come: Contingencies, the 4th Industrial Revolution and theologies of practices*, Jan-Albert van den Berg strengthens the challenge we face in the 21st century in our theological understanding of human capability. What does it mean to be human, to survive in a digital world, and to build a just and inclusive society?

The next two chapters in the book focus on the interpretative task of theology. In hermeneutics, contingency shifts the object of what needs to be understood (*interpretandum*) to the meaning event in which the text "gives" meaning. This event is unexpected, disruptive and creates new possible meanings that want to emerge in life with, and for others. Two contributions discuss this event hermeneutics. In *John Chrysostom and 'Knowing God as debtor-friend': An event-hermeneutical reading*, Kobus Kok introduces the concept of God as debtor-friend. The gift of God's grace to man is a free gift without asking for something in return. The author gives an event hermeneutical interpretation of John 5, in which he shows that the transformation of the Samaritan woman is set in motion by the gift of above that Jesus brings. In *Discernment as generative dialogue. A constructive proposal for the challenges of missional corporate discernment in an age of contingency*, Frederick Marais incorporates the event hermeneutic in the practice of discernment. He defines generative dialogue as an event where new possibilities of God's future can emerge.

The ensuing chapters in the book focus on the pragmatic and empirical tasks of practical theology. The pragmatic task is discussed from the perspective

of the decentring of the theological knower and knowledge, as advocated by Hermans in the opening chapter. In *South African congregations in an age of contingency: Unfolding challenges*, Kobus Schoeman illustrates some changes and complexities in religion in South Africa related to contingency. He illustrates that, in the past decade, a shift can be observed from mainline churches to Pentecostal churches. He describes the struggle in congregational leadership to deal with the uncertainties of the future of congregations, and maps the role of churches as evaluated by people in South Africa in relation to the progress made on the issue of reconciliation.

In Congregational *leadership in an age of contingency*, Joseph Pali focuses on the change in leadership that has emerged in this age of contingency. The author advocates a shift towards relational leadership in line with an age of contingency. He perceives a growing uncertainty among congregational leaders, due to the complexities and action options of persons in an age of contingency.

In *The concurrent challenge of being a mission agent and the facilitation of agency in mission encounters on the margins: A Missiological perspective*, Eugene Baron presents a meta-analysis of the MoP (meal of peace) project from the perspective of the agency of the researcher and the researched. The author raises some permanent questions from the perspective of contingency: Whose knowledge? How did new perspectives emerge in an age of contingency? Whose perspectives were taken? How is the agency of the poor transformed towards new possibilities? This chapter also reflects on the methodology of the research based on "encounterology" and the use of the "pastoral cycle".

The last chapter by Chris Hermans entitled *Everything can change. A response to my conversation partners* has the same structure as the first chapter. Hermans resumes the discussion on the concept of contingency in dialogue with some of the authors in the book (notably Venter, Dreyer, and Marais). He argues that contingency implies the rejection of essentialisation, but theologically also rejects a postmodern interpretation of contingency. Contingency acknowledgement opens, but not necessarily, the emergence of purpose, surplus of meaning, human fullness, and mystery. It can happen, but it is not necessary. The emerging possibility of human fullness can be interpreted religiously, but not necessarily. In addition to this elaboration of the concept of contingency, Hermans takes up the dialogue with the authors in the book on the four tasks of practical theology: theological-normative, hermeneutic, pragmatic and empirical.

Chapter 1

Theology in an age of Contingency

Chris Hermans

1.1 Introduction

According to Hans Joas, we live in an age of contingency (Joas 2008). The concept of contingency has influenced every discipline in the academy: the sciences, theology and philosophy, sociology, management theory, pedagogy, and so on.

The concept of contingency is definitely always defined in the same way. But in a "word cloud" for contingency, one would certainly find words such as "complexity", "uncertainty", "plurality", "risk", "increasing number of options", "unpredictability", "increasing number of decisions people need to make", "co-existence of cultures, life styles and value systems", "greater awareness of options for actions and social life forma, and so on.

The world in which I live now is a different place to the world in 1955, the year I was born. When I grew up, my parents taught me to cycle on the right side of the road; they knew which side was the right side. Everything had a right side: what norms and values to live by, what was right and what was wrong, when to pray and which words to use. In the middle of our village was the church; in primary school, we watched workmen fixing its roof. With our teachers, who were nuna we prayed for their safety. And in this world, I grew up in, it was clear what I needed to do: study, find a job with security, buy a house to live in, start a family.

We live in a different world now. But it's not that I am just an old man looking back on his youth, thinking that life was so much better then. The narrative of this chapter is not "why everything was good in the past, and is so much worse in the present". I observe that I have changed, and that the world in which I live in has changed too. And yes, I understand that the village in which I grew up is not the same as the villages in which most children in Africa grew up in the fifties, or the ones in which they grow up today. There are multiple realities we must be aware of, and we must ask ourselves: whose perspective do we take? Who do we serve? Who wins and who loses? Who is included in "we"? And who is "out", and therefore marginalised? Whose future are we talking about?

With this contextual awareness in mind, I will first define the concept of contingency in the fields of sociology, ontology, epistemology and ethos1section 1). From this background I will reflect on four tasks of practical theology and missiology2. The claim of this chapter is that the content and aim of these tasks changes from the perspective of contingency.

- A shift towards naming God as an eschatological possible/present (a theological-normative task, section 2).
- A shift towards event hermeneutics (an interpretive task, section 3).
- A decentring of the theological subject of enquiry and opening (a pragmatic task, section 4).
- A shift towards a practice-oriented methodology (an empirical task, section 5).

1.2 Contingency

In the first section of this chapter, I will define contingency in four different ways:[3]

- as a characteristic of modernity (sociological perspective);
- as epistemology (modality of truth);
- as ontology (first philosophy on being); and
- as ethos (art of living).

1.2.1 Intervention and design research

The age in which we live is characterised by modernity, or modernisation. There is consensus among sociologists on this; but there is no consensus on the causes of modernisation, whether for a monothematic explanation of modernity or a multi-thematic explanation, or concerning the question of whether we are witnessing the beginning of a new era (Joas 2014, 64).

The two major causes debated are "economisation" and "functional differentiation". The major end in economisation is "an ever greater penetration of

[1] A beautiful Dutch word for this is *"gezindheid"*. The best English translation would be ethos, or "spirit" In the language of phenomenology, this is called a 'meta-intentionality' (Strasser 1977).

[2] See Osmer (2004, pp. 149-152; Osmer (2008. pp.4-12). I take the four tasks as a frame for the formal object of practical theology. Internationally, there is agreement that the four tasks define practical theology (Osmer 2004), but (obviously) disagreement as to the content of a specific task. Other disciplines in theology share one or more of these tasks. This opens the possibility of an interdisciplinary debate on the challenge of contingency for theology.

[3] I pick up this debate as it is developed in modern philosophy, starting with Heidegger and continuing with Giorgio Agemben (Van der Heiden 2014a).

the economy, but of other spheres of social life as well, by the logic of rational utility calculation" (*idem.* 68). The major end in functional differentiation between societal sub-spheres is a division of labour, and a process of complex institutional constellation resulting in a partly neutralised political sphere, and a concomitant privatisation of religions (*idem.*). We follow the analysis of Hans Joas in his claim that the predictions of the theories mentioned above are only partial, and not comprehensive; any monothematic explanation of modernity is bound to leave many societal phenomena and human experiences unexplained. And we need to be more nuanced about the continuity and discontinuity of the change in society in time.

Why then should we characterise the modern age as an age of contingency? [Joas 2006; 2008; 2014). What we need to understand is "the massive increase of individual action options and the growing number of experiences that result from this massive increase" (Joas 2014, 73). This increase in action options as a result of modernisation is what we need to explain; and contingency is better able to convey human experiences connected with this shift. Contingency sensitises us to the greater number of action options that people have today; but at the same time, the randomness of what we go through in our lives arises for the most part from these same increased action options. Some people experience the increase in the number of decisions that have to be made as a freedom that has been forced upon them (Joas 2014, 21).

Increasingly, we are becoming more aware of the differences between people when they have increased action options. This depends largely on the contingent fact of where in the world you are born, or within which family you are born. Also, the fact that I am a Christian and another person is Hindu or Muslim is largely due to the fact that I was born into a Christian family. The fact that I am Christian is a possibility and an actuality, but not a necessity; and I am aware of this fact. Joas is very keen to stress that contingency does not lead to massive relativism, or to an end to stable commitment to individuals and values.

> "There may well be stable commitments to individuals and values, but the nature of these commitments changes" – that is, they are characterised by an awareness that it is a possibility and not a necessity – "and a sensitivity to contingency does not produce relativism but 'contingent certainty'. Which entails an awareness of the contingency of its emergence." (Joas 2014, 76)

1.2.2 Epistemology

Is "x" true or false? This question is based on the presumption of a binary logic: either a positive assertion ("if x . . .") or an absolute negation ("if not x . . .") (Ricken 2004). According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, "contingent" refers to something that can be true, but which can also be false. It cannot be decided

ahead of time if the possible outcome will be true or false. The possible is a logical modality of knowing; but epistemologically, one cannot decide or prove that the possible is true or false.[4] The contingent is not a conclusion based on a line of argument that decides if it is true or false. Epistemologically, a contingent reality cannot be known for certain (as true or false).

Epistemologically, the concept of actual contingency must be distinguished from logical possibility.[5] The first type of possibility is completely open. It has "no real ontological status, no real claim to reality or existence. It is a world by itself, separated from everything else".[6] Only when possibility finds a place in the universe does it become "real". Peirce states that in addition to truth and falsehood, logic must allow for a third value: "that of potentiality defined not as ignorance but as a state of being".[7]

The difference between a mere "logical" possibility and a "real" possibility is that a person is prepared to act on the latter, because it has grounds in reality. Suppose I plan a trip to a city, and that I like to go to a Christian church on Sundays. I do not know if there is a church in that city that has a Sunday service. But I do know that there is a Christian community living in that city. I am not able to verify this, because there is no information on the internet that will verify this. I am not certain that there is a Sunday service in a church on this specific date; but there is a "real possibility" that there will be a Sunday service. For Peirce, it is important that he is willing to act assuming "if x" could happen. He accepts it as an "actual possibility", and acts accordingly, "as if" the possible was actual (Hermans 2012, 57).

Contingency is not the same as "coincidence" or "fate", although in common-sense usage they are used interchangeably. Logically, faith refers to the "accidental" within knowing the certainty of a reality ("x")[8]. Epistemologically, the presumption is that we can establish the necessity of some event or situation. But if the conditions which could present something to emerge, or there is a chance that something will take place "if" and "only if" certain conditions are in place which would cause that thing to happen – if that chance is small, people use the word "coincidence", or "fate". In a logic of coincidence, people look for reasons (causes) which might explain that "x" needs to happen. Contingency is a possible certainty which is neither necessary nor impossible, yet actual (Wuchterl 2011).

---

[4] *"Wissen und einen Schluss, der ein beweis wäre, gibt es für das Unbestimmte nicht"* (*Analytica priora* A13, 32b23) (quoted in Ricken 2004, 35).
[5] See Hermans (2004) for a more elaborate account.
[6] Prawat 2001, 701.
[7] Prawat 2001, 688.
[8] Zie Wuchterl 2011, 70-71; Ricken 2004.

1.2.3 Ontology

There is a long tradition in Western philosophy and theology in which ontology refers to the question of what is common and what is general in the nature of our being (Van der Heiden 2014, 14). This is understood to be a question regarding an immutable (static) and necessary order of reality, and of the foundation or grounding of this order. In Greek thought, contingency played no role in ontology, because it referred to what is "accidental" and could have no influence on this immutable order (Ricken 2004, 36-37). Influenced by Christian theology, in the Middle Ages human beings – and nature as a whole – were considered finite (creatures), and God was considered as the first ground and cause of human beings and nature (Van der Heiden 2014, 16). Through the connection of ontology with the existence of God as the creator, ontology was understood as ontotheology (Van der Heiden 2014a, 16-17). God was presumed to be ground of an immutable order of being.

In modern times, the world view of an immutable order has been abandoned, and the world is considered a contingency. Modern science searches for causal explanations (natural laws) for facts which are in themselves contingent.[9] True knowledge must be based on empirical research, which tries to falsify the predictions we have about reality. Scholars who say goodbye to Christian metaphysics, such as Nietzsche, understand contingency as an expression of the groundlessness and meaninglessness of existence. And for Rorty, contingency marks the awareness that a finite, mortal, accidental human being can only find meaning in life in finite, accidental truths.[10]

I mention these radical interpretations of contingency because they lock any experience of new possibilities beyond what is given. Or to formulate it more critically: what cannot be thought in a radical interpretation of contingency is the same as what cannot be thought in an ontology of what is common and general, namely the emergence of new possibilities which disrupt our understanding of reality. This can only be thought if – and only if – we decouple the connection between "in common" and "in general".

In an ontology of contingency, the general is thought as the singular, i.e. the unknown, unexpected, different or other.[11] "The singular event is par excellence that which escapes the principle of sufficient reason, and which can only be found outside its boundaries" (Van der Heiden 2014a, 16). The essence of being is that which emerges as an event:

---

[9] Grube 2015, 350

[10] Ricken 2004, 40.

[11] See also the title of Wuchterl's (2012) book, *Koningenz oder das Ander der Venunft.* In translation: 'Contingency, or the Other than Reason'. 'Reason' refers to what can be explained by what is common.

> "The event concerns the singular occurrence by which our world changes, since it interrupts something in our world or interjects something new in it." (Van der Heiden 2014a, 17)

Characteristic of an "event" is the emergence of (or the possibility of) an actuality that was not foreseen, nor can be reduced to the factual. The essence of an ontology of contingency is the "new beginning"; it is not about a first beginning or (ground). Suspending a first ground opens up a space for the possibility of that which is totally other, and which cannot be foreseen, mastered, or calculated. According to Van der Heiden (2014a, 5-8), there are three shifts connected with an ontology of contingency compared to an ontology of what is common and general.

- A shift from the one (i.e. the general) towards the many (plural) and the difference (non-identity);
- A shift from common ground towards the unknown (undisclosed), the event and the potentiality of what is possible.
- A shift from sufficient reason (first ground) towards thinking from a reserve (adjournment; no final judgment) and emergence ("event").

1.2.4 Ethos

What is the ethos of contingency? Ethos is a way of life and an outlook on life which orients human life (Willemsen & de Wind 2015, 184). According to the philosopher Stephan Strasser (1977), it is a meta-intentionality, which he defines as "the level of the spirit",[12] and is characterised as an orientation, a passion, a regularity of acting and a worldview. [13]An ethos is an orientation (attitude to life, lifestyle) that determines the whole person. It characterises the person (e.g. the "who" speaks and acts).

- The "authenticity" of the ethos is apparent from the action. An ethos gives direction to action (orientation) and strength (will to act). An ethos motivates people to act in a specific way, and the source of this motivation is found in a passion (i.e. a volitional striving). Passion (Strasser 1977) is not as much (or only) about an emotion as it is a focus on action (i.e. the will to act).

---

[12] Intentionality is a term in the phenomenological tradition (Dabrowski 2015, 3). The least contested definition of intentionality is a mentalistic one. "The intentionality is a property of mental states (perceptions, thoughts, memoirs, imaginations, emotions) that makes them to be directed to an object." (Dabrowski 2015, 4). 'Meta-intentionality' is a secondary type of intentionality based on culture (meaning system) and expressing a desired orientation.

[13] This definition comes from Strasser (1977, 279). The original term in Germen is 'das Gemüt'; the English translation is 'basic comportment'

- An ethos encourages people to act using a certain type of action that belongs to the specific ethos. This gives human actions a regularity or habitual character.
- An ethos also incorporates a certain worldview, which indicates how people see the world, others, themselves, and the relation between all these.

Which ethos is tuned to an ontological contingency? The core idea (presupposition) of contingency refers to the event as a possibility which becomes reality. The essence of this event is that it is unexpected; by definition, new and different from what we have ever thought about ("disruptive"). In an ethos of contingency, we relate to life as an event in which our lives change because something happens ("an event") through which something new and different breaks through.

The shortest way to characterise the ethos of contingency is by the phrase "Expect the unexpected!". And "unexpected" has two meanings: live from the possibility that "what is not" can become actual ("what is"); but also, live from the possibility that "what is" could also be different, and also could not be ("what is not"). It is an openness for the possible to emerge (or befall people) as that which is strange, other, incomprehensible, and disruptive.

Van de Heiden (2014b, 16) characterises the ethos of contingency as an attitude which considers life from an inexhaustible surplus. On the one hand it accepts the "givenness" of reality, but on the other, it is freedom from being bound by reality (Delahaye 2018, 234). Be open to what is possible, yet unseen and unthought of, and not framed within the existing order of existence.

> "This surplus is in a way also attuned to a certain characteristic of reality or being itself. The fairly complex contemporary discussions within ontology suggest something similar: the suspension of the final judgment touches on a certain state of reality." (Van der Heiden 2014b, 15)

In this ethos, man approaches himself, the other and the Other as not coinciding with himself. No identity can be determinate for human beings (Delahaye 2018, 232). And if a person is not identical with what is given, then this liberates him or her from any given order of existence. We do not know what will become of ourselves or of the other. This ethos of surplus is restrained in terms of any final judgement, but at the same time unrestrained towards the unexpected possibility of becoming a new and liberated person.[14]

1.3 Naming God as eschatological possible/present

What does this shift towards contingency imply for the act of "naming God"? Theology is "in the end, all about the mystery we name God, and the way this God relates to the world of human experience in all its facets, including our hopes

[14] A possibility that liberates one from necessity and the law, as St. Paul would express it (see Gal. 19). This leads to a transformation of the person I am. "And it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me…" (Gal. 3:20) (Delahaye 2018, 18).

and fears about life and death".[15] How do we understand this mystery we name God, in a theology that breaks with the equation between God and Being (ontotheology)? A God who emerges in the disruptive event of contingency? As de Gruchy eloquently explains, naming God is related to the world of human experiences, which is related to our hopes and fears about life and death. We will develop our argument in conversation with two philosophers who are influenced by the shift towards contingency, and reflect on the meaning of this shift in naming God, namely Paul Ricoeur and Richard Kearney.[16]

In the book *Living up to death* (2009), Ricoeur reflects on eschatology in relation to naming God. After mentioning the non-iconicity of God, who is a Name [Ex. 3:14 "I am"], Ricoeur reflects on the "Our Father" prayer.[17] Why does the prayer start with an invocation (Your Name… your kingdom… your will…), and not with a statement about God? This invocation is addressed to a God who can do what He does. This type of action by God is on the level of pure acting; that is, an eschatological level of completeness of God's acting.

> "In the petitions in Thou, God is asked to *act* so that He reigns. The eschatological vision is one of a completeness of Acting. The very structure of the petition is expectation, that is, more than an avowal, more than the optative, namely confidence in the accomplishment of this Acting. Two indications in the vocabulary agree with the one in the (imperative) grammar, the words kingdom and will. (…) . Kingdom and will are on the level of pure Action." (Ricoeur 2009, 82-83)

What is meant by "pure action", or "completeness of acting"? It is acting in which possible (in Greek, *dunamis*) and actual (in Greek, *energeia*) are inseparable. We can understand the Name of God in Ex. 3:14 as "I am who will be". Possibility and actuality are in God's will and reign inseparable. Therefore, we can say that God's reign is – at the same time – both possibilising and actualising. We need to understand the coming of God's reign in a completeness of action, in which "possible" implies "actual". God is the "I am who will be" (Ex. 3:14). In human beings, the possible and the actual do not coincide; because human existence is characterised by contingency. What is "actual" has the possibility of being "not actual"; and what is "not actual" has the possibility of being "actual".[18]

The theme of forgiveness and eschatology was also taken up by Ricoeur in the epilogue to his book *Memory, History, Forgetting,* published in 2004. "Forgiveness offers itself as the eschatological horizon of the entire problematic of memory, history, and forgetting (…) it offers itself as their common horizon of

---

[15] John de Gruchy (2013). Led into mystery: Faith seeking answers in life and death (Kindle Locations 1104-1106).

[16] See also Lieven Boeve's appreciation of the contribution of Ricoeur to the issue of naming God, as distinct from postmodernist philosophy (Boeve 2011).

[17] More precisely: his reading of Marc Philonenko's book *Le Notre Pere* (2001).

[18] We will take up this point in the section on spiritual transformation.

completion" (Ricoeur 2004, 285). Forgiveness puts us at the limits of the acts of binding and unbinding to an agent. The paradox of forgiveness is the impossibility of the pardon: we cannot forgive, because of the evil done by the agent. But if there is no forgiveness, we identify the agent with the evil done, and deny the possibility of a future. "You are no good!" – period. Forgiveness puts us at the eschatological horizon of the completeness of action (as formulated above): the agent is identified with the actual deed of evil, and is denied the possibility of doing good.

Now the act of radical unbinding demands that we move from the incapacity of unbinding, which characterises the human condition, to beings that transcend the limits of this incapacity (Kearney 2010, 57). We have located this incapacity in the disjunction between possibility and actuality of human beings as "contingent". In order to unbind, possibility and actuality must coincide in this transcendent being. This is precisely what we suggested above – that Kingdom and the will of God are expressions of Pure Action. The "I am who will be" refers to a capable God for whom the possible and actual coincide. For God, the possibility and actuality are eternally identical; because in God, the beginning and end are one. The Name of God opens an eschatological horizon of excess, generosity, promise and fullness that can restore human capability. God is enabling the future as the possibility of (or in) human beings of the fullness of life (De Haardt 2018); and in doing so, he restores the capacity to live a good life with and for others. The "I can" of a capable God restores the "you can" in the gift of love and hope.[19] The logic of the Resurrection expresses this coming in actuality of "the possibility for the more than possible, the surplus that makes all things possible in love and hope, the arrival of something more than can be measured by expectation of what is possible"(Treanor & Venema 2010, 3).[20]

> "Under the sign of forgiveness, the guilty person is to be considered capable of something other than his offences and his faults. He is held to be restored to his capacity for acting, and action restored to its capacity for continuing. This capacity is signalled in the small acts of consideration in which we recognise the incognito of forgiveness played out on the public stage. And finally, this restored capacity is enlisted by promising as it projects action toward the future. The formula for this liberating word, reduced to the bareness of its utterance, would be: you are better than your actions." (Ricoeur 2004, 493)

Naming God as eschatological possible/present fits into the landscape of current trends in eschatology. What is at the heart of the proposed model is the connection

[19] The gift of "You can" is a constitutive act which inaugurates human beings as capable ("Í can"). To be capable is a possibility that life holds in "reserve". It is possible, but not necessary, and can become actual in one's life.

[20] The Cross represents the logic of what is possible, including also the evil done unto others as to myself. Resurrection refers to the more than possible, excess, fullness.

between human action and divine action. The eschatological possible/present refers to the reign and will of God understood as Pure Action (or completeness of action).[21] This is a limit category seen from the perspective of human action, which is characterised by contingency. The incapacity of human beings to act (e.g. to forgive, to love, to touch and be touched, to promise, etc.) leads to an incapacity to do good, e.g. to act towards a fullness of life with and for others. The "I can" of a capable God can restore the incapacity of human beings through a gift of love and hope: "*You* can".

Naming God is incomplete if it indicates just the possible[22] without the actual. In the invocation of the Name in the Lord's Prayer, God is asked to *act* so that his future emerges in actuality. To see God's eschatological future emerging in the present (actual) is a hard task for human beings; it is hard because the coming of God is not a necessity, but a contingent fact, based on the more than possible (resurrection). Where is the fullness of God's future for/in eople emerging? Where do we see the incapacity of human beings changed into "You can"? Where is the hope of the powerless, emerging as a gift which recreates them as capable men and women? Where is the memory kept alive of betrayed promises and suffering inflicted on the powerless by the powerful?[23] Where is the injustice of institutions in society that has been unbound and justice restored by the gift of "You can"?

1.4 A hermeneutic of the event

What does this shift towards contingency imply for the hermeneutics we use in theology? "Hermeneutics" refers to the sign-process in which someone (the *interpreter*) interprets something or someone (*interpretandum*) on some basis (the *basis of interpretation*) in a particular context and situation (the *context of interpretation*). From the perspective of contingency, we focus on the event which leads to the understanding of a possible self that emerges in this process of understanding. According to Ingolf Dalferth (2016), one can distinguish different types of hermeneutics based on the different ways in which the interpretandum (object of interpretation) is defined. The interpretandum is the object that one is trying to understand. It may be:

- either linguistic or non-linguistic texts (works);

---

[21] For a more elaborate reflection on this issue by Kearney, see his book *The God Who May Be* (2001). In the book, Kearney also refers to the Name which Cusanus has given to God as "*Posse",* which can be translated as "pure action" (Kearney 2001. 110). See also Hermans (2012, 257-259) on God as the Ground of Possibility.

[22] See Mt. 19:26: "With God, everything is possible."

[23] "To remember the unremembered is a way of revivifying the 'traces' of those victims of history, just as Ezekiel reanimates the dry bones in the desert." (Kearney 2016: 55)

- the authors who produce texts and the recipients who make use of texts (subjects); or
- the process of life in which producing and understanding texts is embedded (event).

We will focus here on the third type, namely a hermeneutics of the event.[24] The focus of this hermeneutic "is not on the producer or the resulting text, but on the meaning-event of the production of the text" (Dalferth 2016: Chapter 3, Section 4). This meaning-event is the dynamic process of meaning construction that takes place; and not primarily on the active aspects of those dynamics, but on the passive-phatic aspects.

> "The hermeneutically decisive question is not from whom a construct of meaning stems or what it 'really' says, but rather where and how and by whom and on what grounds it is understood, which new possibilities of meaning it opens up, and which old possibilities thus are taken up and developed or excluded as dead ends." (Dalferth 2016: Chapter 3, Section 4)

What counts is the event to which the text owes its existence, "and to which it bears witness through its reality as a text, as well as paying attention to the possibilities of understanding, self-understanding, and life that are set free and put into play by this event" (*idem*). Dalferth stresses that theologically, the meaning of the text reveals who I really am (that is, *coram deo*). The theological interpretandum is neither behind nor in front of the text, but the interpretation of the text as a meaningful event in life, in which our understanding of ourselves and the world is transformed.

Of importance for Dalferth is that this transformation in the event is marked by contingency (Dalferth 2016: Introduction). 'Contingent' implies that a transformation is not necessary; yet it is possible, and it happens in actuality. Any reference to God retains this inexplicable contingency, and even deepens it. The coming of God's future is more that possible, seen from the incapacity of human being. This future – which is God – holds something in reserve, the surplus of a good life with and for others.

According to Dalferth (2016, Chapter 12, Section 1), theology is a discipline about the possible, not an ontic or ontological discipline. In light of what I have said above, I would frame theology as a discipline about the eschatological possibility in/of the actual. The possible should not be thought of in the framework of an emergence-continuum of the real, but as a transformation of what is given through the Name of God as "I am who will be". Theology, according to Dalferth, observes the world from the point of view of the priority of the possible

[24] A large part of the argument, which I offer in this section, was published in the article 'Love in a time of scarcity' which was published in *Acta Theologica* (Hermans 2017).

above the reality, through its orientation around God as the reality of the possible in/of the reality.

I will now give an event-hermeneutical reading of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).[25] How is our understanding of ourselves and the world transformed by the interpretation of the text as a meaningful event? From an event-hermeneutics perspective, the beginning of this parable is very typical: "And he said, 'A certain man had two sons.'" (Luke 15:11). Why this man, and not another? Why here, and not somewhere else? The text explicitly reminds us of the radical contingency of the event that happened to this father. It could have happened to anyone; and yet, it happened to him. Could it happen to me?

Through the act of selling the family's property, the son creates an economic problem, a relational problem, and even a community problem. The young man cuts himself off from his father, destroying their kinship; and by the same act, the father loses his role as the *pater familias* who takes care of his (extended) family (Park 2009).

In the scenes that follow, the situation of the young man deteriorates quickly: with no money, and with famine in the land, he sells himself to someone as a worker (Luke 15:14-16). Why did this happen? Even in a famine, there is no need for a young man to lose all his money and sell himself to someone as a worker. We are also aware of the fact that richness is a contingent fact. Richness ("what is") has the potentiality not to be (poverty). It need not happen; but it happens to the young man.

Breaking his legal contract could led to penalties which would make his situation even worse. And yet "he stands up" (Luke 15:18a), and decides to go to his father. Again, this is a contingent act, because the young man seems to be deprived of any capability ("I can") to change his situation for the "better". Standing up is a powerful metaphor for the emergence of the son's potentiality to act. His capacity to make decisions for the good is restored. And he decides to go back to his father.

Suppose I read this text in a context of incapacity: the son is poverty-stricken, deprived of good education, with no job and no connections in a strange land. One wonders what ("in heaven and on earth") could make him rise? Suppose my expectations of a situation such as this are that "standing up" is not possible. Yet he stands! How can this happen? Not by the power of the person himself, because he lacks this capacity. A clue is offered by the text, in the consideration of the young man as to what he intends to say to his father, namely: "I have sinned against heaven, and before thee." (Luke 15:18b). We see that the young man has an awareness (confession) that he has sinned. This confession need not happen, but it could; and it does. The confession takes into account the relationships of the young man, both to heaven {"*coram deo"*) and to his father ("before

[25] See Hermans 2017, 38-40, for a more extensive analysis.

thee"). What is more, the text suggests that we need to see them connected. Did the confession need to happen to set in motion the reinstatement of the young man as a capable man? We are inclined to think so, because it precedes the reinstatement.

The narrator of the book of Luke continues: "But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." (Luke 15:20). The dynamic that sets the transformation of the young man in motion is the acts of a capable father, namely seeing (understanding), compassion (appetite), and action (will). Is this just the young man's earthly father, or also his heavenly Father? We don't know. The son makes his confession as he intended to do (Luke 15:21), but it comes after the actions of the father, who mediates the gift of "You can" in compassion and love. The eschatological dimension of the acting of the father becomes clear in the following verse: "Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet."(Luke 15:22). The acting of the father is transparent towards the acting of the Name. God's future of the abundance of new possibilities emerges in the acting of the earthly father.

The father takes the interests of his son as his own interests, and gives him an identity and a status within the community (*oikos*). By doing this, he also transgresses the boundaries that the system imposes on people: "Boundaries of insider and outsider, the 'haves' and 'have-nots' within which our identities are contested, challenged, and often jeopardised by strife and scarcity, where death is dealt with as often as life" (Park 2009:520). In the act of compassion, a new interpretation of '*oikos'* emerges:[26] a (comm)unity which is neither divided nor discriminatory, but a place of life and freedom for all, where all boundaries are levelled and where the people's real needs are taken care of.

Which new possibilities of meaning are opened up by the text that can transform the way we understand our lives? And which old possibilities are taken up and developed or excluded as dead ends? The parable starts by introducing "a certain father". Why this father? Why a crisis in economy, relationships, and this "*oikos"*? Can he handle this situation? Yes, he can. But the enigma of his "I can" (love and compassion) is hidden in the gift of God's love, in which the possible and the actual are the same. New possibilities emerge which transform the good

[26] Is it completely unexpected that the father shows compassion to his youngest son? Is what happens in this situation beyond imagination? The act of compassion need not happen, but it is not impossible. Carol LaHurd shows that when reading Luke 15, Arab Christian women did not consider the act of the father to be inappropriate. "The son is the father's 'own blood', and the 'loving heart of the father' forgets the wrong and the lost money, and thinks only about getting his son back." (LaHurd 2002, 259). It could have just happened, of course; but from an event-hermeneutical perspective, that is not the issue. The issue is that it happened to *this* father, in *this* situation. And when it happens, it transforms our understanding of community, economy, and relationships.

life with and for others in just institutions. In the act of compassion and love (i.e. the event), the earthly/heavenly father transforms the meaning of "*oikos"*, both on the level of economy and relationships and in the idea of the *pater familias*.

What about the young man? He actualises possibilities that human beings have, and that can result in death and suffering. He claims his inheritance, and by doing so, declares that his father is dead to him. He can do this, though he need not; and yet, he asks for his inheritance. He puts his future in his money, but loses it all. At the end, he even sells his freedom in order to survive. The young man represents old possibilities in the domain of economics (money) which are developed in the parable as leading to death and suffering.

But the young man also manifests new possibilities. He makes a confession, that he has "sinned against heaven, and before thee". What he has done to his father ("before thee") is understood as also being "against heaven". In his confession, he expresses an awareness of the gravity of his acts (against heaven). Out of this depth, new possibilities arise: "he stands up". Does he *need* to stand in order to receive? Could one not receive the gift of "You can" while lying down with the swine? We do not know. What we know is that a surplus of new possibilities happens through the father, who mediates the gift from heaven to the son. So the father is not only transformed by the divine "You can", he also mediates this gift to others. If this event could happen to this father, it could happen to us. It is possible, but need not happen. Thank God it happens!

1.5 Decentring the theological knower and knowledge[27]

How does one live a good life, with and for others, in just institutions and a sustainable world?[28] This pragmatic task refers to (what I will call) practical reasoning in human acts in the Name of God. Practical reasoning refers to the reasons (How to? Why? What?) and rules for acting and suffering as belonging to a certain community of knowledge which shares a certain background knowledge.[29] Within a community of knowledge, agents share a certain understanding; of the self, others, and the world. For example, a congregation or a religious denomination is a community of knowledge in which people share a certain understanding of their way of life in Naming God. Reasons include ideas about goals and aims (What to do?), strivings of the human will (How to choose?), emotions and feelings (How does it affect you?), and action-tendencies (How to do it?). Rules for acting are incorporated in the practices in which actors are involved. For example,

---

[27] Parts of the argument in this section were formulated in Hermans 2015: *From Practical Theology to Practice-Oriented Theology*. The difference in this article is that we connect this shift to the perspective of contingency.

[28] This formula is based on Paul Ricoeur' s *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). However, I add "in a sustainable world" to his definition of the good life.

[29] Ricoeur, *Practical Reason,* 193. We also refer to this as an epistemic community.

a religious ritual such as baptising incorporates certain categories of meaning (such as human beings as the image of God), which symbolises the meaning of this action in the "Name of God".

How does contingency affect the theological researcher (the knower) and the theological theory (the knowledge) e.g. human acting and suffering in the Name of God? Our claim in this section is that contingency implies a decentring of both the knowledge claim of the theory which we build, and of the theologian, as a privileged source of knowledge.

The members of an epistemic community take the knowledge base of the reasons and rules for acting for granted. For example, the community of ministers of a specific Church, or the members of a Christian congregation, all accept the knowledge base of their epistemic community. Contingency makes the members of the epistemic community aware that their knowledge base is an option, along with other options. We will illustrate this in the process of the widening of the material object of practical theology in the last 50 years.[30] In the same movement of expanding the subject researched, the researcher moves out of the centre from which theological theory is built.[31]

In 1964, the first volume of the *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* [Handbook of Pastoral Theology] was published, which widened the material object of pastoral theology to every active believer in the Church. This opened up the knowledge of other epistemic communities in the church (women; the younger generation; migrants; different ethnic groups; etc.), alongside the knowledge of ministers as trained theological professionals. A beautiful example of this is Dion Forster's (2017) study of intercultural bible reading on different understandings of forgiveness in Matthew 18.15-35, looking at 'ordinary' Bible readers of different cultures (e.g. epistemic communities). Group A was made up of black members, and Group B of white members of the same Christian denomination – the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Helderberg Circuit. In Group A there was a dominant social and political understanding of forgiveness. Group B held almost exclusively individual and spiritual understandings of forgiveness (Forster 2017, 215). The knowledge base of each group was different, and using this difference in communication between the groups created an opportunity for transformation.

[30] My claim would be that the same has happened in other disciplines in theology, and other disciplines in the academic field.

[31] There is a third movement included in this development, namely from strong to weak rationality. Lack of space prevents me elaborating on this. See Chris A.M. Hermans' 'Narratives of the self in the study of religion: epistemological reflections based on a pragmatic notion of weak rationality'. In M. de Haardt, M. Scherer-Rath & R.R. Ganzevoort (Eds), *Religious Stories We Live By. Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies* (Leiden: Brill), 2013, pp.34-43.

This ecclesial paradigm creates a new boundary between different epistemic communities; that is, between members of the Church and people outside the Church. From a theological perspective, this boundary can be criticised from the width of the history of salvation and the length of the eschatological perspective of the Church (Van der Vern 1985: 23). Van der Ven calls this a decentring of the Church from what is beyond (i.e. he kingdom of God). He refers to the paradigm that goes beyond the boundaries of the Church as the paradigm of Christianity in the coordinates of Church and society. Within this paradigm, the objects of pastoral theology are not only the actions of liberation, justice and care by believers (members of the Church), but also the acts and practices of non-believers who act according to the same principles in society. Where is God's future as the possibility of (or in actuality emerging as) acts of liberation, justice and care of non-Christians in our society? What events are narrated in the differing communities in society about the shift from incapacity to "I can" or "We can" (capable men and women)? Not only acts in the Name of God as we know it in Jesus Christ, but all human acts of liberation, hope and love? What do they teach us about God's future that wants to emerge in the lives of people suffering and struggling to survive?

As stated before, contingency implies not only a decentring of theological knowledge, but also of the theologian (the knower) as a privileged subject of knowledge. We have described the widening of the material object of pastoral theology, starting with the actions of the pastor towards all human acts of liberation, love and hope (Hermans 2014). In the situation of the actions of the pastor, we as academic theologians felt quite comfortable in having privileged knowledge. We were the persons in the centre, who know where, how and why God was acting in the lives of human beings, in society and in nature.

But in building knowledge of situations at the other end of the spectrum (all human acts of liberation, love and hope), no scholar today can claim to have knowledge on improving the situation of people suffering and in need of change. We do not know how to change the lives of people living in scarcity (Hermans 2017). We do not know what reasons people have for acting in the cause of justice, hope and love, and we do not know the rules of the practices which establish a good life with and for others in just institutions and a sustainable society. We do not know what God's future is that wants to emerge in the lives of people in poverty, without any education and means to survive.

To be able to do all of this, we need to move out of the centre of knowing and become watchmen for the new world to come (Rev. 21:1). Theology in an age of contingency is a risk: where is God's future emerging, in actuality? This is not how we are trained as theologians, within a theology in which we have presumed that God is the foundation f an immutable order of being (ontotheology). But it is a risk in the Name of God whose future is emerging in our world.

1.6 Practice-oriented Methodology

What research methodology is aligned with this shift towards contingency? It will not come as a surprise that I am a strong advocate of practice-oriented methodology. But I will focus here on those characteristics of practice-oriented methodology that align with contingency:

1. the general and the singular, i.e. the unknown, unexpected, different or other;
2. the role of the possible in transforming the actual;
3. building a theory of contingent certainty; and
4. that the researcher is not the problem-owner.

1.6.1 The general and the singular

In practice-oriented research, the research goal originates from the action problem (the practice), and the knowledge created in the research contributes directly to the improvement of this practice (Andriessen 2014, 14). The problem does not stem from theory, and the knowledge created in the research is not valued, because it contributes to theory (Hermans & Schoeman 2015, 22). The problem is singular (this person, this community, this situation) and the theory is valued because it contributes to the improvement of the praxis. The theory is not on the general and that which is in common, but on the general and singular. (What this means will be illustrated later, in terms of the so-called CIMO logic.)

Practice-oriented research methodology is not the same as action research; but on the other hand, it is not completely different. As it has been developed in the last decades, practice-oriented research incorporates a knowledge stream of theory development and a practice stream of change.[32] The knowledge stream aims at generating transferable[33] knowledge; the practice stream aims at the transformation of a situation from the actual to the desired. Without the knowledge stream, it is not academic research. (In essence, this is the criticism

[32] Daan G. Andriessen, Designing and testing an OD intervention: reporting intellectual capital to develop organisation. *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science* 43 (2007), 89-107.

[33] Which is not the same as the "generalisability" of research results in a population. But I would like to formulate a provocative claim here: I have never read any study in practical theology that met all the conditions of sampling and data collection in order to be able to state that its results were generalisable. Or, to formulate it more positively: all the theory building as I know it (definitively – including everything I have done) is explorative research, for which every claim made for generalising results is out of order!

action research as it has been developed from the middle of the 20th century onwards, for example in educational science.)[34] So practice-oriented research methodology is not just the transformation of practice; it also wants to build transferable knowledge about action. On the other hand, the knowledge stream without the practice stream would be "old" theoretical research. In practice-oriented research, the knowledge stream and practice stream should be held together.

How does the development of transferable knowledge work? The first way is to use a multiple case study methodology.[35] Where the cases allow for difference at an individual level, they are compared across the different cases, to build theory that is transferable beyond the individual cases. A multiple case methodology allows for switching several times between the practice stream of transformation and the knowledge stream of theory building. If the cases are selected in sequence, one can continue selecting new cases until saturation is reached.

Secondly: in building knowledge in cases, we should specifically aim at trying to understand the mechanisms that generate the change in a specific context. We need to go beyond the kind of logic that can be expressed by the formula "if A, then do B". This can be called "IO logic": some intervention [I] leads to a certain outcome [O]. (Denyer, Tranfield and van Aken 2008). This logic is decontextualised, and does not clarify the mechanism that generates the transformation. Practice-oriented logic needs to produce so-called "CIMO logic". This logic involves a combination of a problematic context [C], for which the design proposition suggests a certain intervention type [I]; to produce, through specified generative mechanisms [M], the intended outcome(s) [O].[36] An example of this is the project on the merger of congregations by Dieter Praas (2018). His main research goal was the improvement of the quality of the narrative of the merged congregations (shared, related to human flourishing, rich, adequate). In his research, he showed that some shifts in quality happened in both cases (in general). Other shifts were specific to one case, and related to the difference in context (singular).[37] The difference was related to the historical background of the merged congregation, giving singularity to the comparison.

---

[34] Harold L. Hodgkinson, Action research: a critique. *Journal of Educational Sociology* 31 (1957):137-153.

[35] Daan Andriessen, Kennisstroom en praktijkstroom [Knowledge stream and practice stream]. In Joan van Aken & Daan Andriessen (Eds.), *Handboek Ontwerpgericht Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek* [Handbook of Design-oriented Scientific Research] (Den Haag: Boom Lemma), pp. 90-91.

[36] Idem.

[37] See Praas 2018, Chapter 6.

1.6.2 The role of the possible

An action problem is defined by not knowing how to act to move from the actual to the desired situation. The desired situation can be seen as a real possible ("something-that-can-be"), in the sense that people are willing to orient their actions towards the possible; and in doing so, transform the actual into the possible. Practice-oriented research starts with action problems (decision making; discernment; re-constructing one's life story; not knowing how to communicate experiences in the Name of God) rather than theoretical problems. Action problems express the discrepancy between the actual (A) and the desired (D) situation, where (given our existing knowledge) we have *no knowledge* of how to solve the discrepancy. What is more, the change in the actual situation must come from the possible. Seen from an understanding of the incapacity of human beings, the coming of God's future is a shift from "I cannot" towards the desired situation "I can". This future – which is God – holds something in reserve as a surplus, of a good life with and for others. So the change or transformation does not come from the past (the antecedent) but from the possible (the consequent); which is a reversal of how we normally define a causality, in which we explain the future from the past. The desired is defined from the perspective of the possible, which – for the people in the problem situation – might not be perfectly clear at all at the start!

There are two types of practice-oriented research: intervention research, and design research.[38] In the first, the aim is an improvement of the actual situation towards the desired; in the second, the focus is on the construction of the intervention to be used in practice to transform the actual. Both types are dealing with the same challenge, of bridging the gap between the actual and the desired – but from a different perspective.

The intervention research build theory is about bridging the gap between the actual (A) and the desired (D), from the perspective of the situation that it wants to improve. The core question of the research: after the intervention, has the actual situation (of this person, this community, this organisation) improved in the direction of the desired? Design research, on the other hand, focuses on the construction of an intervention (or design) from the perspective of the desired. The core question is: does the intervention change the actual situation in the direction of the desired?

Intervention research can be structured according to the intervention (or policy) cycle: starting with an analysis of the problem, making a diagnosis of the context and causes of the problem, defining conditions for the solution of the problem and imagining the possible, making an intervention plan, monitoring and evaluating the intervention, and reflecting on what one has learned in the intervention cycle (new knowledge). Design research focuses on developing a material artefact that helps to create the desired situation; such as a protocol of short-

[38] Piet Verschuren, *Praktijkgericht Onderzoek.* pp.154-168.

term counselling in spiritual guidance for non-believers, or a prototype of an *im*-possible act of forgiveness in a traumatic situation of ethnic conflict, which makes it impossible for communities to build a new future together. But the outcome of design research can also be an immaterial artefact, which incorporates the conditions, specifications and/or principles of the desired situation, such as the principles of liquid church communities in late modernity. An immaterial artefact is not a realised example of the desired situation, but a "drawing board scheme" of the desired situation or the principles that must be met to develop new church practices in the future.

1.6.3 A theory of contingent certainty

Thirdly, practice-oriented research methodology incorporates an awareness of multiple perspectives and contingent certainty. There is no theory (existing knowledge) that could be "applied" in order to bridge the gap between the actual and the desired situation. To understand this, we must make a distinction between the "predictive cycle" and the "regulative cycle" (Van Strien 1997). In the "predictive cycle", the object which needs to be explained (*explanandum*[39]) is an example of some analytical theory, which predicts "what is" from causal antecedents. In the "regulative cycle", the *explanandum* is the process by which change has emerged in the desired direction ("what ought to be"). The criteria for the desired situation are different in each life domain: in health, the criterion is "quality of life"; and in the religious domain, it is "the surplus of life", or (formulated theologically) the eschatological possible/present. What happened that made the problem situation shift in the direction of the desired situation?

What we like to transform is always in the field of the meaning of human action: a transformation of an incapacity – of "I cannot", through the gift of "You can", to the capacity of "I can" (in whatever capacity of acting, such as forgiveness, promise, trust in the coming of God's future, etc.). In the research of Dion Forster (2017) mentioned previously, Group A (the white members of the congregation) had a spiritual and inter-relational understanding of forgiveness. They were incapable to understand forgiveness from a community and socio-political perspective.

Sense-making always incorporates multiple perspectives reflecting a contingent reality: "What is" from the possibility that "It is not", and "What is not" from the possibility that "It is". The researcher tries to develop knowledge about the process (intervention; event) that changed the perspective of the persons in Group A in the desired direction. This theory is always a contingent certainty, unlike the theories of science by which we predict reality. Change or transformation can happen, but it need not happen; and in this case, it happened. Remem-

[39] In hermeneutics this is called the "*interpretandum*" – see Section 3 above.

ber that the theory which we build is always about the *explanandum,* or the dependent variable. From all the practice-orientated research that I have supervised, I know that we also use existing social-scientific theory in developing our interventions – such as the Intergroup theory, in the multi-ethnic setting of Dion Forster's research. It helps to understand the psychological mechanisms which cause anxiety and prejudice; mechanisms which can block people from being open to other perspectives on theological imagination, such as forgiveness.

The new knowledge is about what we do not know, namely changing the actual situation seen as an incapacity from the perspective of the eschatological possible/present (A) and the desired situation (D). This shift is ruled by contingency, not by causality.[40] The theory that we have built expresses contingent certainty about the transformation from the actual (A) towards the desired (D).

1.6.4 The researcher is not the problem-owner

In practice-oriented research, the researcher is not the owner of the research problem. A problem-owner is a person (for example, a minister), or a group of people (for example, a policy body within congregations), or an organisation that is the 'stakeholder' of an action problem (Hermans & Schoeman 2015a, 28). The problem-owner need not be part of the action problem. On the other hand, the possibility that they are also involved in the situation cannot be excluded. There are three markers of ownership:

a. Owners identify with the issues of others, e.g. people;
b. They accept responsibility for the action problem, and therefore accept responsibility for improving the situation;
c. They handle an issue with competence (making a difference!).

A problem-owner can easily be identified, as s/he commissions the research project, and is the one to whom the researcher should report his or her findings. One of the requirements of the problem-owner's role is to guarantee that the project is collaborative, well connected to the interests and problems of the problem-owner, and use-oriented (McKenney & Reeves 2012, Chapter 1). Is it helping the people involved in the action problem to change towards the desired? Is the new knowledge useful and meaningful for them? Is the new knowledge connected to their interests?[41]

---

[40] Our interventions are holistic, unlike the research in a psychological laboratory. What we do is register a willingness to re-evaluate the respondents willingness to open up to other perspectives of forgiveness (Forster 2017, 198). We do not claim that this caused the change; it could have happened, and it is plausible that – in this case – it was affected by the event.

[41] For a more extensive discussion on utility of research, see Hermans & Schoeman 2015b.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andriessen, D.G. (2007). Designing and testing an OD intervention: reporting intellectual capital to develop organisation. The Journal of Applied Behavioural Science 43:89-107.

Dabrowski, A. (2015). How many concepts of intentionality? Studia Humana 4(3):3-13.

De Gruchy, J. (2013). Led into mystery: Faith seeking answers in life and death (Kindle Locations 1104-1106). SCM Press. (Kindle edition.)

Dalferth, I.U. (2016). Radical theology. An essay on faith and theology in the twenty-first century. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. (Kindle edition.)

Delahaye, E. (2018). It is no longer I who lives. Heidegger, Badiou and Agamben on subjectivity in the letters of Saint Paul. Dissertation, Radboud University, Nijmegen.

Denyer, D., Tranfield, D. & van Aken, J.E. (2008). Developing design propositions through research synthesis. Organisation Studies 29(2008)3:396-413.

Forster, D. (2017). The (im)possibility of forgiveness. An empirical intercultural bible reading of Matthew 18.15-35. Stellenbosch: SUN press.

Hermans, C.A.M. (2004). Abductive Hermeneutics. A pragmatic key to the learning paradox. In: Lombaerts, H. & D. Pollefeyt (eds.), Hermeneutics and Religious Education. Leuven (Peeters), (pp. 95-120

Hermans, C.A.M. (2012). Towards a 'U-turn' by the churches: How (not to) possibilise the future. Religion and Theology. A Journal of Contemporary Religious Discourse 19:237-264.

Hermans, C.A.M. (2013a). Narratives of the self in the study of religion. Epistemological reflections based on a pragmatic notion of weak rationality. In: M. de Haardt, M. Scherer-Rath & R.R. Ganzevoort (eds.), Religious stories we live by. Narrative approaches in theology and religious studies (Leiden: Brill), pp. 34-44.

Hermans, C.A.M. (2013b). Spiritual transformation: Concept and measurement. Journal of Empirical Theology 26 (2):165-187.

Hermans, C.A.M. (2014). From practical theology to practice-oriented theology. The study of lived spirituality and lived religion in late modernity. International Journal of Practical Theology 18(1):1-14.

Hermans, C.A.M. & Schoeman, K. (2015a). Practice-oriented research in service of designing interventions. Acta Theologica, Supplement 22:26-44.

Hermans, C.A.M. & Schoeman, W.J. (2015b). The utility of practical theology: Mapping the domains, goals, strategies and criteria of practical theological research. Acta Theologica, Supplement 22:8-25.

Hermans, C.A.M. (2017). Love in a time of scarcity: An event-hermeneutical interpretation. Acta Theologica 37(2):30-50.

Hodgkinson, H.L. (1957). Action research; A critique. Journal of Educational Sociology 31:137-153.

Joas, H. (2006). Religion in an age of contingency. In: W.B.H.J. van der Donk (ed.) Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenning van een dubbele transformative [Believing in the public domain. Inquiry of a double transformation]. (Amsterdam: WRR), pp. 55-64.

Joas, H. (2008). Do we need religion? On the experience of self-transcendence. London: Routledge. (Kindle edition.)

Joas, H. (2014). Faith as an option. Possible futures for Christianity. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Kearney, R. (2001). The God who may be. A hermeneutics of religion. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kearney, R. (2010). Capable man, capable God. In: B. Treanor & H.I. Venema (eds.), A passion for the possible. Thinking with Paul Ricoeur (New York: Fordham University Press), pp. 49-61.

Osmer, R. (2004). Johannes van der Ven's contribution to the new consensus in practical theology. In: C.A.M. Hermans & M.E. Moore (eds.), Hermeneutics and empirical research in practical theology. The contribution of empirical theology by Johannes A. van der Ven (Leiden: Brill), pp. 149-168.

Osmer, R. (2008). Practical theology: An introduction. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Park, R. 2009. Revisiting the parable of the prodigal son for decolonisation: Luke's reconfiguration of Oikos in 15:11-32. Biblical Interpretation 17:507-520.

Praas, D. (2018). Zusammen sind wir sind ganz bunt und eigentlich ganz stark! Narrative Identitätsentwicklung in fusionierten Pfarreien [Together we are different and very strong! Narrative identity transformation in merged congregations]. Munster: LIT Verlag.

Prawat, R.S. (2001). Dewey and Peirce, the philosopher's philosopher. Teachers College Record 103(4):667-731.

Rahner, K. (1972). Practical theology in the totality of the theological disciplines. In: K. Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 9 (New York: Herder & Herder), pp. 101-117.

Ricken, N. (2004). Diesseits von Relativismus und Universalismus: Kontingenz als Focus kritischer Reflexionen [On the other side of relativism and universalism: Contingency as focus critical reflection] In: A. Schäfer & M. Wimmer (eds.), Tradition und Kontingenz (Münster u.a.: Waxmann, S.), pp. 27-58.

Ricoeur, P. (1986). Zufall und Vernunft in der Geschichte [Contingency and Rationality in History; original French publication 1986](translated by Helga Marcelli). Tübingen: Verlag Claudia Gehrke.

Ricoeur, P. (1992). Oneself as another (translated by K. Blamey). Chicago: Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, P. (2004). Memory, history, forgetting. Chicago: Chicago Press. (Kindle edition.)

Ricoeur, P. (2005). Becoming capable, being recognised (translated by Chris Turner, original 'Devenir capable, etre reconnu'), Esprit no. 7, July.

Ricoeur, P. (2009). Living up to death (translated by David Pellauer). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Kindle edition.)

Treanor, B. & Venema, H.I. (2010). Introduction: How much more than possible. In: B. Treanor & H.I. Venema (eds.), A passion for the possible. Thinking with Paul Ricoeur (New York: Fordham University Press), pp. 1-21.

Van der Heiden, G.J. (2014a). Ontology after ontotheology. Plurality, event and contingency in contemporary philosophy. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Van der Heiden, G.J. (2014b). 'Het is niet zo': over metafysica en contingentie [Ít is not as it is. On metaphysics and contingency] Inaugural lecture: Radboud University [accessed 12 Oct 2018; at https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/handle/2066/131546]

Van Strien, P.J. (1997). Towards a methodology of psychological practice: The regulative cycle. Theory & Psychology 7(5):683-700.

Van der Ven, J.A. (1985). Wat is pastoraaltheologie? Een analyse van het werk van Frans Haarsma [What is pastoraltheology? An analysis of the work of Frans Haarsma]. In: Van der Ven, J.A. (ed.). Toekomst voor de kerk? Studies voor Frans Haarsma. (Kampen: KOK). pp.11-46.

Verschuren, P. (2009). Praktijkgericht onderzoek. Ontwerp van organisatie- en ((beleidsonderzoek [Practice-oriented research. Design of organisational and policy research]. Den Haag: Boom Academisch.

Venter, R. (2015). Trends in contemporary Christian eschatological reflection. Missionalia 43:1, 105-123.

Wuchterl, K. (2011). Kontingenz oder das Andere der Vernunft. Zum Verhaltnis von Theologie, Naturwissenschaft und Religion. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Chapter 2

Re-imagining God in an era of Contingency

Rian Venter

2.1 Introduction

A theologian has the difficult task of negotiating the relationship between *theos* and *logos*, the reality of the Ultimate within a particular horizon of understanding.[1] Various thinkers have suggested the notion of *contingency* as key to unlock the character of the contemporary moment. Inevitably, the theological imperative emerges about a hermeneutic for speaking God in these conditions. The article focuses on exploring the contours of this, especially in conversation with Chris Hermans and his inaugural lecture "Theology in an age of contingency" (2018). According to him, the normative task, that is, speaking about God, changes from the perspective of contingency. This I am interested in.

2.2 The Horizon

2.2.1 On naming the present

The title of Tracy's volume of essays *On naming the present: Reflections on God, hermeneutics, and church* (1994a) aptly captures the urge felt by many contemporary intellectuals or cartographers to describe the nature of radical changes being manifested and experienced by contemporary society. Labels such as 'postmodernity', 'postcoloniality', and 'globalisation' have acquired huge attention and in-depth treatment. It is hardly disputed that far-reaching shifts have been taking place;[2] the question, however, is *how to name* these and *how to discern* the nature of these transformations. In recent treatments, Goldin and Kutarna (2016) refer to an 'age of discovery', a new Renaissance; Mishra (2017) speaks of an 'age of anger', calling attention to the contradictions of the present moment; the philosopher Sloterdijk (2007), assuming the perspective of curator in his inaugural lecture to the Levinas Chair, advances the notion of a 'critique of extremist

[1] Tracy (1994b:37) puts it strikingly as follows: "The history of theology is the history of the ever-shifting relationship between the reality of God and that divine reality as experienced and understood from within a *logos*, i.e. a particular horizon of intelligibility".
[2] The somewhat older, but still insightful discussion of Gilkey (1985) of a "hermeneutic of events" remains worth reading.

reason', to deal with the Hobsbawmian 'age of extremes'.[3] The idea of a 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' has captivated the attention of many recently (see Schwab 2018). 'Contingency' is the proposal that requires our attention in this brief exploration.

These attempts at naming and diagnosing the character of the present are obviously indispensable for doing responsible theology. However, these discernments of critical changes are not innocent; they are *political acts* executed. What particular experiences are mapped – experiences of uncertainty (epistemology), connectedness and compression (globalisation or digitalisation), or relativity and alterity (postmodernity)? The experience of a significant part of the world's population, especially in the South, is one of sheer desperation, of daily struggle to survive. At the onset of the article, this *ethical* dimension of naming should be registered. In South Africa, the notion of 'de-colonization' acquired currency to address the continued experiences of suffering and discrimination. The deep yearnings for redress, for justice are arguably the most prominent experience. The 'age of the cry' should at least be articulated, even if the focus of the article requires an engagement with contingency.

2.2.2 Contingency as heuristic key – some voices

There may be a need for a genealogy of scholarly interest in 'contingency' in existentialist, poststructural and postmodern philosophy,[4] for example in work by Sartre, Foucault and Rorty. In their thought, 'contingency' is linked to the human condition, to human freedom, to the nature of knowledge and to truth as such. Sadly, no such study is available, to my knowledge. One will have to focus on a few individuals in order to get a glimpse of the divergent and multilayered approach to contingency.

Naming our age in terms of 'contingency' has become especially prominent in the work of the sociologist Hans Joas. Generally speaking, 'contingency' is "something that is, but does not have to be". Joas (2004:394) mentions that the best way to understand it is to view it as a 'counter-notion' to 'necessity'. In an interview, Joas (2017:236) succinctly conveyed his connotations to the notion. First, he employs it as reaction to the current discourse about modernity, which treats different social changes as necessarily tied to each other; for example, secularisation and democratisation. He resists the conventional homogenising of different dimensions of social change, and, by speaking about 'contingency', he

[3] See Hobsbawm (1994).

[4] The express link between contingency and postmodernity should not be missed. The contemporary enthusiasm for contingency cannot be divorced from larger shifts under way in especially Western societies. A careful observer such as Bauman (1996:51) states this emphatically: "Postmodernity is the condition of *contingency* which has come to be known as beyond repair."

seeks more precise *causal connections* between the phenomena. The second meaning Joas (2017:237; see also discussion in Joas 2014:chapter 5; 2004:395) attaches to 'contingency' emphasises "the growth in individual options of action". What was previously predetermined, has become, for the present generation, a matter of *individual decision*. What is crucial in Joas' approach is that he is aware that the notion itself is not fixed. He calls attention to the fact that a "dramatic semantic change" took place with the dawn of the modern scientific revolution: the understanding of a "well-ordered cosmos" was replaced by one of "a causally determined universe" (Joas 2004:394). He also refers to the "historical change in the experience of contingency" (Joas 2004:395).

Thomas Torrance (1913-2007) is one of the few theologians who accords 'contingency' a prominent position in his theology.[5] His interest is cosmological, and he locates his work in the intersection of theology and natural science. Contingency is for him "a fundamental factor in the basic structure of our scientific theories and explanations of order in the universe" (Torrance 1979:330).[6] He credits the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and especially the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, for a profound change in the understanding of God and God's relation to the world. In contrast to the Greek tradition, this relation has been re-conceptualised; it is no longer a necessary one, based on divine changelessness and necessity. Creation has been re-visioned "as an act of pure liberality and grace, that is, a contingent act unconditioned by any necessity in God" (Torrance 1979:332). This rendered the universe an essentially open system. The "innate power constantly to surprise us in its manifestation of unexpected features and structures" correlates "to the endless possibilities of the Creator" (Torrance 1979:334). The occurrence of *contingency and order* requires a quest for the ultimate intelligible ground for this unique feature of reality. Contingency generates a simultaneous possibility of dependence and independence – away and to God.

Chris Hermans, following Joas in reading our time in terms of contingency, articulates an ambitious proposal in his inaugural lecture. He defines 'contingency' in terms of sociology (modernity as increase of individual action options), of epistemology (knowledge and possible certainty), of ontology (being as event and new possibility), and of ethos (life and surplus). Employing the well-known fourfold grid of Osmer, he redefines the tasks for Practical Theology. In light of contingency, the normative task should re-imagine God in terms of eschatology and possibility; the interpretive task in terms of event; the pragmatic one in terms of decentring the theological knower, and the empirical task in terms of practice methodology.

---

[5] One other theologian who should be mentioned is W. Pannenberg, who discusses this extensively in his doctrine of creation, especially in relation to science. For a treatment and critique of Pannenberg, see Russell (1988).

[6] For a major exposition, see Torrance's *Divine and contingent order* (1981).

As a preliminary, a number of *critical questions* could be raised, especially about Hermans' proposal: Can 'contingency' carry this inclusionary burden? Can an array of discourses be lumped together in this manner, without blurring the complex originating impulses? For example, his proposal about re-imagining the divine has an intricate and variegated history in Continental Philosophy of Religion, of which contingency was definitely not the centripetal force. Does 'contingency' not become yet another reductionist and totalising narrative? Does contingency, as presented by Hermans, not eclipse the historical specificity of people's lives in the South, their suffering and quest for agency in a postcolonial era? Is contingency not devoid of any political urgency for justice? Does the enthusiasm for 'possibility' not remain oblivious to its disturbing indeterminacy? Hermans' proposal for Practical Theology cannot be uncritically accepted. More precise work is required to delineate the meanings of 'contingency', and of the links between epistemology, ontology, hermeneutics, and methodology. If this did not happen, the proposal cannot pass the test of scientific rigour.

2.3 Re-Imagining God – Some Voices

Over the past one hundred years, the doctrine of God has received major attention in Systematic Theology and in Philosophy of Religion, and critical re-constructions have taken place.[7] Only a few representative intellectuals can be highlighted, those whose work may furnish impulses for thinking God in terms of contingency.

The proposal by Hermans should probably be referred to at the start. He follows the well-known identification by Osmer of the four tasks of Practical Theology and raises the question about God as part of the theological-normative one. In a fairly dense argument, Hermans employs the arguments of Ricoeur and Kearney as primary interlocutors. His major focus is the overcoming of onto-theology and eschatology. If one's interpretation is correct, one gets the impression that eschatology is equated with 'pure act', that is, the simultaneity of possibility and actuality. Hermans is interested in transcending incapacity, which is the implication of contingency. For Hermans, God should be viewed in terms of 'possibility', 'enabling', 'making capable'. This then opens a horizon of 'excess'. The crux of this construal lies in the connection between human and divine action, and the fundamental problem is how the eschatological future emerges in the present. A number *of critical observations* should be voiced in this instance. Contingency has shifted from Joas' multiple options to human incapacity. It is not clear how Hermans overcomes onto-theology; he remains trapped in a metaphysical approach where God's identity is inferred *via causalitatis*.[8] Why the enabling action of God is labelled 'eschatological' is also not clear. It is conspicuous how typical theological resources such as pneumatology (Spirit as 'enabler'!), and

[7] For an overview, see Venter (2018a).

[8] For a discussion, see Gunton (2002:12ff.). At stake, in this instance, is the long and intricate attribute tradition.

twentieth-century discourses on eschatology and prolepsis are absent. To the credit of Hermans, one should remark that a pastoral concern radiates from his proposal.

The intense engagement with religion has become one of the outstanding features of Continental Philosophy of Religion since the second half of the twentieth century. The accusation by Janicaud *et al.* (2001) of a 'theological turn' in phenomenology has become widely known. Behind important prominent thinkers such as, among others, Ricoeur, Levinas, Derrida, Marion, Caputo and Kearney, the figure of Heidegger looms large.[9] Seminal impulses preceded his contributions: the idealism of Hegel, the anti-metaphysics of Nietzsche, and the phenomenology of Husserl, for example. The key to Heidegger's challenge has been to overcome the onto-theological constitution of Western metaphysics. The link between God and being has to be severed. God is not the apex of a long chain of being, and not its ultimate ground. The quest for radical alterity has become the central quest.[10] A twofold movement has manifested itself – one *à Dieu* (towards the totally other), and the second one *adieu* (one away from traditional views of God) (Jonkers 2005:11). No apologetical theology is at play in this instance; most of the proposals – whether for language, for the ethical, for excessive gifting, or weak thought – amount to a quest for more authenticity, a divine God, a God "one could worship". The insistence to unmask the 'idols' of God-thought is a tremendous service to Christian Systematic Theology, and interaction could be most productive for Christian theology.

The reflection by Richard Kearney, one of the prominent thinkers in present Continental Philosophy of Religion, forms some of the most important opinions in contemporary work on God. A brief overview of his main emphases could serve as illustration of developments in this disciplinary field of study.[11] Basically, all of the current intellectual sensibilities contract in his work and are reworked in creative proposals. He has become especially known for the notion of a "possibilizing God" (see *The God who may be* [2001]), of "anatheism" (see *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* [2010]). What is appealing in his work is the connection between eschatology and alterity, which opens vast political implications. After three previous 'reductions' – Husserl's transcendental, Heidegger's ontological and Marion's donological – Kearney submits a fourth,

[9] For an informed discussion, see Jonkers (2005:1-43).

[10] According to Jonkers (2005:10), the quest is "for a givenness, which goes beyond onto-theology, transcending our (power of) thinking, but which at the same time moves us most profoundly and throws us out of balance."

[11] For a good summary of his work, see Gschwandtner (2013:chapter 13); for an engagement from a Trinitarian perspective, see Venter (2018b:chapter 11). In the epilogue to the volume *Reimagining the sacred*, Kearney (2016:240-258) himself gives a most insightful summary of his own thought.

an eschatological one.[12] Crucial for him is the switch from macro- to micro-eschatology, to revisit the sacred in the midst of the secular, to turn to the 'least of these' (Mt. 25:40), to imagine a 'God of small things'; he is seeking "a radically fragile, vulnerable, humble, appealing, loving divinity" (Kearney 2016:156). In his more recent work, he also attends to carnal hermeneutics, which adds to the attractiveness of his philosophy. That very deep currents run in contemporary Continental Philosophy of Religion, and these should be carefully noted, transpires in Kearney's work. One gets a glimpse of this in his important discussion of "God or *Khora*?" (Kearney 2003:191-211). For some thinkers such as Derrida and Caputo, the final reality is *khora*, a void, without meaning or identity. Kearney reacts to this preferential option by deconstruction. Ultimate reality, for Kearney (2003:208), is a chiasmic play between *khora* and *hyperousia*, and there he situates his possible God.

David Tracy, one of the great 'god-thinkers' of our time, has written extensively on this theme.[13] He is appreciative of the modernist emphasis on God as relational, but he is concerned that it could become yet another system. He (2011:124) prefers *naming* God in typical postmodernist manner as the Impossible.[14] For him, this implies that the *hiddenness* and the *incomprehensibility* of God are to be emphasised. To counter any attempt at domesticating God, he associates God with disruption. Hence, his focus on God's hiddenness in negativity, in terror, but also in love as transgression, in excess and gift (Tracy 2011:124-127). He retrieves the relevance of the books of Job, of Lamentations and of theologians such as Dionysius the Areopagite.

The theological contribution of Jürgen Moltmann is well-known, but it may be fruitful to return to his work on God, which developed through various phases, and to relate his central insights to the present interest of this article. His successive re-imaginings of God in terms of promise, of suffering and of relationality open important avenues for an age of contingency. By suggesting that *future* belongs to the essential nature of God, Moltmann (1967:16) realises that such a notion of transcendence "promises something qualitatively new which stimulates the fundamental transformation of the 'systems' of the present" (Moltmann 1969:190).[15] The employment of the notion of *novum* was truly remarkable in this early thought of Moltmann, and his emphatic view that this should be viewed theo-logically: "the new shows itself as God's creative act" (Moltmann

[12] Verhoef (2016) gives a good overview of the fascination, in Continental Philosophy of Religion, with *transcendence* and its relation with *eschatology*.
[13] For an excellent discussion of God in his theology, see Okey (2018:chapter 6).
[14] For an interesting discussion of historical antecedents (for example, Kierkegaard and Heidegger), see Tracy (2006:343f.). Derrida should be credited with the contemporary fascination with the 'Impossible'.
[15] Note the striking title of this article: "The future as new paradigm of transcendence".

1969:9).[16] By distancing himself from Greek thinking (for example, the immutability of God), by turning to history and by assuming an explicit political antenna, Moltmann established an immensely rich grammar for speaking God. His later comprehensive pneumatology and eschatology added specific depth to his original intuitions.

2.4 Hesitant Intimations

There are resources available for re-thinking God, and the insights by the three scholars mentioned earlier could be very fruitfully employed. In my own modest contribution, I would like to add *four retrievals* that could assist to re-imagine God under conditions of contingency. In a fuller exposition, I believe one will have to employ specific nuances and distinctions: what contingency implies for thinking God's identity (nature), God's action and for discourses about God.

Before the 'retrievals' are mentioned, *two comments* may be pertinent about *onto-theology* and *eschatology*. The charge about traditional theology as captive to onto-theology should be approached with circumspection. The Von Harnack thesis about the Hellenization of early Christianity is no longer uncritically accepted (Markschies 2012). Even the position of a metaphysical thinker such as Thomas cannot be dismissed as mere onto-theological. Reformational theology has been acutely suspicious about 'speculative' theology, theology in the grip of some philosophical system. The emphases on the difference between Creator and creation, the Bible as normative source, and salvation history as starting-point for God-talk have always safeguarded theology from a banal onto-theology. Scholarship does not support the dismissal of a two thousand-year God-thinking as onto-theology. The hype about eschatology also requires some qualification. Prior to the discovery of eschatology, Christian theology, already in late nineteenth century, made a turn to eschatology, inaugurated by the well-known work of Weiss. Much of twentieth-century New Testament Studies, at least in the first half of the century, has been devoted to exploring the meaning of 'kingdom of God'.[17] In the 1960s, the turn to the future by theologians such as Moltmann and Pannenberg also opened a new era in Systematic Theology.[18] This discourse has been multilayered: not only history came into play, but also questions about prolepsis, ethics and politics. What distinguishes this from much of Continental Philosophy of Religion is the stress on the Trinity, specificity, and teleology. For example, Moltmann's eschatology is a far cry from the vague and indeterminate rumination about the 'possible'.

---

[16] The category *novum* obviously originated from E. Bloch, but Moltmann interpreted this differently: it is not linked to possibilities of (human) historical activity.

[17] For a good discussion, see Willis (1987), especially chapters 1-4.

[18] For different approaches, see, for example, Moltmann (1996:chapters 1-3).

2.4.1 Retrieval of the narrative identity of God

This retrieval fits the category of the contingent. Older theological scholarship tended to neglect the plurality of traditions in the Christian canon. Nowadays, in both Old and New Testament scholarship, one encounters an appreciation for the diversity of traditions, texts, and literary forms. Attending to the God of Samuel, of Job, of Jonah, or of John opens an exciting world of contingent speaking. If this is coupled with narratology, a new trajectory for speaking God is created.[19] Narrative identities are complex identities, and resist the typical fossilized, distilled and reductionist portrayals found in older systematic theological accounts, especially as expressed in the attribute tradition. Multifaceted, evolving and even contradictory character mapping will enrich one's grammar for speaking the divine and fit the age one inhabits. Simultaneously, recurring patterns such as *faithfulness* may emerge to disrupt the tyranny of 'sheer contingency'.

2.4.2 Retrieval of a Trinitarian pneumatology

This retrieval redresses the conspicuous blind spot in Continental Philosophy of Religion. The category of the Impossible, with its related associations such as excess and surplus, belongs in the Christian tradition uniquely to the Spirit. The presence and action of the Spirit in the Bible are connected to plurality, justice, and future.[20] The connection between Spirit and eschatology in Pauline theology, the Spirit as the *aparchē* and as the *arrabōn*, the first fruit or guarantee, is critically important for re-imagining God in an age of contingency. Any reference to a *novum*, to justice, and to emergence should, in a Christian sense, be regarded as belonging to the sphere of the Spirit.

2.4.3 Retrieval of the New Jerusalem vision in the Book of Revelation

This retrieval could function as corrective to the overly vague and indeterminate eschatology found in Continental Philosophy of Religion. This thoroughly symbolic and imaginative construal could suggest some heuristic guidelines to any Christian eschatology. The elements in this narrative account are astoundingly

[19] For only one study in this new field, see Lasine (2016).

[20] A theologian who emphatically argued for this is Welker in his pneumatology. For only one example of his reflection, see (2007:237, 238, 239, 244, 246). He argues that "all associations of the Spirit with uniformity and homogeneity have to be corrected"; he refers to the "polyphonic presence" of the Spirit. The focus on *justice* addresses the political hiatus often lacking in thinking about contingency. For a detailed discussion of Welker's pneumatology, see Van der Westhuizen (2013).

relevant to contemporary sensibilities.[21] The Christian hope is material and spatial; it entails restoration of justice; it is thoroughly inclusive (nations upon nations, the gates will remain open); it is relational (God will live with the people); its power will be redefined (a river flows from the throne); it embraces the aesthetic (the glory, *i.e.* beauty, of God will fill the streets); it is discontinuous with the evil of old Babylon, but also continuous with cultural achievements (nations will bring their splendour into the city), and it is cosmic in range. The vision evokes a most creative grammar for thinking about Christian hope in a substantial manner. Christian eschatology is, fundamentally, soteriologically determined. This moves relatively beyond micro-eschatology. History becomes the locus of God's saving work (see Moltmann 1996:section 3 on 'historical eschatology'). The Christian vision has always been *teleological* – The Messiah will come. For this reason, one could, in anticipation, labour for some signs of the New Jerusalem. Bauman (1996:51) makes the fascinating comment that "[c]ontingency may be lived as a state of perpetual new beginning and fresh start". Christian theology could accept, but within a wider frame of a final *telos*, that which will liberate one from perpetuity.

2.4.4 Retrieval of everyday life as locus for doing theology

Much has been written about 'contextualising theology', but the irony is that life is lived in the tedium of daily repetition, daily frustration and daily rituals, and this is often not theologised. Bodily practices, spatial practices,[22] and relational encounters all belong to the field of theological imagination. My suggestion is that the category of "everyday life" is the outstanding place where thinking about contingency should occur. Studies about this notion[23] should become preferred disciplinary partners for theology. At stake, in this instance, especially for a focus on the re-imagination of the divine, is the *mediation of transcendence* in daily routine and daily practices. The Matthean parable of the last judgement (Mt. 25:31-46) is relevant. By feeding, by clothing, and by welcoming the stranger in everyday life, one encounters the Transcendent.[24]

There are rich resources available in the biblical tradition and in the history of Christian thought to speak God in a manner that may make one's communication intelligible. Maybe the emphasis on contingency could foster a discovery of treasures often overlooked in one's grammar to mediate the reality of God in human speech.

---

[21] For only one significant interpretation in an overwhelming state of scholarship, see Schüssler Fiorenza (1991:109-114.)

[22] See the well-known work by De Certeau (1984:chapter 7) about "walking in the city".

[23] See the outstanding study by Amato (2016).

[24] Gutierrez's (1973:196-203) interpretation of this passage remains worth reading, and his stress on "human mediation to reach God" (1973:200).

2.5 Provisional Conclusion

It is debatable whether 'contingency' would be the most fruitful label to name our time, especially when place and space are seriously taken into consideration. Maybe contingency could assist heuristically for Europe, but for Africa some more urgent labels should be considered, with less of a Cartesian anxiety in mind, and more with an ethical concern for justice and flourishing. The desperation in the South is not a matter of mere contingency. Anyway, the discussion should continue to distinguish the surplus of meaning at stake. The different contexts in which it could be used, should be carefully separated, and the relations argued, and not assumed. The question could even be raised of a *Christian interpretation* of 'contingency', an interpretation Torrance has initiated. This could be liberative for the Christian faith, but at the same time a nexus of accompanying themes such as *meaningfulness, faithfulness, purpose and mystery* could be introduced that are conspicuously absent from the typical postmodern and continental usage.

Discourses of contemporary Continental Philosophy of Religion have produced sensibilities that Systematic Theology should consider. Christian Theology cannot ignore the prominence of themes such as onto-theology, weak rationality, donation, alterity, and excess, to name only a theme. However, an uncritical adoption of these convictions and perspectives could lead to an eclipse of the distinctive contours of Christian approaches to these.

Hermans' reflex to follow uncritically the Continental Philosophy of Religion's proposals for substantiating the Christian normative function of Practical Theology in an age of contingency cannot be missed. A drastic *truncation* takes place, in this instance. A mere glance at his literature used confirms this. The immense rich and pluralistic canonical traditions in both the Old and New Testaments for naming the divine are ignored. The same applies to twenty centuries of the Christian tradition. One cannot employ the charge of onto-theology, dismiss these, and seek recourse to Philosophy of Religion. Responsible Christian Theology would assume a different posture: excavate with a different hermeneutical lens the long Hebraic-Christian tradition with its multiple sources for avenues to profile the divine.

These comments lead to my *major question* to Hermans: What disciplines are primary conversational partners for Practical Theology? The traditional answers would have been the Bibliological and Systematic disciplines, and then, in an auxiliary sense, other disciplines such as philosophy. His naming of the normative function has *primarily* followed Philosophy of Religion. The truncation of the divine to eschatology and the notion of impossible display this in a most stark manner. One cannot wonder whether this, sadly, does not ironically amount to yet another idol, precisely what Heidegger tried to combat. The corrective of a scholar such as Tracy is most relevant in this instance – to call attention to hiddenness and incomprehensibility.

Hermans vaguely represents the deep current running in Continental Philosophy of Religion – the *ethical* in terms of alterity. A God-thinker such as Kearney and his contribution are crucial in this regard. At the same time, this is prominent in the Hebraic-Christian tradition. All re-imaginings of the normative function of (Practical) Theology should pay attention to justice and, more emphatically, to the political. This connection between eschatology and the political has been an explicit theme in the theology of Moltmann.

What is clear in Hermans' proposal is that contingency goes all the way down. His proposal is totalizing, and what is disturbingly absent is *qualification*, or a dialectic that inhibits the devastating implications of contingency, such as contingency-amid-purpose/order. The antenna by Kearney for the interpretations of *Khora* is pertinent in this instance. A consistent contingency is the occasion for sheer dread. A responsible *Christian* engagement with contingency would also be *prophetic* – redefine consistency in terms of meaningfulness.

Chris Hermans' inaugural lecture is an ambitious and provocative intellectual feat. Personally, I have misgivings about several elements of the project he has envisioned. But he should be congratulated on the sheer stimulation for further exploration, further discernment and re-imagining. This is how theology could serve the church, society and the academy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amato, J.A. (2016). Everyday life: How the ordinary became extraordinary. London: Reaktion Books.

Bauman, Z. (1996). Morality in the age of contingency. In: P. Heelas, S. Lash & P. Morris (eds), Detraditionalization (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 49-58.

De Certeau, M. (1984). The practices of everyday life. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Gilkey, L. (1985). Events, meanings and the current tasks of theology. Journal of the American Academy of Religion 53(4):717-734.

Goldin, I. & Kutarna, C. (2016). Age of discovery. London: Bloomsbury.

Gschwandtner, C.M. (2013). Postmodern apologetics? Arguments for God in contemporary philosophy. New York: Fordham University Press.

Gunton, C. (2002). Act and being: Towards a theology of the divine attributes. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans.

Gutierrez, G. (1973). A theology of liberation. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.

Hermans, C. (2018). Theology in an age of contingency. Unpublished inaugural lecture as Extraordinary Professor. University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

Hobsbawm, E. (1994). The age of extremes: A history of the world, 1914-1991. New York: Vintage.
Janicaud, D., Courtine, J-F., Chrétien, J-L., Henry, M., Marion, J-L. & Ricoeur, P. (2001). Phenomenology and the 'theological turn': The French debate. New York: Fordham University Press.
Joas, H. (2004). Morality in an age of contingency. Acta Sociologica 47(4):392-399.
Jonas, H. (2014). Faith as an option: Possible futures for Christianity. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Jonas, H. (2017). An interview with Hans Jonas (by C-G Heidegren). Sociologisk Forskning 54(3):233-243.
Jonkers, P. (2005). God in France. Heidegger's legacy. In: P. Jonkers & R. Welten (eds), God in France: Eight contemporary French thinkers on God (Leuven: Peters), pp. 1-42.
Kearney, R. (2001). The God who may be: A hermeneutics of religion. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
Kearney, R. (2003). Strangers, gods and monsters. New York: Routledge.
Kearney, R. (2010). Anatheism: Returning to God after God. New York: Columbia University Press.
Kearney, R. (2016). Epilogue: In guise of a response. In: R. Kearney & J. Zimmermann (eds), Reimagining the sacred: Richard Kearney debates God (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 240-258.
Lasine, S. (2016). Characterizing God in His/own image. In: D.N. Fewell (ed.), The Oxford handbook of Biblical narrative (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 465-477.
Markschies, C. (2012). Does it make sense to speak about "Hellenization of Christianity" in antiquity? Church History and Religious Culture 92:5-34. [Online.] Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1163/187124112X621581, on 23 February 2019.
Mishra, P. (2017). Age of anger: A history of the present. London: Penguin.
Moltmann, J. (1967). Theology of hope. London: SCM.
Moltmann, J. (1969). Religion, revolution, and the future. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
Moltmann, J. (1996). The coming of God. London: SCM.
Okey, S. (2018). A theology of conversation: An introduction to David Tracy. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
Russell, R.J. (1988). Contingency in physics and cosmology: A critique of the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Zygon 23(1):23-43.
Schüssler Fiorenza, E. (1991). Revelation: Vision of a just world. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
Schwab, K. (2018). Shaping the future of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. New York: Currency.
Sloterdijk, P. (2007). What happened in the twentieth century? En route to a critique of extremist reason. Cultural Politics 3(3):327-356.

Torrance, T.F. (1979). God and the contingent world. Zygon 14(4):329-348.
Torrance, T.F. (1981). Divine and contingent order. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Tracy, D. (1994a). On naming the present: Reflections on God, hermeneutics, and church. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
Tracy, D. (1994b). The return of God in contemporary theology. Concilium 6:37-46.
Tracy, D. (2006). God: The Possible/Impossible. In: J.P. Manoussakis (ed.), After God (New York: Fordham University Press), pp. 340-354.
Tracy, D. (2011). Approaching the Christian understanding of God. In: F. Schüssler Fiorenza & J.P. Galvin (eds), Systematic theology: Roman Catholic perspectives (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), pp. 109-129.
Van der Westhuizen, H. (2013). Selfloos en sosiaal? 'n Ontleding van Michael Welker se teologie van die Heilige Gees. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Stellenbosch University.
Venter, R. (2018a). God in Systematic Theology after Barth: Trends and perspectives. Stellenbosch Theological Journal 4(2):303-333. [Online.] Retrieved from: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n2.a15, on 23 February 2019.
Venter, R. (2018b). Trinitarian theology and Richard Kearney's anatheism: An engagement. In: D.P. Veldsman & Y. Steenkamp (eds), Debating otherness with Richard Kearney: Perspectives from South Africa (Cape Town: AOSIS), pp. 237-251. [Online.] Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2018.BK94.11, on 23 February 2019.
Verhoef, A.H. (2016). Transimmanence and the im/possible relationship between eschatology and transcendence. Religions 7/135. doi:10.3390/rel7110135.
Welker, M. (2007). The Holy Spirit. In: J. Webster, K. Tanner & I. Torrance (eds), The Oxford handbook of systematic theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 236-248.
Willis, W (Ed.). (1987). The kingdom of God in 20th-century interpretation. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

Chapter 3

Practical theology and the human person in an age on contingency: A pragmatic hermeneutic perspective

Jaco Dreyer

3.1 Introduction

What is the current *Zeitgeist* and how does this influence our theological practices? This is the theme of the inaugural lecture entitled "Theology in an age of contingency" (Hermans 2019) presented at the University of the Free State. Hermans starts by describing how much the world has changed in his lifetime. With reference to the work of the prominent sociologist Hans Joas, Hermans identifies our current age as an *age of contingency*. What is contingency and how does the perspective of contingency change the content and tasks of practical theologians? These are the main questions that Hermans sets out to answer in the remainder of his inaugural lecture.

Contingency, according to Hermans, can be described as a characteristic of modernity with an exponential increase in "action options" and an unpredictability of change in social order. This sociological perspective is the first of four definitions of contingency that he addresses in his paper. The heightened awareness of contingency also challenges our epistemologies (our view of truth) and ontologies (first philosophy of being). Author maintains that we have to add "potentiality" to the binary true-false on the epistemological level. Regarding ontology, the claim is that we have moved away from immutable (static) conceptions of reality to more dynamic conceptions. We have an awareness of plurality and difference, of potentialities, and the provisional character of everything. Lastly, the perspective of contingency also challenges our art of living (our ethos). We have learnt to expect the unexpected, and this outlook fundamentally shapes our view of ourselves and of life.

With these four different perspectives on contingency, Hermans discusses how applying these perspectives on contingency changes the four tasks and aims (theological-normative, interpretative, practice, and empirical-descriptive) of practical theology (and missiology), as described by Osmer (2008). Regarding the theological-normative task, Author describes naming God as eschatological possible/present. Human beings have to learn to view the coming of God

in the present. God is not "out there", but He is present where the capacity of human beings to act is restored and where broken relationships and memories are healed. The perspective of contingency also changes our interpretative task. The focus is no longer on the "real" interpretation, but on the possibilities of meaning opened up by our interpretations and on the transformation of ourselves and the world through actions. Thirdly, a contingency perspective decentres our knowledge claims, our theological hierarchies, and our roles as researchers. Theologians lose their status as a privileged source of knowledge. The focus is less on theological knowledge and more on the coming of God's future through acts of liberation, hope, and love. Lastly, a research methodology that takes the shift towards contingency into account focuses on the transformation of practices through practice-oriented methodologies.

This article takes up the challenge of doing theology in an age of contingency, with which Hermans confronts us. However, I will not discuss his wide-ranging response to the challenges of an age of contingency for theology, in general, and practical theology, in particular. Furthermore, my contribution is not specifically aimed at any particular perspective on contingency distinguished by Hermans. My focus is on the view of the human person[1] in an age of contingency. After all, practical theology studies the lived religion of *human persons*. How does the perspective of contingency affect our view of human persons? What is an adequate theological anthropology[2] at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century?

On the surface, these questions do not seem to be so difficult to answer. We are quite used to the traditional theological answer, namely that human beings are created in the image of God (*imago Dei*). However, I will argue that formulating a theological anthropology in an age of contingency is, in fact, a fairly difficult task. There are many competing views of what it means to be human. For example, postmodern and posthuman theorists seriously challenge our traditional theological views on the human person. Technological innovations and advances towards the end of the twentieth century further complicate matters, as they start to challenge the boundaries between human beings and technology. We are thus faced with many difficult questions regarding a theological anthropology.

I will not attempt to deal with all these challenges to a theological anthropology. In the next section, I will argue that, if we take the contingency perspective and

[1] I use the term 'human person' following Copleston (1950).

[2] Heitink (1979) took up this task in his doctoral thesis published as *Pastoraat als hulpverlening.* See also Heitink (1993) for a discussion of an anthropology in relation to a practical theological methodology.

its theoretical, epistemological, ontological and methodological consequences seriously,[3] it severely challenges the traditional, essentialist view of the human being that has reigned supreme for many centuries, at least in the Western world. I will further argue that the newly found freedom in an "age of contingency" has led, among other things, to novel ways of imagining the human being.[4] One of the most prominent of these[5] is a postmodern perspective on being human that is totally anti-essentialist. This perspective on being human has, however, also led to many new problems and challenges. I will conclude that neither an essentialist nor a postmodern perspective on the human being is satisfactory from our point of view.

In the third section of the paper, I will explore an alternative approach to the problem of formulating a view of the human person, namely a pragmatic hermeneutic approach. I will argue that a combination of the insights from two philosophical approaches, namely pragmatism and hermeneutics, help us formulate a view on the human person that does manage to steer between the Scylla of an essentialist view and the Charybdis of a postmodern view. I will also argue that

---

[3] Everyone does not share this point of departure, namely that a theological anthropology must meet the challenges of an age of contingency. Some conservative theologians may argue that we merely have to retrieve a biblical understanding of human beings as created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). However, if we take the contingency perspective seriously, it implies that a theological anthropology cannot be a-contextual or a-historical. We have to take both our understanding of the biblical traditions and the material conditions of our existence into account when we formulate a theological anthropology for our current context. Constructing a theological anthropology is a thoroughly hermeneutical endeavour.

[4] "Constructive theologians" also engage in this task. Copeland *et al.* (2005:79) refer to the importance of approaching our constructions of the human being both from the perspective of the "supernatural orientation" of being created in the image of God, and from the "more material side of existence": "Since being human involves both these trajectories reflecting the image of God and grappling with the burden of that reflection in everyday life, it would be fruitful to explore the interplay and ambiguity surrounding these two dimensions of human life". Copeland *et al.* (2005:78-83) mention three examples of cultural changes that put our traditional theological anthropologies under pressure. First, changing cultural expectations regarding freedom and responsibility and a "pervasive relativist ethic". Secondly, difficulties regarding issues of identity and alterity surface, due to gender, class, and race biases and intolerance towards the different other or the foreigner. Thirdly, due to our changing perceptions and experiences of time and memory – everything must happen now, in this instant, and past and future are sent to the margins of our existence. These technological advances and cultural shifts intersect and make it difficult to formulate a theological anthropology that resonates with life in the twenty-first century.

[5] There are many other approaches or perspectives that cannot be neatly fitted into this simplified scheme. In this instance, I contemplate, for example, behaviourism, personalism, and existentialism.

we find such a pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on the human person in the philosophy of the capable human being of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.

What are the possible implications of these discussions and perspectives for theology? How does this help us formulate a practical theological anthropology? I will address this topic in the fourth section. I will argue that some of the challenges that faith communities have to deal with flow from an outdated (essentialist) or a postmodern (expressive individualist) view of the human person. Can a pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on the human person, such as Ricoeur's capable human being, help us formulate a practical theological anthropology in an age of contingency that avoids some of these pitfalls and problems? I will argue that this perspective helps us interpret the *imago Dei* in a new way in an age of contingency.

3.2 Personhood in an age of contingency: The postmodern challenge

In the introduction, I already referred to Hermans' view of contingency and mentioned that I will not discuss the notion of contingency as such. I can simply acknowledge, in this instance, that the notion of contingency has a long and prominent record in philosophical thinking in the Western tradition. The Aristotelian-Thomist tradition regarding contingency plays an important role in theological reflection up to this day. According to this tradition, contingency (possibility) is related to the notion of necessity. The scholastic tradition regarding contingency has also greatly influenced the leaders of the Reformation in their struggle to balance human freedom and divine predestination.[6] It must be noted that contingency is, in the field of human life, connected to the idea of human freedom and possibilities.

It is interesting to note that the concept 'age of contingency' is used by prominent sociologists such as Hans Joas to describe the momentous sociocultural, political, and economic changes that have taken place in the modern world.[7] Joas (2014:65) maintains that we can get a better understanding of modernity and

[6] "The issue for the Western tradition was not to shed a purported Aristotelian determinism but, beginning quite clearly with Augustine, to coordinate an Aristotelian understanding of contingency, potency, and freedom with a Christian assumption of an overarching divine providence, resting on the non-Aristotelian assumption of a creation *ex nihilo*" (Muller 2017:317).

[7] Many scholars have tried to formulate the sociocultural conditions under which we live in our current modernising and globalising world. Sociologists often refer to processes such as modernisation, secularisation, and globalisation to describe the changing world in which we live. These context-dependent descriptions cannot be applied thoughtlessly in every context. However, they do function as very general descriptions of the changing material and cultural conditions of late modernity (or postmodernity, as some authors prefer).

modernisation if we view these changes from the perspective of contingency.[8] He is wary of explaining the changes in the contemporary world through "monothematic analyses" such as Ulrich Beck's risk society and "explanations of epochal rupture" such as modernisation theory and Marxism. From his pragmatic perspective, these theoretical explanations lose sight of the multidimensionality of the changes that have taken place in modern times and show a lack of balance between continuity and discontinuity. In other words, they are too triumphalist, too deterministic, and too homogenising. Instead of trying to formulate a "master trend", he rather opts to describe the changes in the modern world in terms of a theory of contingency. This helps us avoid the "fetishization" of macro-sociological theories such as modernisation theory and Marxism and aids us in recognising the "actual variability of constellations" (Joas 2014:72).

> Why then do I refer to our present as an age of contingency? The reason is that the concept of contingency seems to me better able than any other to convey both the massive increase in individual action options and the growing number of experiences that result from this massive increase (Joas 2014:73).

The contingency perspective helps us understand how the pre-modern idea of a well-ordered cosmos was disrupted and replaced by a view that stresses "randomness" and "free will" (Joas 2014:74).[9] In this instance, it is particularly important that the view of the human being also changed under "conditions of high contingency", as Joas (2014:76) describes it. The modern person is "a contingent person", writes Murphy (1998:101). The view of the rational human being promoted by Descartes and his followers came increasingly under pressure. In the age of contingency, people became aware of the limitations of a view of the human person based on "essences" or "substances". Darwin's theory of evolution further undermined the essentialist idea of a human being. From a scientific perspective, the idea of a "human being" has been criticised on the basis of an "outdated essentialism" and from a social perspective for its outdated concept of White male as the ideal of a human being (Naicker 2012). Traditions lost their power and people became aware of their new-found freedom and the autonomy of the person.

This way of viewing the human person is a massive change from the premodern, substantialist understanding of the human being. In a paper on "The human person in contemporary philosophy", Copleston (1950:3) describes the classical, substantialist view of a person with reference to Boethius' formulation: a person is "an individual substance of rational nature". Copleston (1950:3) further describes how Thomas Aquinas emphasised the "human substance, consisting of

[8] In this instance, I follow Joas' (2014) explanation in his chapter "The age of contingency".

[9] "Contingency is anything that escapes the direction of our lives and that exposes the open-endedness and uncertainty of human experience" (Schilderman 2011:54).

rational soul and body" and how Descartes emphasised the "self-consciousness of the spiritual substance". This has changed in the modern period when "(f)reedom becomes recognized as the chief characteristic of the human person" (Copleston 1950:4). This ties in with Joas' view that the modern person became aware of the manifold action options. The modern person "becomes an 'individual' ... by the exercise of his (*sic*) free choice, by freely giving form and direction to his life" (Copleston 1950:5).[10]

These ideas of freedom and autonomy became even more important when poststructuralist, postmodernist, feminist and postcolonial ideas started to gain ground in the second half of the twentieth century. These intellectual streams differed in many ways, but they had a common enemy in the substantialist view of the White heterosexual male as the ideal human being.[11] The "Vitruvian ideal of Man as the standard of both perfection and perfectibility was literally pulled down from his pedestal and deconstructed" (Braidotti 2013:3).[12] Postcolonial and decolonial theorists gladly assisted with this deconstruction.

The deconstruction of the essentialist view of the human being gained special impetus in the late 1960s in Europe and, more particularly, in France. Poststructuralism increased its influence and postmodern ideas about the human being resulted in new ways of thinking about the human being. The ideal of a "universal" image of "man" was replaced by an awareness of the contingencies of cultural contexts and social processes in the formation of identity (Richardson *et al.* 1998:501). Bernstein (1991:307) specifically mentions the "'postmodern' celebration of contingency, fragmentation, fissures, singularity, plurality, and ruptures". A new awareness of the importance of context, history, and the role of power (Foucault) also contributed to the deconstruction of earlier visions of "man".

The development of the human and social sciences also contributed to different views on what it means to be human. In the preface to a book on Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology, Michel and Porée (2016:vii) write that these fields and disciplines have become increasingly specialised and jealous about

---

[10] This emphasis on freedom is echoed by Sattler (2014:86): "It has often been seen as a crucial feature of modernity that the old chains of necessity – religious, political, social, or otherwise – have been shaken off and human beings have been released into a radical form of freedom." Bauman (2001:50) maintains: "It is my conviction that this rising above necessity, which is called freedom is the secret of the amazing creativity which humans go on demonstrating when it comes to seeking and finding and inventing the modes of being-in-the-world.".

[11] "Feminists like Luce Irigaray pointed out that the allegedly abstract ideal of Man as a symbol of classical Humanity is very much a male of the species: it is a he. Moreover, he is white, European, handsome and able-bodied; of his sexuality nothing much can be guessed" (Braidotti 2013:3).

[12] The Vitruvian ideal of Man refers to Leonardo da Vinci's drawing "Vitruvian Man".

their methods and how they construct the human being.[13] Human sciences, but also natural sciences such as paleoanthropology and the neurosciences, have many different views on what it means to be a human being. Traditionally, theology had much to say about human beings, but they now face a great deal of competition from other human and natural sciences. The idea of what it means to be human has become very fragmented. Eagleton (1985:71) describes this "new" view of the human person well in a chapter on capitalism, modernism and postmodernism:

> As postmodernist culture attests, the contemporary subject may be less the strenuous monadic agent of an earlier phase of capitalist ideology than a dispersed, decentred network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority, the ephemeral function of this or that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend or fashion. The 'unified subject' looms up in this light as more and more of a shibboleth or straw target, a hangover from an older liberal epoch of capitalism, before technology and consumerism scattered our bodies to the winds as so many bits and pieces of reified technique, appetite, mechanical operation or reflex of desire.

The postmodern, fragmented picture of human beings is well illustrated by the character of Ulrich in the Austrian writer Robert Musil's unfinished novel *The man without qualities* (Sattler 2014). The main character, Ulrich is aware of his freedom (contingency), but cannot choose and ends up confused and deeply troubled. In this novel, we see how "expressive individualism" without any moral accountability leads to a moral crisis for the main character.[14]

The irony is that this unbound freedom proclaimed by postmodern thinkers often does not lead to well-being and happiness and a sense of living a meaningful life. Feelings of happiness and satisfaction rapidly disappear if they are not grounded in something higher or bigger or substantial. Fortin (1996:11) thus concludes:

> Contrary to its stated aim, liberal democracy does breed a specific type of human being, one that is defined by an unprecedented openness to all human possibilities. What this leads to most of the time is neither Nietzschean creativity, nor a noble

[13] The result is: "Hence the mirror they hold up to human beings is cracked" (Michel & Porée 2016:vii).

[14] Sattler (2014:86) refers to the negative side of the radical form of freedom that confront human persons. He mentions that it leads to the "dire difficulty of dealing with what we can call the problem of contingency: how to decide what to do if it is equally open to us to perform a certain action as well as its opposite, if there is no necessity, no sufficient reason that tells us to do the one but not the other".

> dedication to some pre given ideal, nor a deeper religious life, nor a rich and diversified society, but easy[-]going indifference and mindless conformism.

The advertising industry and capitalist machinery maintain the illusion of freedom that rugged individualism and consumerism is the way to a good life.[15] I shop, therefore I am! The following quotation from Faucher (2018:97), in a recent publication, accurately describes this predicament:

> What we seem to be left with is a life indexed on the pursuit of a false happiness where the best result is simply adjustment to the social media environment's competitive nature, and the pathway to this spectacular happiness is littered with signs that tell us to amass virtual objects, to consume our way to self-actualisation.

Many more examples can be mentioned, but the message is clear. A postmodern view of the autonomous human being, free from traditions, expectations and constraints, does not in itself lead to a happy and fulfilling life.[16] It also raises many questions from a philosophical and scientific perspective. We know from scientific research that human beings are born in specific situations and cannot choose the "lifeworld" in which they are raised. Freud and the other masters of suspicion, as they are referred to, undermined the sense of control and agency through the role of the unconscious and the internal and biological drives that influence human behaviour. The ego is not master of its own house! The view of human freedom and autonomy is further complicated by the discovery of the role of genes in human behaviour.[17] We, therefore, have to question the postmodern view of the human person. Are we really so free to act as these postmodern thinkers assume? What is the role of tradition, of the lifeworld, and of religion in becoming a human person? And how do these aspects affect human agency? Are we really the masters of our fate and the captains of our souls as the poet William Ernest Henley formulated it in his well-known poem *Invictus*? How can we enhance social cohesion when there is a loss of universal ideals and individuals choose

[15] Kunneman (1996) sets out the societal changes in The Netherlands after Auschwitz and the Second World War. The title of the book gives a good description of these changes. The "theemutscultuur" refers to the old traditions that played a major role in the past and that have been replaced by individualism (walkman ego).

[16] Levinson (1997:61) states that there is actually a "deep cultural desire to escape rather than confront contingency".

[17] Turner (2009:528) summarises this view in the following words: "Our selves are not determined by a moral education but are an outcome of genetic contingency.".

their own interests above everything else? How do we balance expressive individualism with a sense of belonging to a community?[18]

We can conclude that the essentialist or substantialist view of the human person has rightly been discredited. However, the postmodern perspective of the fragmented human person does not provide a satisfactory view either. Is there perhaps another perspective on the human person that avoids these extreme positions? This is the topic of the next section.

3.3 Personhood in an age of contingency: A pragmatic hermeneutic perspective

In this section of the paper, I will explore an alternative approach to the problem of formulating a view of the human person, namely a pragmatic hermeneutic perspective. I will argue that a combination of the insights from two philosophical approaches, namely pragmatism and hermeneutics, helps us formulate a view on the human person that manages to steer safely between the Scylla of an essentialist view and the Charybdis of a postmodern view. I will also argue that we find such a pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on the human person in the philosophy of the capable human being of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. I will argue that a pragmatic hermeneutic approach to the self is a way to deal with autonomy and human agency (that is, with contingency) without denying the role of traditions, commitments, and a sense of stability (identity).

Before I describe a pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on the human person, I first have to explain what I mean by a pragmatic hermeneutic perspective. I regard a pragmatic hermeneutic perspective as a combination of the insights (theoretical, epistemological, and ontological assumptions) and practices (methodologies) from the American philosophy of pragmatism and the "Continental" philosophical tradition of hermeneutics (Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur). Each of these philosophical traditions is characterised by a great deal of internal variety, but also some core elements (family resemblances) that the main proponents of each tradition share.

Pragmatism is often described in terms of classical pragmatism (Peirce, James, and Dewey) and post-Deweyan pragmatism (Quine, Putnam, and Rorty). I will not discuss all these varieties, but I will only refer to the six main characteristics of pragmatism as summarised by Thayer and Rosenthal (2017), namely an emphasis on the practical function of knowledge and a focus on action; priority of experiences over fixed principles; a focus on practical consequences; truth is to be found in the process of verification ("what works"); ideas are suggestions

[18] "Postmodern social thinkers stress discontinuities in social development and have less confidence than their predecessors in our capacity to identify the general regularities and causal complexes. For most of them, contingency rules OK" (Pakulski 2009:257).

or plans of action, and theories are judged according to their efficacy and utility to achieve specific outcomes.[19]

Theologians do not need any introduction to hermeneutics. A brief word about hermeneutics will thus suffice. Hermeneutics, in contrast to pragmatism, is a "Continental" tradition that is mainly concerned with the interpretation of texts, symbols or actions and the conditions under which these interpretations are made (Gjesdal 2011).[20] Hermeneutics as a methodology considers the tools of interpretation as well as the role of cultural and historical traditions (Gadamer's horizon of understanding) that influence the interpretation. Although hermeneutics started with the interpretation of sacred texts, it is currently used in many different disciplines and fields of study to deal with epistemological and ontological problems related to interpretation.

A pragmatic hermeneutic approach brings these two philosophical approaches together.[21] Widdershoven and Van der Scheer (2008:25-26) briefly outline such a "pragmatic hermeneutics": "Pragmatic hermeneutics stresses the importance of practical processes of meaning-making, related to concrete problems". They further argue that a pragmatic hermeneutic approach is sceptical of general principles and abstract procedures for solving problems, due to the importance of history and contingency for both these philosophies. They also argue that moral knowledge is embedded in action rather than in theory and that "practice precedes science". Another author who combines pragmatism and hermeneutics writes that

> pragmatist hermeneutics focuses on meaning, on discourse products, but it does so in the pragmatist spirit, i.e., it broadens the notion of meaning beyond its familiar identification with linguistic intent and logical sense to include affective narrative, body work, and behavioral performances (Shalin 2007:197).

A pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on the human person is totally different from an essentialist approach. "*To pour scorn on the belief in a substantive self* is to challenge the presupposition of autonomous individuality and forces us to accept that identity is constituted not by some static condition of a person always remaining the same, but rather by an active, indeed creative process" (Joas

[19] "Pragmatism was a reaction on the one hand against the philosophical idealism of the Hegelians and Neo-kantians and on the other against the dogmatic authority of cultural, mostly religious, elites who claimed to possess privileged knowledge of the world stemming from a transcendent or supernatural source" (Heelan & Schulkin 1998:271).

[20] "Hermeneutics as the methodology of interpretation is concerned with problems that arise when dealing with meaningful human actions and the products of such actions, most importantly texts." (Mantzavinos 2016).

[21] Heelan and Schulkin (1998) investigate the "compatibility" of pragmatism and philosophical hermeneutics and come to the conclusion that these two "philosophies" have much in common, despite their different origins and "root metaphors".

1996:251). Its focus is on human action rather than metaphysical speculations about the "essence" of being human. It is also much more sensitive to the historicity of people and their embeddedness in specific traditions. It is also more receptive of interdisciplinary approaches to the human person and emphasises practical knowledge and wisdom.

A pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on the human person takes the postmodern perspective seriously, but it is determined to use it in a productive way (Joas 1998:12). It emphasises a coherent personal, social and moral identity instead of the postmodern focus on fragmented identities and "expressive individualism". Its conception of identity leaves room for both socialisation and the "*radical difference between socialized individuals*" (Joas 1998:13). It recognises the importance of power relations and the role of "*power and exclusion in processes of identity formation*" (Joas 1998:13). It also emphasises the importance of a coherent personal and social identity. It maintains that becoming is more important than being and strives to contribute to a meaningful life. It fosters a differentiated sense of autonomy (where autonomy does not mean self-transparency) and emphasises the importance of human agency. This human agency is not to be confused with repressive self-control, but a creative way of living where the forces of creativity are "unleashed in a controlled manner" (Joas 1998:12).

It is my view that the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's theory of the capable human person is one of the best examples[22] of such a pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on selfhood.[23] Ricoeur focused on the human person from his early work, but it is only with the 1986 Gifford lectures entitled "On selfhood: The question of personal identity", later published as *Soi-même comme un autre* (the English translation *Oneself as another* was published in 1992) that Ricoeur systematically sets out his "philosophy of the subject". In this work, Ricoeur sets himself the task to formulate a hermeneutics of the self that "can claim to hold itself at an equal distance from the cogito exalted by Descartes and from the cogito that Nietzsche proclaimed forfeit" (Ricoeur 1992:23). With reference to the earlier discussion about essentialism and postmodernism, one can say that Ricoeur is seeking a philosophy of the human person that does not fall into the trap of essentialism nor one that annihilates the idea of the human person, as is the case in postmodernism.

Ricoeur is best known for his work in hermeneutics in the "Continental tradition" of Heidegger and Gadamer. It is not the place to discuss his critical

[22] The many references to the work of Joas indicate that his theory of creative human action can also be regarded as an example of a pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on personhood in an age of contingency.

[23] Ricoeur would probably not have used such a label himself, as he always eschewed such labelling practices. However, I hope to convince the reader that his view of human persons fits very well into a pragmatic hermeneutic mould.

hermeneutics and the contribution he made regarding the methodology of the human sciences. However, it is clear in his philosophy of subjectivity that he approaches the topic from a hermeneutical perspective. He even describes his work regarding personhood as a "hermeneutics of the self" (Ricoeur 1992:16-23). One of the main characteristics of the role of interpretation in his view of the human person is that there is no direct route from the "I" to the "self". It is only through many mediations and interpretations, metaphorically described as detours, that the self can be narrated. He thus refers to a "*hermeneutics characterized by the indirect manner of positing the self*" (Ricoeur 1992:17). Ricoeur's thoroughly hermeneutical stance is also clearly visible in the role of tradition, "historicality" and the "lifeworld" in becoming a self. The hermeneutical stance is also always present in his view of truth (attestation) and in the ontology that he describes in the tenth study.[24]

Whereas Ricoeur's hermeneutical stance is well-defined, it is less so regarding pragmatism. Ricoeur hardly ever refers to any of the founding members of the philosophy of pragmatism such as James, Dewey, or Peirce.[25] The category "action" plays an important role in Ricoeur's philosophy of the self, but the pragmatism that he engages with is the analytic philosophy of action rather than American pragmatism. However, I opine that it is possible to do a responsible reading of Ricoeur from the perspective of American pragmatism.[26] In Ricoeur's critical dialogues with the analytic philosophy of action tradition, his use of the term 'action' goes far beyond the atomistic view of action that is characteristic of the philosophy of action theorists. A concrete example is his use of the term 'habit', which brings him much closer to pragmatism than to a philosophy of action. Furthermore, his emphasis on the event, on becoming, of action as the way in which capable human beings exist in the world, resonates strongly with pragmatism. Ricoeur is also anti-essentialist in his thinking and the main focus of his work is on practical problems and how to live well. He also stresses the importance of practical knowledge and practical wisdom, as is the case in pragmatism. Further work needs to be done to fully support this "pragmatic" reading of Ricoeur's work, but, in my view, it is justified to say that Ricoeur, especially in his later works, presents a pragmatic hermeneutical perspective on the human person.

It is not possible to give an extensive overview of Ricoeur's pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on the human person in this article. In view of the discussion, it suffices to indicate very briefly how Ricoeur mediates between the two

[24] "I must confess that this reappropriation is, for me, fraught with pitfalls, for it is a matter of interpreting my own hermeneutics of the self ontologically, by using the Heideggerian reappropriation of Aristotle." (Ricoeur 1992:311).

[25] I found one reference to the work of Peirce in *Oneself as another*, namely regarding Peirce's distinction between type and token (Ricoeur 1992:49). He also refers once to Willard van Orman Quine.

[26] For a discussion of pragmatism as a philosophy of action, see Kilpinen (2009).

extreme positions, namely the substantialist view, on the one hand, and the postmodern view, on the other. Regarding the substantialist view, one can simply mention that Ricoeur's hermeneutical stance (the role of interpretation, the fact that one can never be master of oneself, the historical and cultural embeddedness of a person, and the role of language) is sufficient to indicate that his position dismisses any essentialism.

His position regarding the postmodern, fragmented identity is more complex. In his book *Ricoeur and the poststructuralists*, Michel (2015) discusses Ricoeur's hermeneutic variety of poststructuralism[27] in relation to a number of poststructuralist theorists: Bourdieu, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, and Castoriades. The affinity between Ricoeur's work and poststructuralism is evident throughout this fascinating study. In the introduction to his book, Michel (2015:xxvi) concludes that, although Ricoeur "would refuse to characterize himself as an antihumanist, he does share up to a certain point the critique and deconstruction of the modern subject that can also be found in Foucault, Bourdieu, Deleuze, or Derrida". Michel convincingly backs up this claim through his analyses in the remainder of the book. The important words, in this instance, are "up to a certain point". The "continuity" of the self, rather than a fragmented self, is an important motif in Ricoeur's philosophy of the subject. This continuity is, for example, an important element in his distinction of *idem* and *ipse* identity (the continuity in time is not only in terms of bodily representation, but also in terms of self-constancy of one's character and the ability to keep one's promises) and the idea of a *narrative* identity. This narrative identity helps one consider the continuity of one life, despite all the incongruencies (and we could add contingencies).[28] We came to know ourselves through our own narratives and the narratives that we are told (for example, by our significant others).

The main emphasis of Ricoeur's *Oneself as another*, as indicated in the title, is that you can only become a person through others[29] and that the good life is only attainable if you live with, and for others in just institutions. This "little ethics" of Ricoeur clearly separates his ideas on the human person from the atomistic, self-centred and "expressive individualism" that was indicated as a hallmark of postmodern thinking about the (freedom of) the subject. Ricoeur's view of the capable person stresses the important tasks that a human being has to undertake in order to become a person as well as the never-ending process that this endeavour implies. The capable human person is not the self-transparent, rational

[27] According to Michel (2015:xxx, footnote 23), Lubomir Dolezel "classifies Ricoeur's hermeneutics as one of the four branches of post-structuralism, along with deconstruction, empirical theories of literature, and pragmatic interactionism".

[28] Narrative does this integration through emplotment. "Thus, a told story includes a stability capable of integrating changes." (Ricoeur 2016:245).

[29] This reminds one of the African philosophy of *ubuntu*. It is a limitation of this article that it does not dialogue with the African philosophies of the subject. I still have to undertake this project.

being nor the person with a fragmented identity. It is someone who has self-esteem and cares for others. It is someone who can take responsibility, make promises and can attest to his/her way of life. It is someone with practical wisdom, who knows his/her limitations, but who lives a good (creative) life with, and for others.

Ricoeur often stresses that the capable person is not only an acting, but also a suffering person. Human beings often fail and cause suffering to others. Our capacities sometimes turn into incapacities.[30] We are not superhuman beings. Despite these limitations, we can grow in practical wisdom and deal with the challenges in our lives as capable and responsible persons. "Fragility does not abolish the presupposition of responsibility", warns Ricoeur (2016:253).

In conclusion: Ricoeur's pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on the human person prevents both the exaltation of the human subject and its humiliation, and helps us realise that it is in taking on life's challenges that we have the freedom to become truly human subjects who live the good life with, and for others in just institutions.

3.4 Practical theology and the human person in an age of contingency

I have almost reached the end of my discussion on the human person in an age of contingency. A last, but important, task is to reflect briefly on the meaning and possible implications of these deliberations on the human person for doing practical theology in an age of contingency. How do these different perspectives on personhood help us as practical theologians? What can we, practical theologians, contribute to unravelling the problems regarding personhood in our (post)modern world?

These questions cannot be answered without reflecting on our own theological position. From a pragmatic hermeneutic perspective, it is clear that we cannot construct our practical theological anthropologies without taking note of cultural and historical developments. "What matters is to reformulate Christian anthropology in a coherent and contemporary form by communicating with other sciences, which raises the question of being human in relation to freedom, dignity and love" (Engemann 2017:259). We have to engage in a dialogue with the insights from the human and social sciences. However, we have to go beyond these

[30] Ricoeur (2016:276) makes the following points regarding religion as that which is addressed to the capable human being: "[F]irst, that religion touches human beings at the level of a specific incapacity, classically designated as fault, sin, moral evil; next, that religion purports to bring help, aid, a remedy, to these injured human beings in liberating in them a buried capacity that we can call an originary goodness; and finally, that religion brings about this regeneration by specific symbolic means that reawaken fundamental moral capacities".

sciences and also learn from the natural sciences. Recent work in the areas of post-humanities and in disciplines such as paleoanthropology challenges our traditional view of the human being. This does not imply that we simply have to take over whatever findings from other disciplines. From a pragmatic hermeneutic perspective, we have to interpret carefully the insights from these disciplines and relate them with our biblical and theological traditions. The work of Van Huyssteen (2010) is a good example in this regard.

In the above sections, I discussed three perspectives on the human person. It is my observation that all three these perspectives are present in our religious practices. Although essentialism has, to a large extent, been discredited, I still see this view of the human person operative in some religious communities. I note traces of essentialism in the endless debates about gender (and racial) issues, same-sex marriages and the role of women in the church. Are we taking our historicity and our cultural contingencies sufficiently into account when we formulate our views on human persons? Or, on the other side of the spectrum, I observe the excessive individualism of postmodern anthropologies at work in churches that focus almost exclusively on theologies of experience?[31] Is it really possible to believe without belonging? And lastly, I spot examples of pragmatic hermeneutic perspectives on the human person in churches where persons are helped to become capable human beings who care for others and for creation.

Practical theologians have to explore the different perspectives on the human person at work from an empirical and pragmatic hermeneutical perspective. However, practical theology is not only concerned with the description of religious practices or "lived religion".[32] It also has to formulate normative aims for these religious practices, as Author discusses in his paper with reference to Osmer (2008). This implies that practical theologians also have to formulate practical theological anthropologies that will inform religious practices and the formation of moral and religious identities.[33] It is quite surprising to find hardly any discus-

[31] Dingemans (2010) maintains that the theologies of liberation have been replaced with theologies of experience in our postmodern and consumer societies.

[32] Lazar (2017:124) refers to this normative task: "Hence, the ultimate goal of practical theology is to modify human behaviour through religious practices that are substantiated by the theological heritage.".

[33] See, for instance, the following description by Moore (1998:240) regarding religious formation: "Furthermore, I was concerned that the dominant ways of studying religious formation were skewed toward majority cultures, male-oriented developmental theories, and the search for universal principles. These dominant biases were not only deceptive in revealing only part of a reality, but they were also destructive, as the constructs were sometimes used to demean the experience of communities that did not fit the dominant pattern.".

sion and critical reflection on our (practical) theological anthropologies in journals such as the *International Journal of Practical Theology*[34] and in prominent books such as the *Wiley-Blackwell companion to practical theology* (Miller-McLemore 2012).[35]

Practical theology's task is not done when we look inwardly to our faith communities and religious practices. Practical theologians strive to contribute to interdisciplinary discussions within the academy and outside the academy to the public good. The many challenges regarding social, political, economic and ecological issues always involve human beings and, therefore, some kind of perspective on what it means to be human. It is my view that public practical theologians can make important contributions in this regard if they start from a theologically informed pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on the human person.

3.5 Conclusion

Practical theologians face many difficult questions and practical challenges that involve a view of the human person. In this age of contingency, we are challenged to rethink the *imago Dei* from the perspective of possibility rather than necessity, as Author indicated in his inaugural lecture. I have argued that we should neither fall back on outdated, essentialist ideas about human persons, nor follow the postmodern route to excessive individualism and religious consumerism. The central thesis of this article is that a theologically informed, pragmatic hermeneutic perspective on human persons could contribute positively to the difficult task of formulating a responsible practical theological anthropology in an age of contingency.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Author, A. (2019). Theology In An Age Of Contingency. Inaugural Lecture, 27 February, University Of The Free State, Bloemfontein.

Bauman, Z. (2001). Conversation 2: Ethics and human values. In: Z. Bauman & K. Tester (eds), Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman (Cambridge: Polity), pp. 43-69.

[34] Engemann's (2017) article is a good example of the type of discussion that I deem necessary in practical theology.

[35] The South African practical theologian Daniël Louw pays much attention to the formulation of a theological anthropology for pastoral care. He devotes, for example, a chapter "Rethinking anthropology within the framework of a spiritual praxis of hope" in his book *Wholeness in hope care: On nurturing the beauty of the human soul in spiritual healing* (Louw 2016:183-218).

Bernstein, R.J. (1991). The new constellation: The ethical-political horizons of modernity/postmodernity. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Braidotti, R. (2013). Posthuman humanities. European Educational Research Journal 12(1):1-19. [Online.] Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.2304/eerj.2013.12.1.1 [16 June 2019].

Copeland, M.S., Hopkins, D.N., Mathewes, C.T., McDougall, J.A., McFarland, I.A. & Saracino, M. (2005). Chapter 2: Human being. In: S. Jones & P. Lakeland (eds), Constructive theology: A contemporary approach to classical themes (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress), pp. 77-116.

Copleston, F.C. (1950). The human person in contemporary philosophy. Philosophy 25(92):3-19.

Dingemans, G. (2010). Sporen van die verborgen God: Een theologie van de Geest. Kampen: Kok.

Eagleton, T. (1985). Capitalism, modernism and postmodernism. New Left Review 152:60-73.

Engemann, W. (2017). How people are treated during worship: Problems of an implicit liturgical anthropology. International Journal of Practical Theology 21(2):259-280. doi:10.1515/ijpt-2016-0050

Faucher, K. (2018). Alienation 2.0 – Symptoms of narcissism and aggression. Social Capital Online: Alienation and Accumulation (London: University of Westminster Press), pp. 87-108. [Online.] Retrieved from: http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv5vddrd.8 [16 June 2019].

Fortin, E.L. (1996). Human rights, virtue and the common good: Untimely meditations on religion and politics. Edited by J.B. Benestad. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Gjesdal, K. (2011). Hermeneutics. Philosophy. [Online.] Retrieved from: https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396577/obo-9780195396577-0054.xml [16 June 2019].

Heelan, P. & Schulkin, J. (1998). Hermeneutical philosophy and pragmatism: A philosophy of science. Synthese 115(3):269-302. [Online.] Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/20118058 [16 June 2019].

Heitink, G. (1979). Pastoraat als hulpverlening: Inleiding in de pastorale theologie en psychologie. Kampen: Kok.

Heitink, G. (1993). Praktische theologie: Geschiedenis, theorie, handelingsvelden. Kampen: Kok.

Joas, H. (1996). The creativity of action. Translated by J. Gaine & P. Keast. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Joas, H. (1998). The autonomy of the self: The Meadian heritage and its postmodern challenge. European Journal of Social Theory 1(1):7-18.

Joas, H. (2014). Faith as an option: Possible futures for Christianity. Translated by A. Skinner. Stanford, CA: Stanford University.

Kilpinen, E. (2009). Pragmatism as a philosophy of action. In: S. Pihlström & H. Rydenfelt (eds), Pragmatist perspectives. Philosophical Society of Fin-

land. [Online.] Retrieved from: http://www.helsinki.fi/peirce/MC/papers/Kilpinen%20-%20Pragmatism%20as%20a%20Philosophy%20of%20Action.pdf [16 June 2019].

Kunneman, H. (1996). Van theemutskultuur naar walkman-ego: Contouren van postmoderne individualiteit. Amsterdam: Boom.

Lazar, A.R. (2017). A theory of religious praxis in India. Introduction to Practical Theology in India – Part I. International Journal of Practical Theology 21(1):108-126. [Online.] Retrieved from: doi:10.1515/ijpt-2018-0021 [3 June 2019].

Levinson, N. (1997). Unsettling identities: Conceptualizing contingency. In: S. Laird (ed.), Philosophy of education (Ubana, ILL: Philosophy of Education Society), pp. 61-70.

Louw, D.J. (2016). Wholeness in hope care: On nurturing the beauty of the human soul in spiritual healing. Berlin: Lit Verlag.

Mantzavinos, C. (2016). Hermeneutics. In: E.N. Zalta (ed.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2016 edition). [Online.] Retrieved from: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/hermeneutics/ [16 June 2019].

Michel, J. (2015). Ricoeur and the post-structuralists. Translated by S. Davidson. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Michel, J. & Porée, J. (2016). Editor's preface. In: P. Ricoeur, Philosophical anthropology: Writings and lectures, volume 3, edited by J. Michel & J. Porée. Translated by D. Pellauer (Cambridge: Polity Press), pp. vii-xv.

Miller-McLemore, B.J. (Ed.). (2012). The Wiley-Blackwell companion to practical theology. Malden: Blackwell.

Moore, M.E.M. (1998). Dynamics of religious culture: Theological wisdom and ethical guidance from diverse urban communities. International Journal of Practical Theology, 2(2):240-262. doi:10.1515/ijpt.1998.2.2.240

Muller, R.A. (2017). Divine will and human choice: Freedom, contingency, and necessity in early modern reformed thought. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Murphy, P. (1998). The age of contingency. Daimon: Revista de Filosofía 17:101-117.

Naicker, L. (2012). The role of eugenics and religion in the construction of race in South Africa. Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae 38(2):1-7. [Online.] Retrieved from: http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1017-04992012000200005&lng=en&tlng=en. [16 June 2019].

Osmer, R.R. (2008). Practical theology: An introduction. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans.

Pakulski, J. (2009). Postmodern social theory. In: B.S. Turner (ed.), The New Blackwell companion to social theory. doi:10.1002/9781444304992.ch13

Richardson, F.C., Rogers, A. & McCarroll, J. (1998). Towards a dialogical self. American Behavioral Scientist 41(4):496-515.

Ricoeur, P. (1992). Oneself as another. Translated by K. Blamey. Chicago, ILL: The University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, P. (2016). Philosophical antropology: Writings and lectures, volume 3. Edited by J. Michel & J. Porée. Translated by D. Pellauer. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Sattler, B. (2014). Contingency and necessity: Human agency in Musil's The man without qualities. The Monist 97(1):86-103.

Schilderman, H. (2011). Religious capital and public accountability: Challenges to empirical theology. In: L.J. Francis & H.-G. Ziebertz (eds), The public significance of religion (Leiden: Brill), pp. 41-63.

Shalin, D.N. (2007). Signing in the flesh: Notes on pragmatist hermeneutics. Sociological Theory 25(3):193-224.

Thayer, H.S. & Rosenthal, S.B. (2017). Pragmatism. Encyclopaedia Britannica. [Online.] Retrieved from: https://www.britannica.com/topic/pragmatism-philosophy [16 June 2019].

Turner, B.S. (2009). The sociology of the body. In: B.S. Turner (ed.), The New Blackwell companion to social theory. doi:10.1002/9781444304992.ch26

Van Huyssteen, J.W. (2010). What makes us human? The interdisciplinary challenge to theological anthropology and Christology. Toronto Journal of Theology 26(2):143-160.

Widdershoven, G. & Van der Scheer, L. (2008). Theory and methodology of empirical ethics: A pragmatic hermeneutic perspective. In: G. Widdershoven, J. McMillan, T. Hope & L. Van der Scheer (eds), Empirical ethics in psychiatry (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 23-35.

Chapter 4

In the shadows of things to come: Contingencies, the 4th Industrial revolution and Theologies of Practice

Jan-Albert van den Berg

4.1 Introduction

In Charles Dickens' well-known short novel *A Christmas carol*, the central character Ebenezer Scrooge states: "You are about to show me shadows of the things that have not happened, but will happen in the time before us" (Dickens 2018:3).

For me, personally, as someone with a sensitivity for, and orientation towards a research agenda with a view to the future (Van den Berg & Ganzevoort 2014:166), Scrooge's words evoke, on the one hand, a sense of excitement about a new realm of possibility and, on the other, some anxiety about the unknown looming over the horizon. It is, therefore, understandable that, when I was approached to participate in this research project, which focuses on the different shadings of contingency, the strong future-oriented dimension that is implicitly embedded in the concept of contingency immediately appealed to me.

Further to Scrooge's words of "the things that have not happened", it is hoped that, through this contribution, I might add a few shades to the shadows of the things to come. However, and right from the onset of this description, it remains important to point out the use of the plural form of the concepts in the title of this contribution. The use of the plural form in both the title and the content of the article emphasises that this contribution is merely a perspective on the multidimensional nature of the topic under discussion. Furthermore, and true to the nature of contingency, various alternatives implied by the plural use also confirm the existence of possibilities.

As an expression of this understanding, the shades of shadows will be layered in the following order in this article. First, I will provide a short overview of contingencies and how these perspectives will be linked to the project. Secondly, I will document introductory and preliminary perspectives on the 4th Industrial Revolution, in order to establish a link with the descriptions of contingencies. Thirdly, I will translate the meaning of these perspectives in a preliminary formulation of so-called theologies of practices.

4.2 Perspectives on contingencies and other futures

4.2.1 Hans Joas, Chris Hermans and contingency

A shadow is created by an object that blocks the source of light. This disharmony results in, and projects different shades of shadow. Using the concept of 'contingency' assumes different shades of shadow that are associated, in particular, with possibilities and choices. The following description provides the background for understanding the use of 'contingency'.

Contingency, as a term, has a central role in the later work of the German sociologist Hans Joas. In an interview (Heidegren 2017:237), Joas points out that he prefers to speak of an age of contingency, rather than of modernisation and secularisation. Joas explains his understanding of contingency by the fact that different dimensions of social change need to be identified. It is also important to distinguish the different connections between these dimensions. He views "these connections as highly variable and in that sense contingent, there is no necessity of the one always leading to the other" (Heidegren 2017:237).

Joas, however, also views contingency on another level, namely that of the growth in individual options of action. In this regard, he uses the example of the traffic jam and how technology causes an increase in individual options. Initially, only train connections were available. Later on, cars and the option of travelling according to your own schedule became an option, with the realisation of the perverse effects of the increase in individual options (Joas 2014:n.p.).

As an orientation leading to the reflection on the shadows of things to come, Joas helped us understand that possibilities have increased and that the relationship between these connections plays a pivotal role. Being a scholar of important societal dynamics and the influence on theology, the Dutch practical theologian Chris Hermans adds to the description of Joas by indicating that the uncertainty of life has affected all disciplines in the academy – from the sciences to philosophy, pedagogy, and even to theology itself (Hermans 2019:1). This would typically lead to the exigent asking of questions concerning the implications for a (practical) theology in an age of contingency.

In reference to the strong future-embedded dimension in the concept of contingency, I would like to reflect on this challenge for (practical) theology from the interdisciplinary perspective of futures studies.

4.2.2 Contingencies and futures studies

> *The purpose of futures research is to systematically explore, create, and test both possible and desirable futures to improve decisions … so too futurists with foresight systems for the world*

> *can point out problems and opportunities to leaders around the world* (Glenn *et al.* 2008:Foreword).

This is somewhat relative to the way in which the sailor, positioned on top of the mast of sailing ships, used to point out the rocks and safe channels through uncharted waters. It is generally within human capacity to act with purpose and regard to a future that entails all possible alternatives and choices, and that is formed through different structures, perceptions and forces (Slaughter 2002:2; Lombardo 2008:15-16). Moltmann (2008:103) refers to the fact that "hope for an alternative future brings us into contradiction with the existing present and puts us against the people who cling to it".

In articulating contingencies, a memory of the future is thus envisaged (De Geus 1997:3). Arie de Geus, a strategist at Royal Dutch Shell, was the first person to coin the concept 'memory of the future'.[1] In his book, *The living company*, De Geus (1997:31) describes this concept as "an innate ability to exploit these [crises] and turn them into new business". In order to obtain this goal, De Geus (1997:32) identified four dimensions, namely "its adaptiveness to the outside world (learning); its character and identity (persona); its relationship with people and institutions inside and around itself (ecology), and the way it developed over time (evolution)". Lombardo (2008:2) developed this concept further with the description of a so-called "future consciousness [as] the human capacity to be conscious of the future, to create ideas, images, goals, and plans about the future, to think about these mental creations and use them in directing one's action and one's life". In their article on a future sensitivity in a practical research agenda, Van den Berg and Ganzevoort (2014:166-185) proposed the action of actively engaging with contingencies and, specifically, the future dimensions embedded in contingencies. Taking these perspectives seriously would then imply an active scan of imminent and possible contingencies in not-so-distant futures. The conviction is that people, who are acting with sustained commitment to achieve their visions of hope, are the creators of their future, because "[t]he future is waiting for our making, not our taking" (Spies 1999:18).

---

[1] "There is one important cautionary note that should be mentioned regarding the connection between memory and future consciousness. Although memory (and ideas of the past) may serve as a foundation for anticipating the future, future consciousness often extends beyond memory and the past. In fact, to believe that the future will be like the past is to remain stuck in the past. Experiences from the past, such as traumas and frustrations, can inhibit any new thinking about the future. Yet, one thing we learn from history is that there is always novelty and change; history does not entirely repeat itself. The future will not be the same as the past … individuals at times will abandon, reject, or ignore the past in attempting to create a new and different reality for themselves in the future" (Lombardo 2008:29).

4.3 Contingencies and digital technologies[2]

Further to the central metaphor of shadow, the focus is then placed on the object responsible for the disturbance in light flow, giving rise to the formation of shadows. Metaphorically speaking, I would like to link the rise and meaning of the 4th Industrial Revolution to the disturbance of ordinary light. I will first provide an overview of the significance of changing times prior to discussing the 4th Industrial Revolution itself.

4.3.1 Changing times

With that said, and underscoring the importance of practice for practical theology, discerning the meaning of the future is not meant to be an abstract affair, but rather a concrete, local and embodied engagement (Müller 2009:199). As Miller-McLemore (2012:14) rightly indicates, practical theology focuses on "the tangible, the local, the concrete and the embodied ... it remains grounded in practice and stays close to life". Practical theology is "theology in active mode, grappling with the contemporary culture. It does not pretend to rise above culture but recognizes that it is deeply implicated in it" (Cameron *et al.* 2010:13). In order to engage further with practice, I have opted to provide a description of the shadows of the so-called 4th Industrial Revolution, which are already entering our domain of existence. In order to enter this "shadows space", it is important to understand the various developments that have led to this newly anticipated epoch.

Scholars differ when it comes to naming this era of change in human existence. From the digital revolution (Anderson 2015), the second machine age (Brynjolfsson & McAfee 2015), or the evolution to the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab 2016), the role of digital technologies is present in all the equations configuring our time. According to Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2015:n.p.), "we're living in a time of astonishing progress with digital technologies – those that have computer hardware, software, and networks at their core". This digital revolution is responsible for incorporating different and divergent aspects of human existence within a digital domain, with increasing regularity. Goldin and Kutarna (2016:30) rightly point out that the "advent of digital" is a second Gutenberg moment, providing "a new medium for capturing, communicating and exchanging data". In addition to this, Rushkoff (2013:n.p.) refers to society's orientation towards "the present moment. Everything is live, real time, and always-on. It's not a mere speeding up, however much our lifestyles and technologies have accelerated the rate at which we attempt to do things".

Anderson (2015:n.p.) recently indicated that the "triple revolution" of "the internet, mobile devices and digital social media is revolutionising the way

[2] Some of the perspectives portrayed in sections 3 and 4 of this contribution were initially described in the author's PhD thesis entitled *"Tweeting God: A practical theological analysis of the communication of Christian motifs on Twitter"* (Van den Berg 2018).

we lead our lives and live out our faith". In calculating the meaning of these far-reaching developments for practices of faith, it is important to remember that "paradigms have shifted and are shifting. People interpret their worlds differently than previously and consequently use different languages than previous generations" (Müller 2011:n.p.). Illustrating the art of reading and interpreting changing maps, Khanna (2016:n.p.) points out that maps were initially oriented near holy sites and were as much about "theology as geography". Taking the movement of tectonic plates and seismic adjustments seriously, one can rightly question the mapping of theology and faith in a digital geography of change. Since practical theology values local and concrete manifestations of reality in particular, it would be a major priority to map coordinates of meaning in a digital world of change that abounds in possibilities and as concretely expressed in the coming 4th Industrial Revolution.

4.3.2 The 4th Industrial Revolution

The envisaged contribution of this research lies, therefore, in the space facilitated by contingencies that were not previously known to humankind. The so-called 4th Industrial Revolution provides the space within which such contingencies can flourish.

The ordinal number "4th" rightly implies and confirms that there have already been three revolutions. The first revolution focused on mechanisation; the second emphasised electrification, and the third focused on digitalisation (Philbeck & Davis 2018:19-20). The 4th Industrial Revolution ushers in a new chapter in the history of humankind (Harari 2016; Schwab 2016; Schwab & Davis 2018). The notion of the 4th Industrial Revolution is a heuristic key that gives access to the world of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, quantum computing, big data, the internet of things, and biotechnology. In this so-called age of singularity (Kurzweil 2010), the focus is on the era when woman and man will become one with machine and will bring about systematic, yet drastic adaptations to daily life.

At stake is the fundamentally new era of human civilisation, with the fusion of the physical, digital and biological spheres, and with the underlying basis in advances in communication and connectivity. Often, the discourse on the 4th Industrial Revolution is accompanied not only by promises of improved quality of life for societies, but also by warnings of the potentially disruptive effects.

With respect to the character and meaning of the 4th Industrial Revolution, one could also consider the possible implications and challenges for theology such as, for example, considering the presence of God, the facilitation of human flourishing as well as some ethical challenges. Compared to other revolutions, where the emphasis was mainly on machinery and their capabilities, in order for us to survive, the focus in the 4th Industrial Revolution must not be on

machine. We must deliberately focus on what it means to be human and on human capability. The current human agenda, therefore, needs urgent intervention, otherwise human beings could be reduced to mere extensions of technology in the near future.

The challenge – also for theologians – is whether, in our musing on the 4th Industrial Revolution and digitalisation, we are engaged in the future and future possibilities. Challenges associated with this type of orientation include that we can only see when a crisis opens our eyes and that we can only see what we have already experienced. Challenging these limitations is the endeavour to describe theologies of practices as expressions of the concrete, the local and the embodied.

4.4 Theologies of practices

In the final section of this contribution, the shadow metaphor focuses on the light source that gives rise to all shades of shadow. In using this metaphor, I associate the light source with the meaning of practices (also plural) as a central orientation for practical theology.

4.4.1 A case study – Back to the future

In presenting the following case study, expression is given to a practical theology orientation that possesses a sensitivity to what "is always concrete, local, and contextual, but at the same time reaches beyond local contexts to transdisciplinary concerns" (Müller 2009:205). The shade of shadows in the case study does not seem to be so dark, with even moments of light permeating those present. However, it is in the wording of what is known in which the mechanism is presented whereby the future, such as in the use of voice technology, can be seen. The case study gains further relevance when the indications are that the use of voice technology is likely to increase further in the era of the 4th Industrial Revolution. These different accents are trapped in the subheading of 'back to the future', which describes the relationship with different sections in time and which is also linked to the previously described 'memory of the future'.

The following autobiographical narration by the well-known Afrikaans writer, Dana Snyman, addresses in an accessible way a practice with well-known characteristics but also with reverence to the time to come, with the over-simplified assumption that this type of technology provides the answer to all questions.

We have just been seated at the table in the Blue Whale when Hennie's cellular phone rang. It is an SMS from someone.

> *'I am just going to reply', he says. 'Sorry.'*
> *His thumb moves over the cellphone keys.*

We were good friends at school, but these days we don't see much of each other, Hennie and I. Since he was promoted at the IT company where he works, he travels a lot abroad, in particular to China.
He puts his phone down again.
'I see you are still using your paraffin model.' He points to my old Blackberry next to me on the table.
'I bought this one recently in Hong Kong. Samsung Galaxy. State of the art. It is amazing what this little thing can do.' He presses a few keys, and holds the cellular phone near his mouth, saying loudly, "Hallo Galaxy."' He turns the phone in my direction. 'Ask it anything. In English.'
'Anything?'
'Anything,' answers Hennie.
'What is the purpose of life?', I ask with my mouth near the Galaxy.
'You still are the joker, hey?' Hennie lowers the phone without laughing. 'Ask him a proper question, man. Ask him who is the American president.' He holds the phone near my mouth again. Who is the American president?' I ask.
We wait a while till a tin-like voice comes from the small body of the Galaxy: 'Barack Obama is the president of the United States of America.'
Hennie smiles and puts the phone next to his small plate.
'How are things with you?' I ask.
'No, fine,' he says. 'Fine. Just busy. And you.'
'Fine, fine.'
'I am glad. I am glad.'
A waiter puts a menu in front of each of us.
'Do you still hear from the others?' I ask.
'No, not really.'
'I discovered the other day a team photo of our fourth rugby team.'
'You must put it on Facebook. I like the things that are put on Facebook.' His phone gave a little chirp again. 'Sorry man.'
He looked at the phone's small screen. 'It is a WeChat from my girl.'
'WeChat? What is that?'
'Don't you know WeChat?' He presses a few keys and the voice of his daughter – who is at university – comes over the Galaxy:
'Hallo Dad. Thanks for the money. Hope things are going well, bye-bye.'
He puts the phone down again next to him. 'I feel so sorry for the poor child,' he says.

> *'Why?', I ask.*
> *'Haven't you heard?'*
> *'No. What?'*
> *'Her mother and I are going to get a divorce.' He looks at me briefly. 'The last two years have been a nightmare. We talk past each other all the time.'*
> *'He pulls the menu towards him. 'We probably have to order, hey?' He opens it. 'I wonder what their fish is like?'* (Snyman 2015:n.p.).

Which moments of reflection are visible from the shades of this case study? In the following subsection, the case study is used as background to briefly reflect on the meaning for understanding some aspects associated with the 4th Industrial Revolution.

4.4.2 Practice-oriented research reflections

4.4.2.1 Intervention and design research

There are two types of practice-oriented research: intervention research and design research (Hermans & Schoeman 2015:27; Hermans 2019:15). Intervention research aims to improve the current problematic situation towards the desired. Design research focuses on the construction of possible interventions, which could be used in practice to transform the actual to alternative and desired future outcomes. Although both research designs aim to bridge the gap between the actual and the desired, a different perspective is required. The capacity offered by design research in creating desired future outcomes provides space for addressing the possible contingencies facilitated by the upcoming 4th Industrial Revolution. Hermans (2019:15) captures the implication of this understanding as follows:

> *Seen from the human being's state of incapacity, the coming of God's future is a shift from the actual 'I cannot' towards the desired situation: 'I can'. This future – which is God – holds something in reserve as a surplus of a good life with and for others. So, the change or transformation does not come from the past (antecedent), but from that which is possible (consequent), which is a reversal of how we normally define as causality, by which we differentiate between the future and the past. The desired is defined from the perspective of the possible, which might – for the people in the dilemma – not at all be perfectly clear at first!*

Taking this orientation towards possible futures seriously, the trap of solving yesterday's problems instead of preventing tomorrow's is avoided. Steering consistently into possible futures provides for a new identity to the practical theologian's

research agenda. In this regard, Van den Berg and Ganzevoort (2014:178) rightly indicate that

> *[c]onsidering that the future is indeed open in many ways, and should be seen more as a series of alternative futures rather than as one, our anticipation is never just a description of what is yet to come. In anticipating, we are actively shaping and changing that future. We create the future inasmuch as we try to predict it. Furthermore, it allows us to develop desirable future scenarios. The development of a strategic, practical, theological sensitivity for the future, therefore, has to encompass two dimensions: foresight and creation.*

This designing-creative attitude accommodates perspectives regarding that which is potentially preferable. The aim of designing-creative research orientations is not so much to prepare for what may happen, but to envision what we want to have happen and, more importantly, to facilitate and thus allow desirable events to occur. With this alternative approach, a conscious attempt is made to steer away from the traditional course of merely following events, but instead to change direction with the possibility of a totally different outcome. Van den Berg and Ganzevoort (2014:184) rightfully indicate that, with a sensitivity for possible alternative futures, specific dynamics are fostered in which important and decisive moments are identified, leading to appropriate actions for the creation of more preferable outcomes.

4.4.2.2 Practical theological implications

Despite various statements on the upcoming 4th Industrial Revolution, I choose to focus, in this brief overview, on the contingency, and even the reality of so-called artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence implies the fusion of man and machine (Van den Berg 2012:429). Creating intelligent machines that react and work like human beings thus becomes a reality. In pursuit of human perfection, advanced and emerging technologies such as the construction of artificial intelligence to augment intellectual functions, biomedical transplants, prosthetics, genetic modification and cryonic preservation to stave off the effects of disease and ageing, are being used. There are, for example, already numerous examples of artificial intelligence in use. One of the most common and elementary, but also general accessible examples of artificial intelligence is the use of "Siri", or "Bixby", that provides intelligent answers to users of Apple or Samsung devices, as described in die case study presented.

By entering this uncharted territory, in which various manifestations of the 4th Industrial Revolution contribute to the dominant coordinates of mapping, an awareness of a "radical revision of concepts of humanness in the future" (Murphy 2010:21-22) became possible. The practical theologian would, therefore, do well

to take the words to heart that inventing "is a lot like surfing: you have to anticipate and catch the wave at just the right moment" (Kurzweil 2010:n.p.).

Addressing the challenges outlined above will entail, *inter alia*, leading the practical theologian to the application of futures strategy in a relevant and sustainable manner. Falling within the focus field of the domain of futures studies, and taking the challenges of a movement towards trans-humanism, in which advanced technologies are portrayed in the pursuit of human perfection seriously (Van den Berg 2012:429), I can concur with the following important observation by the practical theologian Elaine Graham (2011:30):

> *We are therefore presented with two contrasting representations of the effects of genetic, digital and cybernetic technologies on the way we live, work, communicate and even reproduce. The coexistence of fear and fascination may be an indication of our uncertainty as to the future trajectory of human engagement with technologies: as promise, or endangerment; as mastery, or extinction. It brings forth the question of whether 'technology' represents a diminishment of human uniqueness, an attenuation of healthy political and civic associations, a narrowing of cognitive horizons, even the obsolescence of Homo sapiens itself, or whether the digital and biotechnological age will propel humanity towards greater knowledge and prosperity – from Homo sapiens to Homo cyberneticus.*

In negotiating this orientation of the shadows of things to come, the concept of singularity can be used as a guiding metaphor, through which perspectives for reflections on possible future dispensations can be articulated. As the father of the so-called Singularity movement, Kurzweil (2010:n.p.) indicated the following perspective:

> *Understanding the Singularity will alter our perspective on the significance of our past and the ramifications of our future. To truly understand it inherently changes one's view of life in general and one's own particular life. I regard someone who understands the Singularity and who has reflected on its implications for his or her own life as 'singularitarian'.*

The fusion of man and machine facilitates new futures and possibilities and allows for the creation of various new practices for theological reflection. The use of artificial intelligence facilitates benefits, but also some challenges. One of the most prominent issues is the significance and implication of the development and use of artificial intelligence for the spiritual dimension of the human condition (Van den Berg 2012:429). One could specifically raise the issue of God's presence in the use of artificial intelligence. How do the contingencies of artificial intelligence practices theologically reflect on in spaces created by new and emerging technologies? In order to facilitate enquiries and further perspectives

for relevant theologies of practices, one will need to focus on specific and concrete practices associated therewith in which artificial intelligence is used.

4.5 Conclusion and the challenge – "Back from the future…?"

How possible is it for research to be done proactively instead of reactively? How possible is it for research to be done "back from the future"? In this respect, there are further possibilities for the development of so-called "*future-oriented design research*", on the basis of which practices and theologies associated with "flourishing" can be described in the broadest sense of the word. This would call for a pro-active orientation implying a new way of viewing, listening and talking to the future. An attitude of doing theology proactively in this age of contingency is, therefore, required.

With respect to the meaning and ethical challenges of the 4th Industrial Revolution, I would also consider some challenges. Compared to other revolutions, where the emphasis was mainly on machinery and their capabilities, the focus in the 4th Industrial Revolution must not be on machines. We must deliberately focus on human capability and on what it means to be human, in order for us to survive.

The challenge – also for practical theologians – is whether we are engaged in the future and future possibilities in our musing on the 4th Industrial Revolution and digitalisation. The future, however, also governs theological thought. I would also wonder whether we, as practical theologians, could make an important contribution, and not only on the basis of the middle point on the horizon of the future. In a rapidly changing world, it may simply be that we can begin to question the nature of the 5th Industrial Revolution and what we can now already do, in order to help create that future. If this becomes the orientation, we proactively enter the "shadows of the things to come", and become shadows of light in an age of contingency.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, K. (2015). *The digital cathedral: Networked ministry in a wireless world*. New York: Morehouse Publishing. (Kindle edition).

Brynjolfsson, E. & McAfee, A. (2015). The second machine age: Progress, and prosperity in a time of brilliant technologies. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. (Kindle edition).

Cameron, H., Bhatti, D., Duce, C., Sweeney, J. & Watkins, C. (2010). Talking about God in practice: Theological action research and practical theology. London: SCM Press.

De Geus, A. (1997). The living company. Growth, learning and longevity in business. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Dickens, C. (2018). A Christmas carol. Orinda, CA: SeaWolf Press.

Glenn, J.C., Gordon, T.J. & Florescu, E. (2008). State of the future. Washington: The Millennium Project. World Federation of UN Associations.

Goldin, I. & Kutarna, C. (2016). Age of discovery: Navigating risks and rewards of our new renaissance. London: Bloomsbury. (Kindle edition).

Graham, E. (2011). The 'virtuous circle'. Religion and the practices of happiness. In: J. Atherton, E. Graham & I. Steedman (eds), The practices of happiness. Political economy, religion and wellbeing (London: Routledge), pp. 224-234.

Harari, Y.N. (2016). Homo deus: A brief history of tomorrow. London: Harvill Secker.

Heidegren, C.-G. (2017). An interview with Hans Joas. Sociologisk Forskning 54(3):233-243.

Hermans, C.A.M. (2019). Theology in an age of contingency. Unpublished inaugural lecture. Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State, 27 February 2019.

Hermans, C.A.M. & Schoeman, W.J. (2015). Practice-orientated research in service of designing interventions. Acta Theologica Supplementum 22:26-44.

Joas, H. (2014). Faith as an option. Possible futures for Christianity. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press. (Kindle edition).

Khanna, P. (2016). Connectography: Mapping the future of global civilization. New York: Random House. (Kindle edition).

Kurzweil, R. (2010). The singularity is near. London: Gerald Duckworth. (Kindle edition).

Lombardo, T. (2008). The evolution of future consciousness. Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse.

Miller-McLemore, B.J. (2012). Introduction: The contributions of practical theology. In: B.J. Miller-McLemore (ed.), The Wiley-Blackwell companion to practical theology (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), pp. 1-20.

Moltmann, J. (2008). A broad place. An autobiography. Translated by M. Kohl. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Müller, J.C. (2009). Transversal rationality as a practical way of doing interdisciplinary work, with HIV and Aids as a case study. Practical Theology in South Africa 24(2):199-228.

(2011). Postfoundational practical theology for a time of transition. HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 67(1), Art. #837, 5 pages. doi.10.4102/hts. v67i1.837

Murphy, N. (2010). Introduction. In: N. Murphey & C.C. Knight (eds), Human identity at the intersection of science, technology and religion (Surrey: Ashgate), pp. 1-22.

Philbeck, T & Davis, N. (2018). The Fourth Industrial Revolution: Shaping a new era. Journal of International Affairs 72(1):17-22.

Rushkoff, D. (2013). Present shock: When everything happens now. New York: Penguin Group. (Kindle edition).

Schwab, K. (2016). The fourth industrial revolution. Cologny: World Economic Forum. (Kindle edition).

Schwab, K. & Davis, N. (2018). Shaping the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Geneva: World Economic Forum.

Slaughter, R.A. (2002). Future concepts. Knowledge base of future studies. Professional edition-CD-Rom.

Snyman, D. (2015). In die blou kamp. Tafelberg: Kaapstad. (Kindle edition).

Spies, P.H. (1999). Measuring and making the future: The contribution of the IFR to strategic thinking in South Africa. In: A. Roux & E. van Vuuren (eds), Celebrating 25 years of futures studies in South Africa: A collection of essays (Bellville: University of Stellenbosch, Institute for Futures Research), pp. 5-22.

Van den Berg, J.A. (2012). An anthropology of singularity? Pastoral perspectives for an embodied spirituality in the annus virtualis and beyond. In: A. López-Varela (ed.), Social sciences and cultural studies. Issues of language, public opinion, education and welfare (Rijeka: InTech Publishers), pp. 429-440.

(2018). Tweeting God: A practical theological analysis of Christian motifs on Twitter. University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.

Van den Berg, J.A. & Ganzevoort, R.R. (2014). The art of creating futures – Practical theology and a strategic research sensitivity for the future. Acta Theologica 34(2):166-185. http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/actat.v34i2.10 ISSN 1015-8758.

Chapter 5

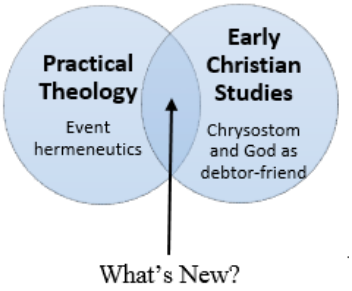
John Chrysostom and 'Knowing God as debtor-friend': An event-hermeneutical reading‘

Kobus Kok[1][2]

5.1 Introduction

In this paper, we want to engage in a dialogue between Practical Theology and Early Christian Studies, by heuristically making use of an event-hermeneutical lens to interpret the surplus of meaning and potential created by John Chrysostom's concept of God as debtor-friend. It will be argued that a relatively underexplored aspect of studies in Chrysostom has been the concept of God as debtor.

This article aims to make contributions to research on two levels. Methodologically, event-hermeneutics has not been used (according to my knowledge) in a reading of friendship discourse in Chrysostom. Research on Chrysostom has overlooked the concept of God as debtor.[3]



The combination of these two levels promises to lead to new insights in the field

[1] *J. Kok, ETF Leuven/University of Pretoria.*

[2] My colleague in historical theology, Dr. Maria Verhoeff (ETF Leuven/University of Pretoria) was most helpful as resource person when writing the section on Chrysostom. Her speciality therein was developed during her PhD (2016) at our institution (ETF Leuven). Section four of this chapter draws much on Verhoeff's PhD's insights.

[3] On this research gap, see the discussion in Verhoeff (2016).

that might be fruitful both to Practical Theology in its dialogue with the source documents of Early Christianity and related literature as well as benefit the latter with the fresh perspectives provided by event-hermeneutics.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, we will sketch the contextual background against which this awareness should be interpreted and explain how we understand contingency and event-hermeneutics. Secondly, with the latter as heuristic lens, I will engage with Early Christian literature, investigating the concepts of God as friend in the works of Chrysostom (and John's gospel, where appropriate) and the exegetical research that was obtained in the process. Thirdly, I will combine the aforementioned insights so as to reflect on the implication thereof for an event-hermeneutical understanding of God as friend, providing a form of hope for believers in an age of contingency and scarcity.

5.2 Contextual background

5.2.1 Living in a VUCA world

We live in a VUCA world, characterised by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity (Kok & Van den Heuvel 2019).

> *We live in one of the fastest changing times in history and … the change we experience now might be just as significant as the change between the Middle Ages and the modern world. We live amidst a digital and knowledge revolution, a knowledge worker economy of which the World Wide Web is its utmost symbol (*Kok & Van den Heuvel 2019:v).

Kok & Van den Heuvel (2019:vi) also point out that we are flooded with constant, disruptive and accelerating change. In a sense, people have more freedom and options than ever before in history. On the other hand, some may experience that this freedom is, in some way, forced upon them, as if we, in some cases, desire simplification and stability instead of acceleration and instability caused by tremendous amounts of change and options in our environment.

Vertovec (2007) coined the term 'superdiversity' to refer to the fact that we live in a time not only of significant diversity, but also of diversity within diversity. Scholars in Business Studies, such as Van den Broeck and Jordaan (2018), have argued that we live in a time of volatility and agility where we need to be able to make choices and adapt to different scenarios and contexts in a rapid fashion, compared to the speed at which such change took place in the past. We live in a world of constant change and there is also a significant increase in the options available to choose from. Klaus Schwab (2016), Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, mentioned that we are about to enter

the fourth industrial revolution.[4] One important aspect of this revolution is that it leads to a tremendous increase in the possibilities for action and the choices people have to make on a daily, sometimes hourly level. Joas (2014:73) refers to "the massive increase of individual action options". This leads to the notion of contingency. Hermans (2019:2) rightly states that

> *[c]ontingency sensitizes us about the increased action options which people experience to have in our time, but at the same time the randomness of what we go through in our lives that arises for a large part from the increased action options which people have.*

Important, however, is that this notion or awareness does not have to lead to a form of total relativism. We could, however, as Joas (2014:76) maintains, have "contingent certainty" and "an awareness of the contingency of its emergence".

From an epistemological perspective, a distinction should be made between "actual contingency" and "logical possibility". Hermans (2012:57; 2019:3), in reference to Ricken (2004), argues that we can act with relative certainty on the condition that there is a 'real possibility' that 'x' *might happen.* In this case, we can view the situation as an "actual possibility" and perform an action "as if the possible was actual" (Hermans 2019:3). Thus, the notion of contingency is based on a real possibility and is not ascribed to mere 'fate', but a "possible certainty which is neither necessary, nor impossible yet actual" (Hermans 2019:3-4; Wuchterl 2011).

From an ontological perspective, the notion of contingency (in contrast to an ontology of what is common/general) wants to perceive and expect the emergence of new possibilities that are likely to "disrupt our understanding of reality" (Hermans 2019:4). Thus, an ontology of contingency (Van der Heiden[5] 2014:16-17) views the essence of being *as it emerges as event* – something that "interjects" something new and *unexpected* into our world. For this to happen, we need to suspend a first ground and be open for the unknown, which is wholly other and unexpected, to emerge. This "suspension" opens up the potential for new possibilities and for a paradigm of thinking that thinks from a dynamic reserve (and not sufficient ground/first ground).

Hermans (2019:5) correctly observes that an ontology of contingency also calls for an "ethos of contingency". Both Afrikaans and Dutch make use of the word *gesindheid* (Afrikaans)/*gezindheid* (Dutch) to express a basic outlook on life, an orientation and the intentionality behind it, which comes from a certain understanding of identity and is expressed not only by that outlook or attitude,

[4] See also https://www.weforum.org/about/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-by-klaus-schwab [accessed: 24 May 2019].
[5] Van der Heiden (2014) via Hermans (2019).

but also in a certain lifestyle reflecting that ethos (*Lebenstil*). In that sense, it becomes part of the way in which the person or group does things.

Consequently, the question may be asked: What would an ethos of contingency then entail? Hermans (2014:5) argues that the core of it amounts to an ethos that revolves around the presupposition that we should preferably view life as an event in which we should "expect the unexpected". It can break through at any time, when we are open to the possibility that what is not actual, could indeed become actual, and what is, could be different. Thus, to put it in the helpful words of Hermans (2019:6), an ethos of contingency lives with "an openness for the possible to emerge (or befall on people) as what is strange, other, incomprehensible, and disruptive". It is important to notice, in this instance, that this ethos entails a life orientation, which does not limit possibilities and reflect from the perspective of limited good, but views life as flowing from an infinite and unbounded surplus. This ethos, therefore, wants to suspend final judgement and create the openness to acknowledge, expect and create the space for possibilities (and hope) to emerge. Herein lies a certain unbounded ethos of liberty, in the sense that we do not limit ourselves or the other, because what is, could be unexpectedly different, given the possibility of unbounded surplus.

Of course, the implications of contingency also have an effect on the way in which Christians think about God and life. Human action is *ipso facto* contingent in nature. Christians, however, view God as unbounded and as the eschatological possible. What is the implication of this when we name God as our debtor-friend? I will explore this idea further and find inspiration from John Chrysostom. Before doing so, I need to clarify how we understand event-hermeneutics and why this is an important perspective that would influence the heuristic lens we use in the process of interpreting the source documents of Christianity.

5.3 Event-hermeneutics

Hermeneutically, the source documents of Christianity (or *interpretandum*[6]) could also be approached from the perspective of contingency. To this end, Hermans (2017; 2019), making use especially of the insights of Dalferth (2016), provides new perspectives to interpret and approach texts in what they call an event-hermeneutical approach. This approach focuses on the dynamic of the process of meaning construction, and not, in the first place, on the producer of the text or the text itself. This would entail that we would "focus on the event which leads to understanding of a possible self which emerges in this process of understanding" (Hermans 2019:8-9, drawing on Dalferth 2016:chapter 3 § 4; Hermans 2017:36). The construction of meaning is something that belongs to a dynamic process, *i.e.*, meaning is not fixed. The potential for new possibilities of meaning "happens" in the dynamic interaction between the way (how) something is said by someone

[6] *Interpretandum* is the object of interpretation. See also Hermans (2017:35).

(who) and the context in which this event took place and the grounds on which it was said (Dalferth 2016). In this instance, it is important to notice "the event to which the text owes its existence" (Hermans 2019:9), *i.e.*, the event the text reflects and how this could potentially change or transform the way we understand ourselves and the world in a manner that creates new possibilities and openness. Thus, this hermeneutic approach, especially from the perspective of theology, in itself contains a form of (potential) contingency and openness to what might be creatively (and especially eschatologically[7]) possible from the perspective of a surplus of meaning of a flourishing life in the presence of others, but also for the sake of others on the ground of God as reality of the possible. For this reason, as Dalferth (2016:chapter 12 § 1) also points out, this approach is motivated by a *priority of the possible.*

In the next section, I want to explore Chrysostom and his view on God as friend, and scrutinise the ways in which his insights on God as friend have the potential to transform our understanding of self and world: How it could "disrupt" our understanding (of reality) and "interject" something new and "unexpected" from a "surplus of meaning and potential" derived from naming God as (the) eschatological possible (debtor-friend).

5.4 Chrysostom and God as friend[8]

Scholars such as, among others, Verhoeff (2016:87) have pointed out that the idea of friendship (φιλος φιλανθροπος) is a core concept within the theology of Chrysostom. This study will be very helpful in our current discussion (section 4 below) and the main ideas were initially developed after having engaged with the work of Verhoeff. In a helpful study, Rylaarsdam (2014) explores the dynamics of divine pedagogy in Chrysostom. An important notion in Chrysostom is the way in which God reveals himself to people, *i.e.*, how God makes himself known. Rylaarsdam (2014:17) remarks that because of "sin and its consequences", people are estranged from their creator due to their "indifference", "sluggishness" (ῥαθυμία), mortality and human passions (ὀργή). Since human beings have limited ability to know God, God has to reveal himself in specific ways and adapt to

[7] Hermans (2019:9) calls theology "the discipline about the eschatological possible in/of the real". He draws his insights in this regard especially from Dalferth (2016). See Hermans (2017:37) and his reference to Dalferth's twelfth chapter.

[8] All translations of Chrysostom, unless explicitly indicated otherwise, are taken from the classic source NPNF (A select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church).

their frame of reference, so to speak. To this end, Rylaarsdam refers to the salience of συγκατάβασις,[9] which according to Chrysostom (*Incomprehens* 3.15 [SC 28bis.200]), could be understood as follows:

> *It is when God appears and makes himself known not as he is, but in the way one incapable of beholding him is able to look upon him. In this way God reveals himself proportionally to the weakness of vision of those who behold him.* [10]

The word συγκατάβασις (συγκατάβαίνω) denotes going from a high place to a low place, for instance when someone is accompanied by someone and goes down to some other (lower) place.

From the perspective of metaphor theory, it can be noted, in this instance, that God reveals himself by means of conceptual metaphorical frames known to people, *i.e.*, when a source domain and a target domain are related to each other. In Chrysostom's thinking, the abstract concept of knowing God or friendship with God as target domain is explained by means of the source domain of ideal friendship, which is a conceptual framework known to Chrysostom and his audience who were well aware of aspects such as patronage, benefaction and reciprocity. For the modern reader of ancient texts, these implied social contextual frameworks are often unknown/implicit and need to be made explicit, in order to provide an appropriate framework in which to interpret the information in these texts that express *social realities* unfamiliar to the modern reader. The original audience or readers were socialised within what social-scientific exegetes call a high context society. The latter is differentiated from a low context society. The difference between the two is that, within a high context society, much of the socialised knowledge is implied and not explicitly communicated. This (high context) is typical of dyadic or collectivist communities such as the ancient Mediterranean context, in which John's Gospel and Chrysostom's work were produced. For us, as modern interpreters of these texts, it is thus important that we do not make ourselves guilty of ethnocentrism and anachronism. Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998:5; 2003:11) correctly point out that it is important to investigate the implicit assumptions and the social background of the original audiences and what scenarios functioned in that socio-cognitive frame. It is also important to note that

---

[9] Rylaarsdam's translation originally quoted by Verhoeff (2016:87). The word συγκατάβασις (συγκατάβαίνω) denotes going from a high place to a low place, for instance when someone is accompanied by someone and goes down to.

[10] This is Chrysostom's definition of συγκατάβασις (in *Incomprehens* 3.15 [SC 28bis.200 τί δέ ἐστι σθγκατάβασις:] as translated by David Rylaarsdam (2014:17 fn 38). See in this regard Rylaarsdam (2014:17 fn 38) who also refers to *Incomprehens.* 4.19 [SC 28bis.222] as well as *In. Is.* 6 [SC 304.258] where God "adapts" himself by not showing his essence to people (in their weakness ἀσθένειαν) would grasp what/who they see.

all texts are not only produced within a social context, but also reflect the values of that context, and want to effect social change.

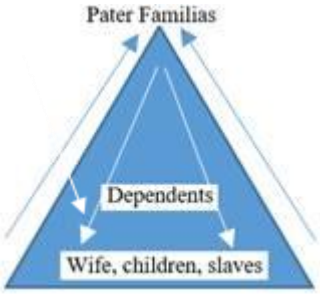
Below we want to provide you with two important concepts, namely patronage and reciprocity, that are needed in order to appreciate the meaning that was implicit to both John's Gospel and Chrysostom's social worlds.

5.4.1 Understanding ancient patronage

Malina and Rohrbaugh (2003:388) explain patron-client relationships as follows:

> Patron-client systems are socially fixed relations of generalized reciprocity between social unequals in which a lower-status person in need (called a client) has his needs met by having recourse for favors to a higher-status, well-situated person (called a patron). By being granted the favor, the client implicitly promises to pay back the patron whenever and however the patron determines. By granting the favor, the patron, in turn, implicitly promises to be open for further requests at unspecific later times.

According to Malina and Rohrbaugh, this idea of generalised reciprocity was especially evident and presupposed in family relations. In the ancient context, family relations were mainly patriarchal and depended on the head of the family's (*pater familias*) patronage.



Malina and Rohrbaugh (2003:389) point out that there was a difference between patronage and friendship. Patronage was, according to them, a relationship between unequals and friendship a relation between equals, or people who were relatively on the same level in a highly stratified society. The primary ethical responsibility of patrons or benefactors was to show favour towards their clients, and their clients were obliged to repay their benefactors in a reciprocal way with honour. However, because the favour that the patron bestowed upon the clients was often much more than the clients could ever repay, receiving benefaction

implied a long-term relationship, commitment and responsibility of the client to 'repay' the benefactor. Malina and Rohrbaugh (2003:389) remark: "[F]riends were normally social equals … [B]ound by reciprocal relations, friends were obliged to help each other on an ongoing basis, whereas patrons (or brokers) were not". In this regard, Malina and Rohrbaugh, in my opinion, perhaps make a too sharp distinction between patron and friend. In many of the ancient texts, patrons are described as "friends"; for instance, in John 19:12, Pilate is described as a "friend of Caesar". It was, however, true that God would rather be viewed as patron than client, or friend of equal status. But, in early Christian literature such as in Chrysostom, there is a *different line of thought* which, in many ways, is counter-cultural for the time in which it was written.

5.4.2 God as patron and friend in Chrysostom

In her study on Chrysostom, Verhoeff (2016:88) correctly remarks that the way in which Chrysostom speaks of the believer's relationship with God as being that of a *friendship,* is rather remarkable against the background of the ancient context in which it was written. Chrysostom provides, in his homilies, countless "evidence" to convince his readers of the reality of God's active pursuit of establishing a relationship between himself and people. In his homily on John 15 for instance, Chrysostom clearly paints a picture that illustrates to us that he viewed God as being the one who took the first initiative in reaching out to human beings. In his homily on John 3:16 and on John 15:16, it is clear that Chrysostom views Christ as being the one who actively pursued friendship with believers – even those who were still enemies (*Homily on John* 77 [PG 59.415.44-45]). In fact, this idea is expressed not once but three times in this homily, which indicates that he wanted to make this point strongly. In this regard, it is also important to investigate his homily on Hebrews (especially Homily 23), in which he presents God as a benevolent patron and believers as the recipients of abundant grace. In Chrysostom's view, God illustrated his benevolence from the beginning of creation, even though we were enemies, showering us with paradise and intimate communion with Him (ὁμιλίαν τὴν μετ΄ αὐτοῦ), giving us his only Son, and reconciling us to himself. Particularly interesting is that Chrysostom, in another context (letter to Theodore), paints a picture of God running after people actively *pursuing friendship* (ἐπιτρέχω) with those who have turned their back upon him. Intertextually, as Verhoeff (2016:89) pointed out, Chrysostom draws on Matthew 23:37 and 2 Corinthians 5:19. The former entails the metaphorical image of a hen gathering her chicks under the protective shield of her loving wings and the latter of God as active agent reconciling the world to himself. God is, in other words, known by his active pursuit of loving friendship with human beings. Not only did he, as great benefactor, initiate it, but he is also portrayed as actively pursuing the relationship by showering people with love and gifts. Said differently, *God, as the eschatological possible, is painted as showering believers with gifts, bestowing upon them loving benefits*.

As mentioned earlier, the authors of the source documents of Christianity wanted to influence their hearers/readers on a social level, *i.e.*, the texts wanted to shape people's thinking and action. In this sense, the texts wanted to influence identity and ethics.[11] The portrayal of God in the form of the above metaphors creates not only a picture of God, but also the way in which people can understand their own identity. Thus, by coming to know God as the active loving, pursuing benefactor-friend, they would also have come to understand themselves as those who have the ethical responsibility to return what has been given to them. For this reason, Chrysostom also wants his readers to *imitate* these values and show the same attitude to the rest of humanity. Concretely, for Chrysostom, knowing God in this way leads one to imitate God in practical ways that do not draw boundaries, but transcend them and build bridges. If we live according to the love exemplified by God (περὶ τὴν κατὰ θεὸν ἐπιδεῖξαι φιλίαν), it culminates in a life that pursues friendship, even with those who are enemies and who despise us (see *Hom. Rom.* 27; Verhoeff 2016:90). For those who understand the dynamics of ancient reciprocity, it is already clear that Chrysostom's logic, in this instance, goes against the grain of what was expected within the "economy of reciprocity" in antiquity. If a benefactor showered someone with gifts, it was the ethical responsibility of that person to repay the benefactor. Chrysostom appeals to the *imitatio Dei* and reminds his readers/hearers that "imitating God or Christ's way of befriending men means a zealous pursuit of friendship regardless of whether this will be reciprocated" (Verhoeff 2016:90). This is a missional responsibility for Chrysostom, as noted in his argument that Paul was often passionately "running" towards the mission to lead people into God's Kingdom (*De laud. Paul. Hom.* 3.6). In his argument, Chrysostom mentions that Paul was like Abraham (see Gen. 18:2; *Hom. Gen.* 42) who ran to meet the strangers and show them hospitality. For Chrysostom, Paul could do so only because he had Christ *within* him. It could thus be argued that knowing God's love manifests in loving pursuit of God and others, which forms an essential dimension to the nature of φιλία in Chrysostom's thinking.

[11] Worth noting here is that scholars such as Rylaarsdam (2014:7) correctly remark that "Having a rhetorical theology, moreover, does not mean that Chrysostom passively or unwittingly incorporates rhetorical or cultural ideas into his thought. He … [i]s challenging one of the most powerful traditions in ancient society by intentionally re-minting classical *paideia* with a biblical language and worldview." In this regard Chrysostom *adapted* (*attemperat*) the classical idea of adaptation and developed the term συγκατάβασις such that the classical idea was transposed into a theological narrative (Rylaarsdam (2014:2, 7). We could thus argue that the metaphors and discourses of *paideia* in Hellenistic thinking were reconstructed by Chrysostom and adapted to suit his theological framework. The identity and ethics of people were engaged with by means of taking their worldview and their frame of reference into consideration and by the power of metaphor, it was reconstructed with new dimensions of meaning and significance (see Rylaarsdam 2014:6).

5.4.3 Knowing God as an intimate and open friend

In a striking image of open, self-disclosing friendship, Chrysostom states that there are no secrets between true friends and that one is, at all times, ethically obliged to respect the secrecy shared between friends. Those who break this secret code transgress the rules of true friendship, thus warranting the destruction of the relationship. Openness and self-disclosure were a prerequisite in true friendship (Konstan 1996:89, referred to in Verhoeff 2016:91, fn. 24; but contra Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:404-405) and demanded a form of reciprocity. Chrysostom argues that God took the initiative to disclose himself to Abraham (Gen. 18:17) and have a close personal relationship with Noah, like a friend with a friend (φίλος φίλω) (Verhoeff 2016:90-91). He also uses the image or metaphor of the entrusted friend of the King to refer to John who had received divine knowledge. In his homily on John's Gospel, Chrysostom mentions that Jesus disclosed secrets to his disciples. This is explicitly stated in John 15:15, where Jesus speaks to his disciples shortly before his arrest. Jesus puts the disciples on an equal level of social status with himself,[12] transforming their status from servants to friends (John 15:15 οὐκέτι λέγω ὑμᾶς δούλους…ὑμᾶς…φίλους…) (Köstenberger 2004: 459).The transformation of this status is expressed by John's Gospel with a qualifying sentence introduced with the subordinating conjunction ὁτι expressing the reason for this change in status. The reason is the result of the given fact that slaves do not *know* the business of their masters – but not in the case of Jesus – He took the initiative to call his former slaves "friends" and reveal to them *everything* that he had learned from his Father. Chrysostom, in this instance, follows John's Gospel's train of thought, namely that the disciples did not choose Jesus, but Jesus chose them (John 15:15b) and that this election should culminate in a form of love that corresponds with the (self-giving) love that Christ showed (John 10). By way of expression, it could be said that the barometer of true friendship is evident in the nature of the self-disclosure and secrets between intimate friends. This idea of God sharing divine intimacies is found in several places in the work of Chrysostom (see JC's homilies on Eph. 1:8-9; John 15:15; 1 Cor. 2:16). Particularly interesting, as Verhoeff (2016:92) has shown, is Chrysostom's commentary on 1 Corinthians 2:16 in his seventh homily. There, in an intertextual manner, he draws on the same discourse as in his commentary on John 15:15. He states that believers have the mind of Christ. The mind of the believer is spiritual (πνευματικός) and divine (θεῖος) in contrast with merely being 'human' (οὐδεν ἀνθρωώπιον ἔχοντα) (Verhoeff 2016:92). This is made possible, because God has revealed to us the things that are in his own heart (Homily on Eph. 1:8-9). Ac-

[12] Equal social status in this context does not exclude the fact that John's Gospel has a clear hierarchal Father-Son-Children structure (which it clearly has [cf. John 5:18, 24)]) (Van der Watt 2000).

cording to Chrysostom, even in his day, this reality was contrasted with, and distinguished from the great figures in history such as Plato and Pythagoras. In his own words (quoted by Verhoeff[13] 2016:92): "The mind is spiritual (πνευματικός) and divine (θεῖος) and has nothing human (οὐδὲν ἀνθρώπιον ἔχοντα). For it is not of Plato, nor of Pythagoras, but it is Christ Himself, putting His own things into our mind" (1 *Cor. Hom.* 7).

What Chrysostom thus might have had in mind is a true transformation of a believer that comes as a result of a form of unity with Christ *within* the individual. This "godly" transformation is something which God, as active agent, does unto the human person. So, Chrysostom in 1 *Tim. Hom.* 11 would go so far as to say that "God became man and man became God". He puts it in rather strong terms: "ἄνθροπος γὰρ ἐγένετο ὁ Θεὸς ὁ ἄνθρωπος". Also in his commentary on the Psalms (*Expos. In Ps*. 8 PG 55.39–498) as Rylaarsdam (2014:134 fn 189) shows, JC says Θεὸς ἀνθρωπος γέγονε, καὶ ἄνθρωπος Θεὸς). From this and other texts, as shown by Verhoeff (2016) we could deduce that Chrysostom has a relatively stronger view of the nature of this transformative unity between God and man and the way in which man can know God than one would, for instance, find even in John's gospel. Perhaps Verhoeff (2016:92) puts it too strongly (in reference to the word 'removed') when she argues: "To a limited extent, the inequality inherent in the king-friend and divine-human relation is removed". Nevertheless, Chrysostom makes it clear that the mystery that God gives is not merely that of transmitting knowledge or information; in the first place, it also entails a *transformation* of the believer. For Chrysostom, the boundaries between God and human beings have been transformed in the sense that having God as friend entails a form of openness and transformation that goes beyond the Johannine understanding of what it means that God reveals himself to believers. Verhoeff claims that the inherent inequality between God and human beings within the King-friend framework has, to some extent, been *removed*. For Chrysostom, God has revealed "*all wisdom (σοφια) and insight/understanding (φρονήσει)" as well as the "mystery (μυστήριον) of his will"* (Eph. 1:8-9; *Eph. Hom. 1* [PG 62.15.1-3]) (see Verhoeff 2016:92).

5.4.4 God as debtor-friend

Verhoeff (2013:47-66, 2016:93)[14] was one of the first to make us aware of the important notion of God as debtor-friend and we draw on her insights in the argument below. In his homily on 1 Thessalonians (*Hom*. 2; PG 62.403.55-5), Chrysostom describes, to the implied reader, a true and honourable friend as being a *debtor*. According to him, a true friend would bestow a form of favour on

[13] Verhoeff makes use of NPNF (Schaff 1988) when translating Chrysostom unless indicated otherwise. See here 1 *Cor. Hom.* 7; PG 61.62.30 Transl. in NPNF.
[14] For a recent reception of the insights of Verhoeff, see Bae (2018:11).

his friend(s) by putting himself in the position of a debtor, not a benefactor. Within the framework of ancient reciprocity, a benefactor could expect a good favour in return. But no, Chrysostom mentions that a true friend (in this case God) is one who puts himself in the position of being one who is constantly seeking to *bestow favours* and not expecting, in the first place, to *receive favours.* For such a person, a sense of gratitude comes from giving, not from receiving. Such a friend takes the attitude of someone who is in debt to the other – giving freely with no expectation of seeking a return in reciprocity from the receiver. Such a true friend wants to remain in the position of being an ὀφειλέτης (debtor). In an ironic twist of ideas, Chrysostom states that such a person "wishes to be the first in bestowing benefits, and not to seem to be the first, but to be returning a kindness" (1 Thess. Hom. 2 [PG 62.404.58-405.3]; trans. NPNF in Verhoeff 2016:93). The counter-cultural message is striking: He motivates his readers to take the position of a debtor (owing someone) and not of a benefactor (expecting reciprocity), based on the great deeds of God in the past. Their behaviour should reflect their identity, which is embedded in a particular understanding of who God is and what God has done. Chrysostom remarks that God has illustrated that he is such a debtor-friend: "He purposed to give his own Son for us; but that He might not bestow a favour, but to be indebted to us …" (Verhoeff 2016:93). Not only was God the one who freely gave the gift of his Son, but he also did not want to *appear as having given a gift to be repaid but rather as one owing a favour, i.e.*, as a "responsive gift, treating the benefit as if it were a repayment of a debt" (Verhoeff 2016:93) [15].

Chrysostom explicitly motivates his readers to make God their debtor and, in the process, expect exponential gifts from God[16]. In this sense, the gift of the giver is based on the Gift of the Giver and will lead to a return of a gift by the Giver: *Because God gave so abundantly to us, we should return good works such as almsgiving as an act of graciousness, but can and should expect that God will abundantly provide to us in return.* This idea is shaped around the notion in Proverbs 19:17, as Verhoeff (2013, 2016; Bae 2018:11-12 also referring to Verhoeff) illustrated, according to which a person who shows mercy towards a poor man lends to the Lord. This leads, at least for Chrysostom, to the language of divine economy, *i.e.*, to a contractual bond (he uses the word γειρόγραφά) [17]. A person gives to the poor without expecting anything back from the poor, but he may expect that God will provide to the giver significantly more than the giver gave.

[15] As mentioned above, Verhoeff's translations of JC (and mine) are from NPNF (Schaff 1988) unless otherwise indicated.

[16] It is worth noting here how the strong adversative Greek word ἀλλὰ is used repeatedly by JC in this section, indicating in the strongest possible way in Greek the contrasting "but" to the ideas expressed. Thus, one would expect a certain motivation or outcome, but God surprises by doing something unexpected, i.e., acting as a debtor.

[17] See *In Matt. hom.* 66 (PG 58.632.7; trans. NPNF) in Verhoeff (2016:95 fn 44) for more on contractual bond.

In that sense, God repays the giver on behalf of the poor person. It is thus argued that, *by giving to those who cannot return, God is made to become a debtor to the giver*. Because of the cross and God's abundant gift of grace towards us, such giving turns it into a favour done to Christ. In return, the giver could rely on a large form of (exponential) surplus in future, which will come from God.

In this instance, the metaphor is remarkable in that Chrysostom moves beyond the expected ancient contextual frame of the metaphor of friendship and the relation between this metaphor and the understanding of who God is. This urges the readers to view God and themselves in a transformative new way. It challenges the believer to *live with an ethos of expectancy* – of the good favour that is to come from a pursuing-debtor-God. God's future holds something in reserve, so to speak. Relating this to Hermans' ideas expressed earlier in terms of contingency, this metaphorical understanding not only holds something in reserve, but also portrays the "coming of God's future", new possibilities that might emerge, with the transformative potential of a "surplus of a good life with and for others" (Hermans 2019:9). This perspective on God and others neither limits possibilities nor operates from the perspective of limited good. Rather, it views life as something that flows forth from an infinite and unbounded surplus.

Similarly, this is most obvious when we investigate the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, especially through the heuristic lens of contingency and event-hermeneutics. With this narrative, the author(s) of John's gospel wanted to transform the way in which people relate to God and to others, by way of imitating Jesus' boundary transcending mission (John 5:18ff.; 17:18; 20:21).

In John 4:4-5, we read that Jesus went through Samaria where he met the Samaritan woman who came to draw water at a well (John 4:6). Jesus was already sitting there (John 4:6) when the woman approached the well. The question could thus be asked: Why this particular place and person?; Why here, and not somewhere else? The Samaritan woman would certainly have experienced this as a form of radical contingency. The point is – it happened to her! It could, from the perspective of contingency, also have happened to someone else; but it happened to her. In fact, it was very unlikely that Jesus, a Jew, would interact with a Samaritan woman. In the time of Jesus, there were clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Kok & Dunne 2014). John's text guides the implicit reader to appreciate the contingency involved in this instance with an explanatory clause: "For Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans" (John 4:9). Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998:98) correctly point out that the term used by John (συγχρῶνται) refers to the sharing of utensils in the context of the purity laws. According to Rabbinic Judaism, Samaritans are unclean from the cradle (*m*. *Nid.* 4.1). Along with texts such as Leviticus 15:19, all indications are that what is happening in this case is, in fact, very unlikely to happen and comes as a surprise. By asking her for something to drink, Jesus is, in fact, transgressing the normal boundaries and acceptable codes of conduct of the time. Even the Samaritan

woman's response to the initiative of Jesus asking her for a drink is an effort to provide the social clue that this kind of interaction should not take place and is considered deviant behaviour in that particular sociocultural context. The Samaritan woman actually "reminds" Jesus of the socially acceptable rules, as noted in Chrysostom's *Homily on John* 4:9. Thus, Jesus' initiative and behaviour should not happen, but it did.

John states that Jesus answered the Samaritan woman with the following words: "If you knew the *gift of God*, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." In this instance, Jesus brings a *gift* coming from God. In John, this gift is associated with life (John 1:1-4; 1:12; 3:16). It is interesting to note that the Samaritan woman lacks this kind of "life". Not only is she an unclean Samaritan woman, but her present husband is not even her husband. In the ancient context, this was taboo. John portrays an unclean, marginalised woman. In John's world view, this woman does not yet believe, and those who do not believe are still considered to be in an existential position of death (John 5:24).

In the ensuing verses, in a dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus speaks to her about the things from above (John 3:3), but she shows a lack of understanding. Jesus then turns the dynamics of the conversation around and reveals himself to the woman. Before Jesus reveals his true identity, he shows the woman that he has profound knowledge about her personal situation. In John, the words ἐγω εἰμι imply some form of self-revelation by Jesus. He reveals that he is aware of the fact that she had many husbands and that her present husband is not her husband (John 4:18). For this woman, Jesus' knowledge about her personal life came to her as a big surprise and is presented as the moment when she realised that what is happening to her now is truly unique and that the person standing in front of her must be truly significant. The woman shows some progression in her spiritual perception, by saying that she now recognises that Jesus is a prophet (John 4:19). She relates this event with what she knew of the Messiah who would one day come. At that moment, Jesus reveals himself with the words ἐγώ εἰμι (I am …) (John 4:26). This is also the moment when the woman's spiritual eyes opened, and she "saw" the true identity of Jesus. Chrysostom goes to great lengths in his Homily on John 4. Not only was Jesus rather gentle with the woman, but the woman also showed an openness and humbleness to *receive* the insights that were about to come her way. From the perspective of what we have learned from contingency and event-hermeneutics, we could argue that the dynamics of this text, and how Chrysostom interprets it, shows us that it is not a given that such faith will take place – it has the potential to be, but also the potential not to be, which represents a form of contingency. In this case, the woman showed an openness that led her to true faith.

In the next scene, the disciples return from the city where they bought food. Even Jesus' disciples, who were not present at the well up to this point (John 4:27), are astonished (ἐθαύμαζον) by the fact that Jesus was speaking to a

(Samaritan) woman. Interesting in the development of the narrative is the evidence of the transformation that has already taken place in the woman's life. She immediately leaves her water jar at the well and runs into the city, calling people to come and see the promised Messiah (John 4:29). People left the city and went to Jesus (John 4:30); many of them came to believe *on account of the testimony of the woman* (John 4:39). Ultimately, based on their own experience of listening to Jesus (John 4:42), they confessed that Jesus is the saviour of the world (σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου). In the narrative in John, the woman becomes the first real missionary witness – something that was very unlikely in a male-dominated world, and that happens rather early in the narrative before Jesus' own disciples are sent out as missionary witnesses. Chrysostom's Homily on John 4:13ff clearly states that she is even more "manly" than Nicodemus and exhibits actions that belong to an apostle, since she preached the gospel to all, and drew a whole city towards him.

In John's narrative worldview, not only the Samaritan woman, but also the Samaritans in the city who came to believe in Jesus, have now been saved and moved from the sphere of death to the sphere of life (John 5:24), and have been taken up in the family of God with the authority to be called children of God (John 1:12). From this perspective, it is clear that the daily event of collecting water culminated unexpectedly in receiving spiritual water (John 4:14) that, according to Jesus, "will become in them (the believer) a spring of water gushing up to eternal life". In this narrative, God's future of abundance and his new possibilities for life emerged unexpectedly. The unclean Samaritan woman becomes the first (female) missionary witness, as Chrysostom also pointed out in his Homily on John 4:14. This portrays the possibilities arising from contingency. The implicit reader/hearer might be asking: "If it could have happened to this woman, could it happen to me?". What are the implications of transcending socio-religious boundaries in the way Jesus did, reaching out to, and restoring the dignity of people who come from the fringes of society or are part of the outgroup? What does that tell us about God's future and the possibilities God wants to create? To what extent does this narrative motivate Christ followers to be agents of life-giving potentiality, show love and create hope and possibilities beyond the confines of their own boundaries?

5.5 Conclusion

From the perspective of a participant observer, so to speak, interpreting the source documents of Christianity by means of the perspectives of contingency and event-hermeneutics provided us, as (epistemic) community of knowledge, with an interesting framework to rethink the understanding of ourselves and the world. As observed earlier, ethos is based on identity, and New Testament/Early Christian ethics relates to the systematic reflection of the relationship between identity and ethos, *i.e.*, "why we do what we do", "how we do it", and "to whom".

How does the above relate to the introductory section of this article, in which I sketched the background of our contextual VUCA reality? As Van den Broeck and Jordaan (2018) have argued, we live amidst a global revolution – one of the fastest changing times in history, in which everything seems to be accelerating at a tremendous pace. Time becomes a valuable resource, and often we experience the availability of time as a form of scarcity, as the "onthaastingsgoeroe" (slow-down guru), as Rosa (2016) correctly pointed out. Already in 2009, Rosa and Scheuerman (2009:8) referred to the rise of an endemic "culture of chronic time famine", a time characterised by broken relationships and lack of resonance, as Rosa (2016) calls it. The gap between the rich and the poor is also increasing and will likely do so in the near future, with the possibility of increased global conflict. For that reason, true and deep transformation (and virtuous love) is needed (Hermans 2017:45) if we want to address the problems of our time. This has implications for the way in which we live and form (un)stable relationships.

De Wachter (2012:17, 20, 21, 23), a well-known Belgian psychiatrist at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, opines that we live in a time where there seems to be a significant lack of meaning/significance (De Wachter 2012:75-95; 209-208) and hope (De Wachter 2012:229-276) as well as an alarming amount of anxiety (De Wachter 2012:23-56) in the super-fluidity and individualism of contemporary Europe (specifically Belgium). He argues that what he experienced in his practice as psychiatrist showed him that there is a significant tendency in our world for people to feel increasingly lonely and disconnected, although we live in the most connected time period in history (via world wide web [*homo sapiens virtualis*]) (De Wachter 2012:23). He argues that this is, *inter alia*, a result of the radical time of change and transition in which we live. He goes to great lengths in his book to describe the nature of the times in which we live. I cannot deal with this in this article. Suffice it to say, De Wachter (2012:49) mentions that meaninglessness relates, among other things, to "the death of God" and the nihilism that flowed from it. He states that, for centuries, social embeddedness and the belief in God and the afterlife gave people a form of meaning. Nowadays, it no longer does and it shows its effect:

> *Het wankelen en wegvallen van het geloof in God heeft ons met gigantische problemen opgezadeld, en verlatingsangst is zeker niet het kleinste ... Het individualisme kwam, zag en overwon, het duwde het universalisme van zijn troon en zorgde voor verbrokkeling, een verlies van hechting, leegte, eenzaamheid, een gevoel van zinloosheid* (De Wachter 2012:50).[18]

[18] Translation: "The faltering and falling away of faith in God has burdened us with enormous problems, and fear of abandonment is certainly not the smallest ... Individualism came, saw and conquered, it pushed universalism from its throne and caused crumbling, a loss of attachment , emptiness, loneliness, a sense of meaninglessness."

De Wachter's (2012:277-283) final chapter is entitled "'La petite bonté' van Emmanuel Levinas". His basic argument is that Levinas' insights can shed important light on the nature of community, unity, engagement and solidarity – for a life with, and for others and the fact that responsibility (for the Other) precedes freedom. For Levinas, as we know, the presence of the Other compels and challenges us to do good to others without expecting reciprocity. It is interesting to note that, although De Wachter acknowledges the problems associated with the death of God, his last chapter, a culmination of his argument, understandably for a post-Christian context and audience, does not seek answers in God and the eschatological possible. This is the difference between our approach and his. In theology, in an age of contingency, we turn back to the possibility and hope that God's eschatological future could potentially emerge. In the discipline of theology, we believe that God's future holds something in reserve. As we learned from Dalferth, theologians go out from the "*priority of the possible above the reality, through its orientation around God as the reality of the possible in/of the reality"* (Hermans 2019:9, italics mine]). It is not that it needs to happen – it is not a necessity – but we believe that it could and has the potential to be. Our hope is not passive, but active.

Martin points to an important aspect of the human person, namely that hope is something which is deeply connected with our desires and our concerns. Martin (2013:8, quoted in Burger *et al.* 2018:10) opines that "to hope for an outcome is to desire (be attracted to) it, to assign a probability somewhere between 0 and 1 to it, and to judge that there are sufficient reasons to engage in certain feelings and activities directed toward it". In the discipline of Theology (see, for example, Moltmann 1965; 2012), we are committed and attracted to God and his story with the world.

Chrysostom challenges us to think of God as benefactor-friend whose future abundance and new possibilities will emerge from the depth of God's love, which we have received and which we are to embody and mediate. In our opinion, this causes us, in a VUCA context characterised by volatility, uncertainty, anxiety and conflict, to think differently about the way in which we could to strive for the good life with, and for others. The contingency and event-hermeneutics perspectives, of which we became aware via the work of Hermans (2017; 2019), helped us construct a new heuristic lens with which to (re)interpret the source documents of Christianity.

What Chrysostom claims in his friendship discourse has transformative implications for the way in which we view community and (divine) economy. It has implications for the way in which we think about what it means to live a good life with, and for others. It also helps frame the basic incapacity of human beings, and consider the possibilities of grounding identity and ethos on/in the *coming of God's future* which, as noted in Chrysostom, wants to motivate readers to be and remain open to expecting the eschatological possible, not in a passive way, but in an active and Other-engaging manner. From the perspective of Chrysostom, a

radical contingency is involved, in the sense that God is the One who undeservedly and unexpectedly pursues the contingent act of friendship with us, and showers us with gifts. Thus, it could be argued that God *does not need to pursue friendship* – yet, he does. Such friendship has the potential to be and the potential not to be, and it thus represents a form of contingency. Good and merciful acts towards, and from others need not happen, but it could happen, thus opening up the space of (eschatological) possibility. This opens up the space in which that which is possible (God's abundant gifts) could potentially transform the actual as God's future comes in and through others and certainly from God himself (eschatologically). This implies that a believer is called, by acts of kindness, generosity and thankfulness, to be involved with the transformation of the actual in the direction of that which is desired. This creates a form of hope and theological meaning, an optimism about the future, "based on an awareness of discrepancy between current reality and an envisioned ideal" (Van den Heuvel & Nullens 2018:xv). Elsewhere, Nullens (2016:42-49) aptly expresses hope as the art of possibility. I agree with Nullens that Christians have the moral duty to create a sustainable future. I close with the following appropriate words of Nullens (2016:ad loc.):

> *Laat varen alle hoop, gij die hier binnentreedt', zo staat er geschreven boven de hel in Dantes Divina Commedia. Zij die daar binnentreden hebben allicht veel verlangens, maar geen vooruitzicht op beterschap. Een samenleving in crisis, vol verlangens, maar zonder hoop, kan lijken op een hel. Volgens Sartre moet de moderne mens 'leren leven zonder hoop'. Maar hoop is inherent aan ons mens-zijn en het is een immense sociale kracht, die nodig is bij de vorming van een politieke toekomstvisie. Het is daarom onze morele en burgerplicht deze oude deugd te hervinden.*[19]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bae, J. (2018). John Chrysostom On Almsgiving and the Therapy of the Soul (PhD Thesis, Australian Catholic University). Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.26199/5b84d5eabcf7f

Burger, M.J., Van den Heuvel, S.C., Nullens, P. & Pleeging, E. (2018). Understanding and measuring hope: The interdisciplinary challenge of Hope Barometer 1.0. In: S.C. van den Heuvel & P. Nullens (eds), Driven by

[19] Translation: "Abandon all hope, you who enter here", words written as you enter hell in Dante's *Divina Commedia*. Those who enter there probably have had many desires, but will have no prospect of any possibility. A society in crisis, full of longings, but without hope, can look similar to hell. According to Sartre, modern man must 'learn to live without hope'. But hope is inherent in our humanity and it is an immense social force that is needed to form a political vision of the future. It is therefore our moral and civil duty to rediscover this old virtue."

hope: Economics and theology in dialogue. Christian Perspectives on Leadership and Social Ethics, 6 (Leuven, Peeters Press), pp. 3-19.

Dalferth, I.U. (2016). Radical theology: An essay on faith and theology in the twenty-first century. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

De Wachter, D. (2012). Borderline times. Leuven: LannooCampus.

Hermans, C.A.M. (2012). Towards a 'U-turn' by the churches: how (not to) possibilise the future. Religion and Theology. A Journal of Contemporary Religious Discourse, 19, 237-264.

(2014). From practical theology to practice-oriented theology. The study of lived spirituality and lived religion in Late Modernity. International Journal of Practical Theology 18(1):1-14.

(2017). Love in a time of scarcity: An event-hermeneutical interpretation. Acta Theologica 37(2):30-50.

(2019). Theology in an Age of Contingency. Paper presented at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

Joas, H. (2014). Faith as an option. Possible future for Christianity. Stanford,CA: Stanford University Press.

Kok, J. & Dunne, J. (Eds). (2014). Insiders versus outsiders. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press.

Kok, J. & Van den Heuvel, S.C. (Eds). (2019). Leading in a VUCA world. (Contributions to Management Science). Cham, Switserland: Springer.

Konstan, D. (1996). Problems in the history of Christian friendship. Journal of Early Christian Studies 4(1996):87-113.

Köstenberger, A. (2004). John. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Baker.

Malina, B.J. & Rohrbaugh, R.L. (1998). Social science commentary on the Gospel of John. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

(2003). Social Science commentary on the Synoptic Gospels. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Martin, A.M. (2013). How we hope: A moral psychology. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Moltmann, J. (1965). Theologie der Hoffnung: Untersuchungen zur Begründung und den Kosequenzen einer christlichen Eschatologie. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.

(2012). Ethics of hope. Translated by M. Kohl. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Nullens, P. (2016). Hoop als het kunst van het mogelijke [Hope as art of what is possible]. [Online.] Retrieved from: https://www.tijdschriftcdv.nl/inhoud/tijdschrift_
artikel/CD-2016-04-42/Hoop-als-de-kunst-van-het-mogelijke [29 May 2019].

Ricken, N. (2004). Diesseits von Relativismus und Universalimsus: Kontingenz als Focus kritischer Reflexionen. In: A. Schäfer & M. Wimmer (eds), Tradition und Kontingenz (Münster, Waxmann), pp. 27-58.

Rosa, H. (2016). Resonanz. Eine Theorie der Weltbeziehung. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Rosa, H. & Scheuerman, W.E. (Eds). (2009). High speed society: Social acceleration, power and modernity. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Rylaarsdam, R. (2014). John Chrysostom on divine pedagogy: The coherence of his theology and Preaching. (Oxford Early Christian Studies). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schwab, K. (2016). The fourth industrial revolution. Geneva: World Economic Forum.

Van den Broeck, H. & Jordaan, B. (2018). The agile leader's scrapbook. Leuven: LannooCampus.

Van den Heuvel, S.C. & Nullens, P. (Eds). (2018). Foreword, In: S.C. van den Heuvel & P. Nullens (eds), Driven by hope: Economics and theology in dialogue. Christian Perspectives on Leadership and Social Ethics, 6 (Leuven, Peeters Press), pp. xv-xxiv.

Van der Heiden, G.J. (2014). Ontology after ontotheology. Plurality, event and contingency in contemporary philosophy. Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press.

Verhoeff, M. (2013). A genuine friend wishes to be a debtor: John Chrysostom's discourse of almsgiving reinterpreted. Sacris Erudiri. Journal of Late Antique and Medieval Christianity, 52, 47-66.

Verhoeff, M. (2016). More desirable than light itself. Friendship discourse in John Chrysostom's soteriology. PhD dissertation, ETF Leuven.

Vertovec, S. (2007). Super-diversity and its implications. Ethnic and Racial Studies 30(6):1024-1054.

Wuchterl, K. (2011). Kontingenz oder das Andere der Vernuft. Zum Verhaltnis von Theologie, Naturwissenschaft und Religion. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Chapter 6

Discernment as Generative dialogue: A constructive proposal for the challenges of missional corporate discernment in an age of contingency

Frederick Marais

6.1 How to practise what we confess

Discernment or corporate spiritual discernment, to be more specific, is a combination of practices and theoretical or theological assumptions. It is problematic if these two streams are separated from each other. Recently, several authors in missional theology proposed a new approach towards discernment that tries to bring the confession in play in discernment. This includes, among others, the work of Keifert (2009); Nouwen (2013); Nissen (2015), and Niemandt (2019).

Already in 1968, the well-known reformed theologian Willie Jonker (1968:2) lamented the fact that, while the reformed tradition confesses that the living Christ rules in the church when the church gathers to make decisions, and that nothing should replace the authority of Christ, in practice a bureaucratic system develops over centuries to effectively replace the rule of Christ. One thing is confessed, but the other is practised! We need a fresh and constructive understanding of the relationship between theory and praxis. Throughout my career in serving the church with a transformative and later missional agenda, I got stuck many times in this war zone of a false dualism between theory and practice. Many of my colleagues in the academia underestimate the complexity of the practical task; in fact, the reformed tradition seems to believe that, if you understand the theory/theology, you will automatically know "how-to-do-it". If we hold firm onto the theory of Christ's rule in the church, leaders will automatically know how to put it into practice.

For many, the theory application model is still the only possibility. We neglect to comprehend the intellectual challenge that the field of praxis presents. Here are a few examples: the simple praxis of listening, a core capacity in discernment, is a complex set of actions and attitudes that need careful consideration and exploration, including, among others, ecclesial, theological, hermeneutical, sociological (safe spaces), and epistemological aspects. On the other hand, my

colleagues in ministry are crying out for help in "how to do" these complex tasks in ministry. How do we forgive, how do we reconcile, to whom do we pray, and so forth. *We are not trained to be missional; we do not know how to do it.* They do not have the time and energy to go into the complexities; they simply ask us, help us, empower us, teach us and coach us into how to listen; to forgive; to pray; to reconcile, and so forth. I was, therefore, pleased to be introduced to the practice-oriented research methodology where there is space to acknowledge the "theory" and the "practice" streams. "Practice-oriented methodology is intended to generate transferable knowledge of actions towards a desired situation (which, in theological terms, incorporates human actions towards the possible or "what-can-be") in a problematic context" (Hermans 2014:13).

To come back to Jonker's lament on the inability of reformed churches to put the confession of Christ's rule into practice: It seems that there is an unfortunate consensus that we do not know how to bridge the gap between confession and practice, in this case. It is encouraging to recognise that the practice-oriented approach seems to gain momentum in South Africa. My sense is that this approach will provide us with a more sophisticated and more constructive approach to the above challenge (Niemandt 2018). I will, therefore, apply this approach in my research and proposal on corporate spiritual discernment. First, I will examine the theological and ecclesial assumption of the reformed tradition on corporate discernment (the theory stream). Then I will discuss the challenges facing reformed congregational leaders when they attempt to do discernment (the practice stream). I will also make some proposals on how to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

6.2 Clarification and working definitions

In reflecting on corporate discernment, I will make use of three concepts, namely contingency, generative listening, and corporate spiritual discernment.

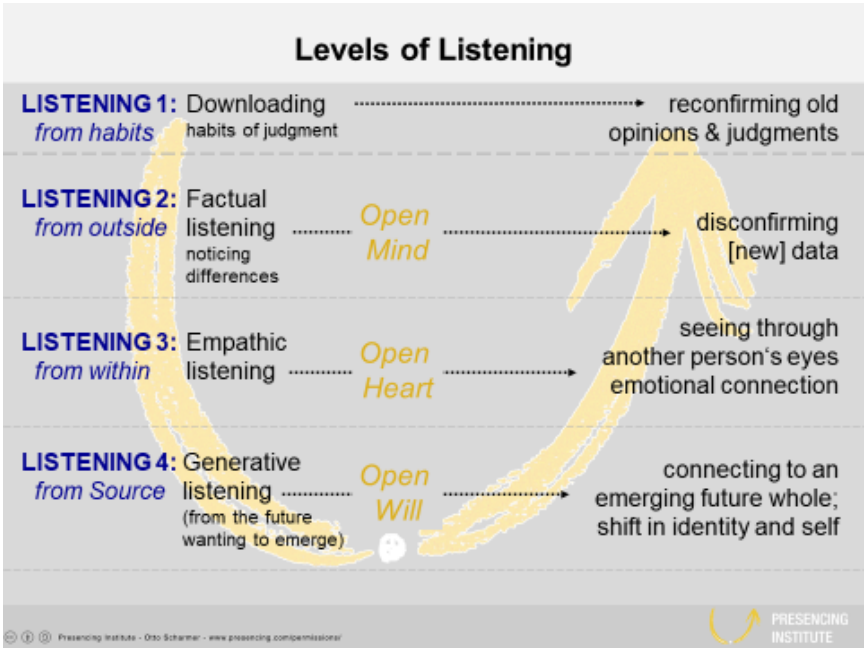
6.2.1 Contingency

In his definition of contingency, Hermans (2018:2-3) draws from the work of Hans Joas and applies it in three fields: sociology, epistemology, and ontology. From a sociological perspective, contingency provides us with insights into the fact that we have an increasing number of action options that underline the unpredictability of the future of society. An epistemological perspective on contingency diverts us from the logic to discern what is true or false, to a logic that explores what is possible. An ontological perspective on contingency provides us with the logic of the essence of being as an event, rather than a static order of reality and the foundation or ground of this order.

6.2.2 Generative listening

I draw my definition for generative dialogue or listening from the work of the educationist Olen Gunnlaugson (2006) and the phenomenologist Otto Scharmer (2009). Generative dialogue supports transformative learning that is open for the unfolding of new knowledge and ways of being, in a learning process that includes the "very ground on which people stand" (Gunnlaugson 2006:16). Or, as Scharmer (2009:254) puts it, generative listening connects us to the source of inspiration and the will to go to the place of silence and allow the inner knowing to emerge.

Scharmer's model of generative dialogue outlines the movement of conversation from conventional discussion (talking nice) to debate (talking tough), through reflective dialogue, and finally into sensing and unfolding new knowledge in the group with the generative stage.[1]



(Scharmer 2009:236)

[1] Scharmer built his theory on the work of Martin Buber.

In generative listening, we open ourselves for the future to emerge. In previous research, I discovered that we need what I called "containers" that consist of habits to guide participants through levels of listening to be open for, or receptive to an unexpected future to emerge (Marais 2017).

Scharmer coined the term 'presencing' in reference to a mode of learning based on sensing and embodying emerging futures rather than re-enacting the past through projection. The opposite is a process that starts with past patterns and that leads to "absencing" (Scharmer 2009:266-267).

6.2.3 Discernment

This article focuses on discernment as a corporate discipline. While many studies focus on individual discernment as a spiritual discipline, this article focuses on the practices when leadership in churches and congregations discern together. In this, I follow Waaijman's (2013:4) clue that the field of corporate or communal discernment needs to be investigated further.

I present the following working definition for corporate discernment. The process of corporate spiritual discernment is a process of generative dialogue where the followers of Christ are receptive to the guidance of the triune God (through the work of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God), for new possibilities for the future in the complexities and fragilities of life.

6.3 Corporate Spiritual Discernment: The confession and the challenge

6.3.1 Age of contingency in the South African context

Since the mid-1980s, the South African society has only one predictable pattern, namely contingency. It was different when I was at the Faculty in the late-1970s and mid-1980s at Stellenbosch. We were trained with the assumption of a predictable, stable and controllable world and worldview. Therefore, the word 'discernment' was not part of our vocabulary; it was not necessary. At that time, we did not have a word for 'spiritual discernment' in Afrikaans. We did not need to practise discernment, because the ontological certainties about God and God's plan for the world were clear to us. We only needed to train our students to understand it and then to apply it in ministry. In addition, if we were challenged, we would appoint a team to study the challenge and come back with the (next) correct answer! How things have changed since then. And how rapid and unexpected the change has been. Such was the change that Du Rand (2001) calls the "ontluisterde wêreld van die Afrikaner" (expatriation of the Afrikaners), in their own country.

Indeed, times have changed. Mainline denominations such as the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) find it increasingly difficult to find these "answers" that are regarded as a reliable truth for society, its members and congregations. The

last of these attempts, the so-called Article 1 referendum on the inclusion of the Belhar confession, failed and the debate on same sex relationships ended in court. These illustrate how difficult it has become for leadership to find a suitable solution for the challenges they are facing. Attempts to give final answers and rulings that everyone in the church should accept and apply failed, because the reality of complexity and contingency has caught up with us. Van der Merwe (2018:13) suggests that, in a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) context, leadership must face the fact that control through management is a myth. The new skill is sense-making that allows the future or the "possibilising" of the future to emerge.

In the last chapter of his book, on the continuous conversion of the church, the missiologist Darrel Guder (2000) argues that, in times of complexity and contingency, the main challenge for churches is to learn how to deal with these complex issues in shifting the focus away from finding or forcing one right answer to processes of discernment that can deal with the complexities and contingencies of our current realities.

In South Africa, church leaders would have to learn how to deal with contingency; it is simply the times in which we are living. Contingency, however, is more than an uncomfortable reality that stole the certainties of the 1970s. Contingency, at least for those who confess that the living Christ has authority, might be a surprising and liberating concept that we can embrace in our approach on discerning God's preferred future.

6.3.2 Reformed confession on the rule of Christ as a confession of contingency[2]

It is one thing to live in an age of contingency, as Hermans argues, but my question is: How do you combine traditional reformed theology and contingency? In this section, I will argue that we find footprints of contingency in the Confession of Dordt when it deals with Christ's rule in, and through the church.[3] When church bodies meet to discern, according to Dordt, it is an ambitious encounter. Dordt confesses that the living Christ is present and rules these encounters, and that the risen Christ is present and rules when Scripture is read and discussed in the fellowship of believers. In his commentary on Dordt, the reformed scholar Willie Jonker (1968:4) makes the following remarks on Christ's reign: "When we, as church, are together in the name of Christ, Christ is present in a particular way":

---

[2] I am aware that this is an interpretation of Dort that differs from a more "traditional" interpretation of Dordt. I do this deliberately in order to explore new possibilities in the interpretation of Dordt. It might be that this went beyond the intentions of the Synod 400 years ago

[3] 2019 is the 400th commemoration of the Synod of Dordrecht.

- Christ is present "in person", *i.e.*, Christ's presence is a relational and inter-relational presence. The invitation (*theosis*) is to step into a relationship with Christ when we gather to discern God's future for them. Discernment for those who believe that Christ is present in person is, therefore, a relational affair. A disturbing fact for many is that Christ, in the prophecy on the last days in Matthew 25:31-46, proclaims that he is present in those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, sick, naked or even those who are in prison! "Even if you have done this to the least of these people of mine, you have done it to me." (Matt. 25:40). Christ's relationship is with those who are vulnerable and neglected. Without a relationship with these people, we cannot be in relationship with Christ. We can draw at least two conclusions from this:
    - Christ's presence is relational and not proportional. It is a relationship of affirming, never-ending and unconditional love. Therefore, it draws us into a new way of knowing, according to Du Rand (2018:40): "It is a way of knowing that is in conflict with our intellect, with our mind and our way of understanding things, our normal way of knowing". It draws us into the fragility of the space between knowing and not knowing. In discernment, we are drawn into the fragility of relational knowledge. We should, therefore, be cautious not to degrade or de-personalise discerning gatherings. We should take particular care of the narrative and emotions of those present and of those whom we prohibit from being present. People are not abstractions.
    - Christ's presence is closely linked with those at the margins. Discerning the will of the ruling, Christ seems to include an awareness of the boundaries that power and empires create and the intentional inclusion of those to be regarded as weak and unwanted.
- Jonker points to the "living" presence of Christ. This clearly points to the risen Christ who has ascended into heaven and now rules at the right hand of the Father. It is interesting to note that, according to Luke 24 and other recordings of encounters with the risen Christ, the disciples were surprised in that they did not recognise him (24:13-35), and were deeply disturbed or even afraid when the risen Christ appeared among them (Luke 24:36-39). The confession that the living Christ is present when the church gathers to discern is not only a comforting confession, but it is also disturbing in that it is surprising and an uncontrollable presence. Living presence implies an encounter with a person who is alive and not the repetitive presence of an "idea". In these encounters, we would be surprised with the contingency that is inherently part of a living relationship.

These encounters are events, a particular event in a particular time and place. Since it is an encounter with the living and risen Christ, we should expect that these events will reveal knowledge about the eschaton. We should apply event-hermeneutics in our endeavour to discern what the event reveals to us. How does the event present new possibilities in the actuality of the event? The presence of the living Christ, particularly in his reign, is an eschatological presence. It introduces and represents the future of God with God's creation. When Christ rules in, and through his church, it presents to us the possibility of a new future, which the church does not control; it receives this as a gift.

- Jonker defines the presence of Christ as an "actual" presence, or a presence in actuality. In Luke 24:41-49, the risen Christ is unexpectedly present among the disciples. It is clear that they find it difficult to accept that his presence is an embodied presence. Christ reacts to this lack of faith, first by presenting his wounded body and, when that does not convince the disciples, he asks for food to eat in order to convince them that his presence is an actual embodied presence. The presence of the living Christ is an actual embodied and historical presence in the particularities of time and space. This might be the most radical of all the claims of the reformed confession on Christ's reign. As much as the first disciples were surprised and shocked by the presence of the risen Christ in their midst at a time when they mourn the death of their rabbi, would individuals and leaders be surprised and shocked by the presence of Christ nowadays?

Surprisingly, Jonker's categories are all well situated in the age of contingency and complexity. In an orthodox version, it can easily become ontological truths that provide us with certainties that are dislocated from the particular and the contextual. It is clear that the reformed confession on the reign of Christ in the church is not meant to be understood as only a theory, but in the encounter with Christ in a particular place and community. According to Du Rand (2018:5, the reformed understanding of God's presence in history is not a general a-historic understanding, but an "awesome wonder" of the presence of God in the reality and fragility of a historic reality. Our discernment of this "awesome wonder" will always fluctuate between doubt and faith.

The radical confession of Christ's reign in the church opens the possibility for the reformed tradition to embrace the age of contingency as a homecoming that could read as follows: We confess that, when we gather to discern, Christ is present in person, or a person among other persons, seeking to be in a relationship with a particular community. Looking us in the eye and loving us. In this meeting, we can be sure that Christ will communicate new things (possibilities) to us, never previously heard or imagined. It will scare us at first; maybe we will seek a way out of this shocking encounter by way of abstraction, seeking reasons why this particular encounter with Christ cannot be the truth for all. However, if we can

find the courage to embrace the encounter, it will enable us to imagine a clear and inspiring picture of the future, the Kingdom of God.

It is obvious that the reformed tradition presents a rather radical proposition concerning spiritual discernment. In the Confession of Dordt, for example, it is confessed that Christ rules in, and through the church. When church bodies meet to discern, according to Dordt, the living or risen Christ is present and rules these encounters when Scripture is read and discussed in the fellowship of believers.

6.3.3 The reign of Christ as a contingent reality in the church

Corporate discernment presents the challenge to go beyond the discernment of the individual. This is why the reformed confession of Dordt is so radical. It is supposed to prevent any individual or office in the church or proposed programme from replacing the reign of Christ. Jonker (1968:9) explains that some of the older examples of reformed church orders such as the church order of Paltz (1563) and the Scottish church order do not have any decrees on the office or church meetings. The focus was on the life of the gathered congregations, the liturgical orders, the confessions, the catechism, and the festivals of the church calendar.

Dirkie Smit, another reformed theologian from Stellenbosch, agrees on the contingent nature of God's presence through Jesus Christ. He explains that the reformation presents us with the challenge of the historical and contingent nature of revelation in discernment:

> Theologians from different traditions again understood that the God of Israel was in the truest sense the God of history. This includes an awareness that history is open towards the future, being part of this history means expecting the unexpected and risking the new. In biblical language, *this openness to the future* is emphasized by the conviction that God as the Lord of history is a living God who acts freely and who, although God remains true to Godself and to God's promises, never becomes slave to a kind of blueprint of history. On the contrary, God's actions are free, new, creative and unexpected. ***God's actions in history are contingent*** in that they resist formalization and programming (Smit 2012:338, my highlight, JFM).

As a reformed theologian, one can expect that, when Smit refers to "… [a]lthough God remains true to Godself and God's promises …", he has Scripture in mind. God is revealed in Scripture, and God's actions in history will always be true to how God is revealed in Scripture. On the other hand, "… God will never become a slave to a kind of blueprint of history …". Smit does not imply that God is contingent, but that God's presence in history is contingent.

Jonker was mainly concerned with the "replacement" of Christ's reign through the office or the bureaucratic rules and orders of the church. Smit's concern is that we should remain open for the creative and unexpected actions of God in history.

The current practices and order in the DRC, for example, are a far cry from the radical and implied open views of the confession of Dort. Until 2015, the church order of the DRC focused primarily on faithfulness to the Word of God and historic confessions. In 2015, article two was added on mission and the *missio Dei*, which illustrates the influence of the missional movement in the church (NGK 2015).

6.3.4 Discernment as a core capacity in missional ecclesiology

The popular growth of the missional movement began in 1998 with the publication of Guder's book *Missional church* (1998). At the core of the movement is the concept of the *missio Dei* as a key concept to understand God's actions in the world. The idea of God's actions as free, creative, new and contingent has grown rapidly since then in missional thinking (Guder 2017). For many, the idea of the *missio Dei* was introduced by Bosch (1991) in his famous book on a new paradigm for the mission of the church. According to Bosch, mission is not an act of the church, in the first instance, but an act of God. This mission of God is not to be controlled by the church; it is an uncontrollable and unpredicted reality of the triune God, according to Flett (2010). The discovery of this inspiring and beautiful new reality, the Kingdom of God, can only be practised in worship and through liturgy and spiritual disciplines (Smith 2013). It is in, and through worship that this new reality becomes our deepest desire. It is in worship that we imagine the kingdom (Smith 2013).

A missional understanding of discernment includes the awareness of the contingent reality of the *missio Dei*. Missional discernment is not, in the first instance, concerned with the regulations of corporate discernment, but with participation in the life of the Trinity and the possibilities that can spring from that. To its core, discernment, missionally understood, is a spiritual activity done in participation of the living God.[4]

A short illustration: In 2006, over fifty leaders of the DRC and the Uniting Reformed Church (URCSA) gathered at Esselenpark in Johannesburg, South Africa, for a meeting on the possibilities of unification between the two churches. It is well known that many view the DRC as the theological architect of apartheid. In the logic of the apartheid thinking in the DRC, four racially divided churches developed out of the mission of the DRC: the DRC, "the White church"; the DR

[4] Cordier 2014, Marais 2007 and Keifert 2009 are a few examples of missional studies on discerment.

Mission Church, the church of the "Coloured" community; the DR in Africa for the Black community, and the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) for the Indian community. In 1994, the Uniting Reformed Church came into existence when the Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa combined. Although all of these churches confessed the importance and necessity of unification, the process with the DRC remained difficult. The URCSA found it difficult to trust the DRC in the process in that they truly confess the wrongs and injustices of apartheid. The DRC, on the other hand, experienced shame and guilt in the process.

Coenie Burger, moderator of the DRC during that period, started the meeting with a personal confession of the DRC's role in the conceptualisation and implementation of apartheid. He offered his apology for the injustices and harm that this caused the Black community in South Africa. Allan Boesak, the moderator of URCSA, responded as follows:

> Coenie, this is now the third time that I have heard you publicly confess the sins of your church regarding apartheid. I was not convinced of your sincerity previously, but today I believe that you are honest in your confession … You know what, you cannot trust Jesus Christ, he will always surprise you with the unexpected. I never imagined that there would be a day that I would accept the confession of the moderator of the DRC.

This took the meeting by surprise; it was not expected at all and encouraged the leaders of the two churches to make bold steps on the road to unity. Leadership focused the attention on what is possible and that inspired the rest to follow. Unfortunately, this initiative came to a halt when this new fragile experience of trust was confronted by rigid structures and when new leaders were elected who did not share the experience.

6.4 The challenge of generative listening: an illustration

What are some of the challenges for leaders who want to participate in discernment processes? In a focus group with congregational leaders, I asked them to explain how they do discernment and what the challenges are in the process.[5]

6.4.1 The relational challenge

The practices of slowing down and connecting with one's own vulnerability do not figure in the data. Although the prescribed model suggests an entering stage of rest and deeper connection, none of the participants reported on any practices

[5] This conversation is part of my research project to be published under the title "Missional corporate spiritual discernment".

in this regard. To the contrary, the data suggest that an organisational and corporate imagination clearly captures the imagination of what a church meeting is supposed to be. Such an imagination seeks objectivity, order and productive outcomes, rather than a focus on relationships. According to the data, the people who gather in official meetings regard themselves as functionaries who have a job to do.

6.4.2 Theological challenge

Many of the participants reported that they find it difficult to perceive God as an active participant in the discerning process at their leadership meetings. One participant reported that a Trinitarian view on God assisted him to re-imagine the discerning meeting as a community in the life of the Trinity. The norm appears to be that God is perceived as an absent observer in the process of discernment. One participant mentioned that when God is mentioned in the conversation, it is "talk about God" and not "with God". The participant laments the fact that God easily becomes a theoretical object of conversation rather than a co-participant in the discerning conversation.

6.4.3 Listening: the hermeneutical challenge

Participants reported efforts to listen and deepen the listening experience. Many participants mentioned listening to the Word of God in their discernment process. It is clear that this is a well-established habit. When it comes to the listening of outsiders to the congregation, it becomes more difficult. I thus concluded that an invisible hierarchy prohibits listening to those on the margins. This could result in an unintentional exclusion of, for example, the youth, strangers and women. It appears that the capacity to decentre in the listening process and the awareness that there are other legitimate experiences alongside ours are lacking.

Time and space are significant in the listening process. One participant mentioned a leadership retreat where they had more time to relax and to listen more intently to each other. They were amazed at how that changed the level of conversation and the daring decisions they could make at that retreat.

6.4.4 Discerning the future

Generative dialogue explores possibilities of the future. Although the questions hinted in that direction, hardly any mention was made of the future. This is a surprising and disturbing observation that needs further investigation. The participants' current aim of discernment is not to seek and understand new possibilities for the future, but an almost moralistic urge to be faithful to the will of God for the present. The leaders used discernment with the aim to make decisions.

Waaijman (2013) suggests that discernment can be described as "discretion" in the effort to find direction towards the future. In an age of contingency, we should focus more on mastering the art of discretion than on making business-like decisions.

6.4.5 Epistemological challenge

Many participants mentioned that their leadership want to work with objective, controllable facts. This creates resistance against spiritual exercises in the discerning process. Others alluded to the fact that their leadership meetings are business meetings where "we stick to the agenda and rules". "We do not do Bible study at meetings; we have too much work in the agenda. This is typical modernistic epistemology that seeks to control" (Palmer 1993:47. The data suggest that the discernment processes lack an openness towards the future, or an epistemology that is oriented towards future possibilities. Although these congregations are from the reformed tradition, where the focus is supposed to be on the reign of God and the imagination of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God (Smith 2013), they are more interested in the management of the church.

6.4.6 A spiritual and formational challenge

The social ecclesial imagination of what should happen at discerning meetings is captured by the imagination of corporate business. The data suggest that they gather and then attend to agendas to make decisions. These "church managers" apparently find it difficult to slow down, to seek the presence of God, or with a consciousness of a possible meeting with the living Christ. Some of the participants argued that their spiritual formation fails them and does not allow them to open themselves for the challenge of discernment. It is interesting to note that some of the participants argued that they need to understand meetings as places of worship (Smit 2001:35-47). Jonker (1968:9) made this point earlier on the oldest church orders that focused on liturgy and catechism, without any rules regarding meetings. Discernment is nested in life-long formation.

6.5 Generative dialogue and listening in an age of contingency

In this section, I will explore possibilities on how discernment can be done appropriately in an age of contingency and complexity. I propose that generative listening could provide us with a set of practices for an appropriate approach to discernment in an age of contingency.

Generative dialogue can provide us with the tools and methodology to reshape our practices and procedures when we discern God's future in an age of contingency. I want to prove this with the following example.

6.5.1 Generative dialogue in missional discernment: An illustration

From 13 to 17 May 2019, the Synod of the DRC of the Western Cape held its 48th meeting. The planning team started to plan the meeting in May 2018, almost a year in advance. They started with an analysis of the state of the church and the congregations. In the recess between 2015 and 2019, the Synod went through one of the most severe conflicts on the issue of same sex relationships. Many congregations threatened to break ties with the Synod on this issue. Trust in the leadership was reported to be at a historic low point. Accusations were made that the leadership planned to force congregations into commitments that they were not ready to make. It became clear to the task team that the discerning approach of previous synods such as, for example, General Synod 2015 and General Synod 2016 could not deal with the complexity of the issue of same sex relationships. In fact, the end result was a ruling of the high court that nullified the 2016 Synod (Jackson 2019). Jackson's article is a good (*sic*) description of a discernment process where a parliamentary-style debate results in a bureaucratic and technical procedural nightmare.

In their analyses, the task team made use of Scharmer's (2009:49) Theory U and decided to design a process of generative dialogue. They started to apply the principles and methods of generative dialogue intentionally in their design for the synod meeting. They felt that the crises provided an opportunity to create a space for reflection on a possible future.

The task team decided on a theme for the meeting, namely "Follow Jesus with courage" (*Om Jesus met waagmoed te volg*), that could encourage generative dialogue (Herselman 2019:A5). Nouwen's (1998) metaphor of the trapeze artists was used to explain the design and preferred outcome of the Synod.

For five days, 670 delegates from congregations of the DRC of the Western Cape gathered at the Goudini Spa in the Western Cape. They structured the meeting with daring themes such as reconciliation and race; gender equality; the ecological crisis; social justice, and sexual orientation, rather than the usual agenda of detailed reports and technical managerial and institutional resolutions.

The delegates gathered at round tables, with table leaders trained to host the generative listening process at the tables, designed as holding spaces where

delegates were received "where they are, without disappointment or impatience" (Gunnlaugson 2006:13). The planning team ensured that the processes were open without a specific outcome in mind. Gunnlaugson (2006:12) describes the necessity of open space as follows: "In my experience [of] facilitating and teaching generative dialogue groups, dialogue is commonly taken to be an unpredictable and even perplexing process of conversation that has no goal or preconceived outcome".

The logistics of the meeting were planned with particular care to detail. The aim in the design was to create a space where every delegate would have equal access to information and where their voices would be heard, unrelated to their status or position. The sound and projection systems were designed to satisfy everybody in the 100m^2-hall. A WhatsApp line was active and monitored throughout the meeting to create a feedback loop. On numerous occasions during the discussions, delegates were asked to send suggestions as to a possible next step in the process. In that sense, they could co-design as the process unfolded. Thousands of these messages were received at the feedback centre, thus empowering the facilitation team to make small alterations to the process. Often, the request was: Give us more time! Go slower, we are ready to go deeper. In the first two days, many of the feedback messages showed some impatience with what Gunnlaugson (2006:12) called "the meandering process of dialogue", but, as the process continued, "the groups gradually develop[ed] their capacity to move through different stages of conversation" as the trust and quality of the relationship at the tables deepened.

The process for the Synod was developed to draw from the three fundamental sources of generic dialogue: past, present and future. The challenge was to create a process where the focus of attention is not on past experience, but on a "proprioceptive awareness" where the attention for learning is informed by the present moment (Gunnlaugson 2006:11).

Each of the five days was organised around a theme that supported the overarching theme of courageous following of Christ. Day one focused on amazement and thankfulness (*verwondering*) for what the triune God has done in, and through congregations over the past four years. Presentations looked back on the four years of the recess. Day two encouraged an honest look at the challenges in our society and was given the theme of humility (*verootmoediging*). Delegates were asked to participate in liturgies of confession. Themes such as gender abuse and gender inequality, racism and reconciliation as well as the ecological destruction and challenge were discussed. On the third day, the theme was trust (*vertroue*). Bear in mind that the Synod gathered at a time of deep conflict and mistrust. Presentations and discussions were facilitated to foster a sense of imagination of a possible future. The liturgies presented had an eschatological feel to it. Delegates were asked to share stories and experiences of vulnerability and uncertainties. The discussions took the delegates into surprising levels of deep sharing. Many delegates witnessed that they had the courage to share vulnerabilities that

they never shared in public previously; in some instances, their own vulnerabilities that they had never noticed! Day four was a day for new imagination and the courage to take risks in our discipleship of Christ. Day five was structured to facilitate commitment to action. In a moving Eucharist, delegates renewed their commitment to their calling as disciples of Christ.

6.5.2 Surprised by new energy

The Synod dealt with many of the same issues that proved to be divisive at previous meetings, in particular the issue of same sex relationships. In fact, the Synod adopted a resolution on the matter that affirms the 2015 position of the general synod with a majority of eighty per cent. This result was in stark contrast with previous synods, in terms not only of the content, but also of the energy experienced by some delegates.

On the last day of the Synod, a video recording was compiled with the title "*Jong stemme*" (young voices) (Odendal 2019). In the video, ten of the young ministers, many of whom attended their first synod, were asked to share their experience of the synod. The overwhelming positive response surprised everybody. To the question, "What hope did you receive at this synod?", the answers were: "It feels as if I was on a pilgrimage of hope"; "I came with fear and frustration, but I was surprised by the inclusivity of the process, it really gave me hope that we are transforming and moving in the right direction"; "The encounters at this synod [were] encounters of grace"; "It was a safe space where I could be myself"; "I enjoyed the intergenerational relationships and the wisdom that flowed from that"; "I enjoyed and [was] surprised by the gender, generational and racial diversity at the synod"; "I received hope in the deep listening especially to the young voices"; "Together, we could dream of a new church that is relevant in our society"; "There is a shift in our church and courage to make the shift"; "The synod allows the new generation to take the lead"; "I am enthusiastic about the future of our church, especially the fact that women were elected in the leadership"; "I have been challenged at this synod especially by the courageous topics that were discussed"; "The intergenerational learning is special"; "I feel totally safe to be myself and express myself, I feel welcomed". "The synod is inspiring, a space of learning"; "I am enthusiastic about the future of our church".

This is by no means a final analysis of the data; more analysis needs to follow. I highlight two themes that seem to correlate well with what Scharmer and Gunnlaugson suggest that generative dialogue leads to:

- Noticeable is the positive reference to the future. Consider that the Synod gathered at a time of deep conflict and the pressure of decline. They were apparently surprised by hope! The future, and not past experiences, has become the primary source and field of attention (Gunnlaugson 2006:11).

- They feel empowered to take the risk to make a shift. The courage stems from the "safe spaces" at the table discussions. These spaces created a context where voices from the margins, young voices, female voices, and so forth could be heard. Communal wisdom could surface from the multiple voices.

6.6 Conclusion

An age of rapid contingencies should not be a threat to reformed churches in their discerning efforts. The challenges that churches face in such an era can be met if they are willing to do the necessary theological work in order to liberate themselves from the static modernistic epistemological paradigm of control. Reformed churches confess to be a humble epistemological community that receive the truth as an act of grace in their relationship with the triune God, through the reign of Christ in the church. Churches from the reformed tradition have the opportunity to engage with this radical proposal of the rule of Christ in the church, as proposed by the Canon laws of the Confession of Dordt, for example. However, this is not work on a theoretical level alone; formative work needs to be done. Reformed leadership need to be exposed to the necessary spiritual formational work to enable them to be adequate leaders who are able to embrace their own vulnerability as a gift and, therefore, be open and receptive to the mysterious life-giving and liberating presence of Christ in their decision-making gatherings. The challenge of an era of rapid contingency and complexity can, therefore, be a liberating challenge that needs to be understood as an epistemological and ontological challenge (Hermans 2018). I have argued in this article that reformed theology can take up the challenge, if we are willing to reinterpret, almost rediscover, our confessions. Serious and challenging theological and ecclesiological rethinking needs to be done with regard to our theological interpretation from the modernistic frame of mind that has captured our imagination for too long.

Flowing from the above, the practices proposed by generative dialogue are a fitting set of practises to re-imagine decision-making processes. Church leadership should take these proposals seriously and apply them in the context of the church. "Discernment is knowing what is, in the light of what is possible from the perspective of God for whom nothing is impossible" (Vandenbroucke 1957:1257, as quoted in Waaijman 2013:8).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bosch, D.J. (1991). Transforming mission paradigm shifts in theology of mission. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Cordier, G. (2014). Kernkapasiteite van die predikant as missionale leier in die vorming van 'n missionale gemeentekultuur. Unpublished PhD, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.

Du Rand, J. (2001). Ontluisterde wereld. Die Afrikaner en sy kerk in 'n veranderde Suid-Afrika. Wellington: Lux Verbi. BM.

(2018). In awesome wonder. Wellington: Bible Media.

Flett, J.G. (2010). The witness of God: The Trinity, missio dei, Karl Barth and the nature of Christian community. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans.

Guder, D. (1998). Missional church. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans.

(2000). The contiuing conversion of the church. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans.

(2017). The background and roots of the missional movement. In: C. Burger, Cultivating missional change (Wellington: BibleMedia), pp. 50-61

Gunnlaugson, O. (2006). Generative dialogue as a transformative learning practice in adult and higher education settings. Journal of Adult and Continuing Education 16(1):1-19.

Hermans, C. (2007). Practical theology theory-building based on a pragmatic notion of weak rationality. In: S.H. Schmidt, Religion inside and outside traditional institutions (Leiden: Brill), pp. 93-124.

(2014). From practical theology to practice-oriented theology. International Journal for Practical Theology 18(1):1-14.

(2018). Theology in an age of contingency. Unpublished paper. Nijmegen.

Herselman, F. (2019). Agenda van die 48ste sitting van die Weskaap Sinode. Bellville: NG Kerk Weskaap.

Jackson, N. (2019). Die kerk en die hof. (Online.) Retrieved from: https://www.netwerk24.com/Stemme/Aktueel/die-kerk-en-die-hof-20190630 [20 June 2019].

Jonker, W. (1968). Om die regering van Christus in sy kerk. Pretoria: UNISA.

Keifert, P. (2009). Testing the spirits: How theology informs the study of congregations. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans.

Marais, J.F. (2007). God praat – leef luisterryk. Handleiding vir gemeentes op soek na God se agenda vir die gemeente. Wellington: Bybelmedia.

(2017). Missional formation and discipleship. In: C. Burger, Cultivating missional change (Wellington: Biblemedia), pp. 370-389.

Mouton, D. (2017). Experiences with denominations in South Africa. In: C. Burger, F. Marais & D. Mouton (eds), Cultivating missional change: The future of missional churches and missional theology (Wellington: Biblemedia), pp. 158-173.

Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK). (2015). Die Kerkorde. Pretoria: NGK.

Niemandt, C. (2017). Experiences with denominations in South Africa: Complex leadership and transformational missional leadership in a denominational

structure. In: C. Burger, F. Marais & D. Mouton (eds), Cultivating missional change: The future of missional churches and missional theology (Wellington: Biblemedia), pp. 196-217.

(2018). Corrigendum: 'n Navorsingstrategie vir missionale transformasie. Verbum et Ecclesia. (Online.) Retrieved from: https://verbumetecclesia.org.za/index.php/ve/article/view/1893 [17/09/2019].

(2019). Discerning spirituality for missional leaders: Integrating leadership, discernment and spirituality. In: J. Kok, Leading in a VUCA world (Cham, Switserland: Springer), pp. 151-168.

Nissen, P. (2015). Het goede kiezen en delen: Over de onderscheiding der geesten. Speling.

Nouwen, H. (1998). Henri Nouwen writings selected. New York: Orbis Books.

(2013). Discernment. Reading the signs of daily life. London: SPCK.

Odendal, M. (2019). Jong stemme. Goudini, Wes-Kaap, Suid-Afrika.

Palmer, P.J. (1993). To know as we are known. Education as a spiritual journey. San Francisco, CA: Harper.

Scharmer, C.O. (2009). Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges. San Francisco, CA: Berret:Koehler.

Smit, A. (2001). Meetings that matter. Leadership, spirituality and discernment in congregations. Wellington: Lux Verbi. BM.

Smit, D. (2012). Trinity, history – and discernment? Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologies Tydskrif : Vol 53, no 3&4 Sept/Des, 337-352.

Smith, J. (2013). Imagining the Kingdom. How worship works. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Van der Merwe, I.J. (2018). "Fiat lux". Navigating chaos through sensing leadership. Stellenbosch Theological Journal , Vol 4, no 2, 1-19.

(2013). Discernment and biblical spirituality: An overview and evaluation of recent research. Acta Theologica Supplememtum 17:1-12.

Chapter 7
Shifting strategies in the study of congregations

Kobus Schoeman

7.1 Introduction

Religion and Christianity, in particular, still play a significant role in South Africa, as the majority of the population align themselves with the Christian tradition. Over the past few decades, South Africa has experienced deep and fundamental political and social changes. Apartheid was replaced with an inclusive democratic system with the aim of developing a human rights culture and eradicating the inequalities of the past. During this time, South Africa also became, to a much greater extent, part of the global world and its challenges. Wars, conflicts and financial crises became part of the South African narrative.

The current era could be described in many different ways. In line with Joas (2014:65), Hermans (2018:1) chooses to classify it as the age of contingency, which he describes as "complexity, uncertainty, plurality, risk, increasing number of options, unpredictability, increasing number of decisions persons need to make, coexistence of cultures, life styles and value systems, greater awareness of options for actions, social life forms". It is important not to use this as a concept to homogenize, but rather to recognise diversity within society (Joas 2014:65). South Africa is a vastly diverse and complex society, experiencing changes and challenges. It is, therefore, relevant to ask the question: How does an age of contingency influence South African society and the way in which we do practical theology?

Practical theology cannot escape these changes and challenges and should, therefore, reflect on its tasks from a perspective of contingency. Using the four tasks of practical theological interpretation developed by Osmer (2008:4-12), Hermans (2018:1-2) identifies four shifts that need to take place in the study of practical theology, due to the influence of contingency, namely a shift towards naming God as eschatological possible/present (theological-normative task); a shift towards event hermeneutics (interpretive task); a decentring of the theological subject of enquiry and opening (pragmatic task), and a shift towards practice-oriented methodology (empirical task).

This article aims to focus on the influence of contingency on the pragmatic task of practical theology. The main research question is: In an era of con-

tingency, what strategic shifts are needed in the study of the church and congregations in the South African society? In replying to this question, the following issues are discussed: What shifts are occurring in the pragmatic task of practical theology? What changes in society are influencing the role of the church and congregations? What is the influence of contingency on the church and congregations? What should be the research agenda for practical theology in South Africa?

7.2 Shifts in the pragmatic task of practical theology

It is necessary to describe the pragmatic task of practical theology before elucidating the shifts within this task. The pragmatic task of practical theology is part of a hermeneutical spiral, and the mutual interaction between the four tasks is a unique characteristic of the discipline of practical theology. It is important to recognise this as a hermeneutical process – not the way things are, but the way we see and interpret them (Meylahn 2012:4).

According to Osmer (2008:10), the pragmatic task "focuses on strategies and actions that are undertaken to shape events toward desired goals". The accomplishment of the desired goals is linked to the leadership and leadership style that are needed to accomplish the desired goals and the change to achieve this within an open system (Osmer 2008:176-207). Osmer identifies three strategic components of the pragmatic task: desired goals, leadership, and change.

An important aspect of the pragmatic task is the movement towards the desired goals. In order to do so, it is necessary to distinguish between the actual and the desired. Hermans (2014:114-115) proposes that practical reasoning arises from the discrepancy between the actual and the desired as a normal process of reasoning in and on action (Hermans 2014). The description of the actual is done as part of the empirical task and the desired as part of the normative task. This also relates to the action problem in practice-oriented research, where the A_component is a description of the actual situation and the D_compoment is the prescriptive or normative dimension of the action problem (Hermans & Schoeman 2015:30-31). The pragmatic task focuses on the strategies and actions that individuals or congregations are or should be undertaking towards the development of more desired practices and actions.

The strategic movement from the actual to the desired should be achieved through the intentional actions of the leadership. Osmer (2008:192) chooses servant leadership as a leadership style that influences individuals and faith communities to change in order to embody the servanthood of Christ. This leadership style is transformative and embedded in a spirituality of service willing to take risks on behalf of others (Nell 2017). Leadership plays a pivotal role in the strategic movement towards a more desired environment or satiation in the lives of individuals and congregations.

Change and congregational change, in particular, can best be done and described through an open systems perspective (Osmer 2008:200). A closed system may be characterised as mainly self-contained with its internal life, whereas an open system usually interacts with both its context and environment (Van Gelder 2007:126-136). An openness towards the context and the environment and their challenges leads to change and transformation:

> *The church should expect to change as it interacts with is community/environment. The church should expect to change as growth and development takes place through its ministry. And the church should expect to change as the Spirit works to bring about transformed lives living out a new nature* (Van Gelder 2007:155).

Part of the pragmatic task is to seek deep spiritual change through transformational leadership in order to achieve a more desired outcome.

The pragmatic task is dynamic and influenced by changes and new challenges in the context. In reflecting on the influence of contingency, it is necessary to understand that the context of doing practical theology has experienced significant changes over the past few decades. Meylahn (2012:11-12) acknowledges the following as important markers in rethinking about what is going on. In the past,

- we had facts; now, we have interpretations;
- we had modern objective ontology (things that are present and that could be studied objectively); now, we have hermeneutics (the art of interpretation);
  there was objective reality; now, there is subjective reality, and
- things were linear, one knew the facts, had the answers and applied them; now, it is spiral and circular.

In describing the shifts in the pragmatic task of practical theology due to contingency, Hermans (2018:12) formulates the shifts as "decentring the theological knower and knowledge". In an age of contingency, the boundaries of church members and those 'outside' the church have moved to different places. The ecclesial paradigm has moved beyond and towards decentring the church, as the focus is on the kingdom of God. This raises new strategic questions: What do we learn about God's future from the margins of society? What are the implications for congregations that are exploring the kingdom from the margins? These questions also have implications for theology, as "contingency implies not only a decentring of the theological knowledge, but also of the theologian (the knower) as privileged subject of knowledge" (Hermans 2018:13). The repositioning of both practical theology and the practical theologian challenges the pragmatic task of practical theology in new and profound ways.

The three strategic components (desired goals, leadership, and change) inform strategies and actions that should be undertaken as part of the pragmatic task. A strategy is a plan or action designed to achieve a goal or aim; it is the creative art of planning characterised by imagination and innovation. In undertaking the pragmatic task, it is necessary to reflect, in more detail, on the influence that contingency has on the changes in society and, consequently, on faith communities.

7.3 Contingency and the changes in society, church and congregations

Contingency has a sociological dimension, due to its influence on society, church and congregations. In this regard, Hermans (2018:2-3) refers to the influence and role of modernity on society and, from a sociological perspective, "economisation" and "function differentiation" contributed towards modernisation in the current age of contingency. There is a substantial increase in the options and number of decisions an individual may make, thus committing the individual to institutions, for example, a faith community into question. Religion and religious institutions such as the church and congregations cannot escape the influences of economisation and function differentiation. The modernisation of societies had a distinct influence on the role and function of religion and its institutions in society.

The concept of secularisation is often used to explain and describe the role of religion in modern society. The relationship between modernisation and secularisation is complex. We cannot simply assume that secularisation is caused by the modernisation of society (Joas 2014:10). Turner (2012:136) argues that, "in order to understand secularization as a process, we need to attend more closely to the disruption of the religious habitus and the emotional life that sustains religion rather than take notice of any alleged crisis of belief". Joas (2014:14) prefers to talk about the thesis of secularisation rather than about the theory of secularisation. There is insufficient theoretical and empirical evidence to support a theory of secularisation, but secularisation as a social phenomenon or process is evident in society.

Turner (2012:140) identifies three components of secularisation: differentiation, decline, and marginalisation. The differentiation into various spheres of the social system (such as religion, polity, and market) may be used to describe a process of secularisation; religion becomes a subsystem alongside other subsystems (Dobbelaere 2009:600). Political secularisation happens in multi-ethnic and multi-faith societies where church and state are separated. South Africa is such an example where church and state have been separated in the South African Constitution.

> *Constitutionalism also inaugurated a new era in the relationship between the state and religions. Whereas the 1983 Constitution explicitly defined South Africa as a Christian state, the 1996 Constitution requires the state to be neutral in religious matters and to follow non-discriminatory policies towards the followers of all religions* (Vorster 2013:147).

The Constitution reveals spaces of choice and freedom for individual believers and for the formation of faith communities.

Secularisation may be viewed as the decline of religious belief and practice in society. The numerical decline in membership of congregations and denominations is used as an indicator of secularisation. As a process, secularisation is more than the numerical decline in denominational membership in Western Europe or the United States. Secularisation is not the same in Europe as in other regions in the world, as "religion in its various and complex manifestations is obviously thriving in many parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America" (Turner 2012:137). Pentecostalism and charismatic movements in both South America and Africa are proof of this. "I want to maintain in any case that there is an alternative to the simple notion of membership decline and social irrelevance, namely, that religion has been democratized through commercialization." (Turner 2012:138). Religion has become a lifestyle choice and is competing in the religious market.

Secularisation may also be regarded as the marginalisation of religion to the private sphere. The pressures of democratisation, commercialisation and individual choice influence religion. Luckmann (1990:135) claims that the sacred or the transcendent is shrinking into a "private sphere" and is removed from primary social institutions. While modern religious activity is articulated around the themes of self-realisation, personal autonomy, and emotional expressivity, the range of the transcendent diminishes. Religion has lost control over the beliefs, practices and moral principles of individuals (Dobbelaere 2009:606). In a democratic and individualist culture, the idea of personal choice is paramount, and it becomes easy to migrate between denominations.

Individualism and consumerism have changed the playing field of religious institutions. Bourdieu's ideas about the struggle for symbolic capital in the field of religion provide a valid sociological perspective on the volatility of this religious field (Turner 2012:153). The contemporary religious market is consequently highly diversified into a range of competing groups, charismatic movements, Pentecostal churches, traditional religions, spirituality, and the like. All of these are, to varying degrees, influenced by consumerism (Turner 2012:154). The "religious market" is increasingly shaping religious practice. This may lead to the commodification of religion and the promise of health and wealth to the poor (Turner 2012:143).

Social processes such as differentiation, privatisation and the commodification of religion have serious implications for the religious landscape and the role that religion may play in society. Questions may be asked about social integration and the possibility of social cohesion in an era of contingency. This may even be truer for a diverse and multicultural country such as South Africa.

> *Taking multiculturalism seriously may force us to take social solidarity seriously, namely, to take a critical look at the celebration of difference at the cost of the things that hold societies together. From a sociological point of view, multiculturalism without some powerful framework of shared interests and shared institutions cannot provide an adequate cultural framework for any complex society* (Turner 2012:145).

South Africa is a multicultural country and the quest for cohesion and reconciliation is an important priority. Could religion contribute towards building shared values and social actions or practices that enhance new practice and action? What role could communities of faith play in this regard?

What are the religious complexities of South African society? The answer to this question may illustrate the role of contingency within this society more sharply. Religion is characterised by diversity and has experienced some significant changes over the past two decades. The next section focuses on religious diversity and changes within the South African context.

7.4 Religion in South Africa

Religion is an integral component of South African society and plays an important role in the lives of many people. Table 1 is compiled from StatsSA data from the last two censuses (1996 and 2001) and Community Survey (2016) that had religion as a question.[1]

[1] Although there are issues with the census records on religion, they are used, in this instance, to illustrate the broad changes and diversity in the religious landscape (Erasmus & Hendriks 2001; Schoeman 2017).

Table 1: Religion in South Africa since 1994

	Census 1996		Census 2001		Community survey 2016	
	Christian %	Total %	Christian %	Total %	Christian %	Total %
Mainline churches	35.90		31.82		23.90	
Pentecostal or Charismatic	6.61		5.86		15.24	
Africa Independent Churches	26.29		32.57		25.44	
Other Christian	5.27		9.54		13.44	
Total Christian		74.07		79.79		78.02
Islam		1.36		1.46		1.60
Other religions		6.29		2.34		8.39
No religion/refused/ not stated		18.28		16.41		11.99
Total		100.00		100.00		100.00

In reflecting on Table 1, the following trends may be noted:

- For the past two decades, Christianity has been and is the major religion in South Africa, with nearly 80% of the population being nominally associated with the Christian faith. Noteworthy changes have occurred within the composition of the Christian religion:
- Mainline churches declined from 35.9% in 1996 to 23.9% in 2016.
- African Independent Churches remain more or less the same.
- The Pentecostal and Charismatic churches more than doubled from 6.6% in 1996 to 15.2% in 2016. A similar trend may be identified for the "Other Christian" category.
  The fastest growing part of Christianity is not mainstream denominations, but rather the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, as part of a global trend.

> *According to international authorities, Pentecostal and broadly associated charismatic religions now have between 200 and 250 million adherents in 150 countries and are growing rapidly, particularly in the developing world. However, in South Africa, the speed, extent and diversity of growth in Christian churches that do not fall in the mainstream is a largely hidden story, and is also not well understood* (Schlemmer 2008:6).

This trend poses a unique challenge to understanding the role of religion in the South African context.

- Islam remains at less than 2% of the South African population over the same period.
- Other religions (African Traditional Religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, ext.) remain as less than 10% of the population.
- No religion declined from 18% in 1996 to 12% in 2016.

> *After twenty years of rapid modernisation in South Africa it has already become clear that modernisation has an effect on religion, but this effect varies according to its interrelationship with other social factors such as the historical culture of a country, the type of role religions played in the specific history of that country, and the dynamics of a country at a specific time* (Vorster 2013:158).

Over the past three decades, the quantitative mapping of the South African religious landscape illustrated the increase in options and complexities that have taken place in this context.

7.5 Reconciliation: A complex challenge of South African society[2]

The South African society is characterised by deep and acute divisions. The apartheid history contributed to this; inequality and racial divisions are still evident. Since the beginning of the South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) reports in 2003, inequality, described as the gap between rich and poor, remains the greatest source of division in South Africa (Potgieter 2017:16). Race plays the second most important role in dividing South Africa's society along racial lines. The SARB 2017 report draws the following conclusion regarding the role of inequality and race in society:

[2] The data and findings of SARB of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation is used as an example to illustrate the multiple and complex challenges facing the South African society.

> *Since the inception of the survey, inequality has remained the most prominent source of social division in the eyes of ordinary South Africans. Not surprisingly, therefore, respondents feel that, on this score, the country has made the least progress since the political transition of 1994. Inequality is thus both the most divisive and enduring aspect of South African society. In addition, improvement in race relations since 1994 has been slow, with race ranking as the second most divisive aspect of South African society for the first time in 2015, and again in 2017* (Potgieter 2017:24).

The need for reconciliation within the South African society has a significant aim: to overcome the divisions and inequalities of the past and to build a more just society. The SARB surveys asked the following question: Have South Africans made progress in reconciliation since the end of apartheid? Table 2 reports on the findings since 2011.

Table 2: Reconciliation in South Africa: 2011-2017

South Africans have made progress in reconciliation since the end of apartheid	2011 %	2012 %	2013 %	2015 %	2017 %
Strongly disagree	2.3	3.3	3.4	6.4	4.1
Disagree	7.3	9.2	11.7	10.0	12.0
Neutral	20.1	26.0	19.3	22.2	25.6
Agree	42.6	40.7	40.0	43.2	37.8
Strongly agree	16.8	14.7	21.4	13.0	15.5
Don't know	10.9	6.1	4.1	5.3	5.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	3.544	3.565	3.590	2.219	2.400

Source: Potgieter (2017)

The following remarks may be made regarding the state of reconciliation since 2011:

> *Just over half the population, however, feel that progress in terms of reconciliation has been made, while fewer than half of South Africans report having experienced reconciliation themselves. Reconciliation processes are taking place in a context of economic uncertainty, declining confidence in institutions and low political efficacy* (Potgieter 2017:51).

Reconciliation is not a simple and linear process and still poses serious and complex questions to society. There is a definite need for improved relationships.

What institutions need to be involved in the process of reconciliation and to take responsibility for the implementation thereof? The SARB 2017 states that seven in ten respondents agreed that they themselves, their families and friends should be involved in reconciliation. An environment of trust should exist between family and friends. The second most important institutions, according to the respondents, are religious and faith-based organisations (65.7%) (Table 3) (Potgieter 2017:22). Table 3 also indicates that, for those South Africans who experience reconciliation (agree or strongly agree), religious and faith-based organisations play quite or a crucial role in achieving reconciliation. The critical question is: Why are faith-based organisations not more involved in the process of healing?

Table 3: Reconciliation and the role or religious institutions: 2017

South Africans have made progress in reconciliation since the end of apartheid	Total %	Roles of institutions in reconciliation: Religious and faith-based organisations					
		Not important %	A little important %	Somewhat important %	Quite important %	Very important %	Don't know %
Strongly disagree	4.1	24.1	5.4	2.5	3.3	4.4	2.6
Disagree	12.0	18.0	17.5	12.2	9.0	13.1	7.5
Neutral	25.6	20.0	32.9	36.8	23.6	18.3	30.0
Agree	37.8	22.0	37.0	36.5	45.0	36.7	22.4
Strongly agree	15.5	11.2	4.7	7.2	15.6	24.9	1.0
Don't know	5.1	4.7	2.6	4.9	3.5	2.6	36.5
N	2.400	50	162	571	612	889	116

Source: Potgieter (2017)

Religious and faith-based organisations have a role to play in the challenges and complexities facing the South African society. In reflecting on reconciliation and the role of religion, Cilliers (2012:503) concludes that religion "can operate as a definitive and formative space-creator and space-setter within culture for reconciliation to happen and take place". Inequality and racial divisions, as one exam-

ple, may influence this role. Joas (2014:73) notes that the degree of social inequality affects the options and opportunities to choose from the opportunities. The context may complicate the choices, but churches and congregations should be more involved in the process of reconciliation.

In reflecting on the complex challenges facing the South African society, the following conclusion may be drawn:

> *In different communities across South Africa, diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, class, generation and religion, presents itself as a challenge to religious communities, schools and institutions of higher education, residential complexes, businesses, sporting clubs, and every other entity alike. Instead of hospitable embrace and warm inclusion or deep forms of belonging and intimacy, we are increasingly witnessing withdrawal and separation, re-segregation, animosity and, more recently, blatant verbal and even physical attacks on each other* (Naidoo & De Beer 2016).

The above empirical data on the religious landscape, inequality, race and reconciliation illustrates the complexities of the challenges and the choices that face religious organisations in dealing with the challenges in the South African society. The concept of contingency is useful to "convey both the massive increase in individual action options and the growing number of experiences that result from this massive increase" (Joas 2014:73). How does contingency influence the church and congregations and, maybe more importantly, what should be the strategic response of churches and congregations? This critical challenge is put forward to churches and congregations.

7.6 The influence of contingency on the church and congregations

It is obvious that changes in the South African society distinctly influence churches and congregations. Secularisation is evident in the repositioning of the church in society, the freedom of choice for believers, and the migration between denominations, to name a few of the shifts that have taken place. The critical question for the church and congregations, in a time of complexity and challenges, would be: Do we know the answer and the strategy to follow? "Contingency makes members of the epistemic community aware that their knowledge base is an option next to other options." (Hermans 2018:12). Options and choices influence the task and strategies of churches and congregations to build a new understanding of their role and mission in a changing environment.

This entails a broadening of the scope of both Congregational Studies as a subdiscipline and Ecclesiology. The object of these disciplines, as forks in the road, is also a choice to be made, and it is necessary to "distinguish six concentric circles: office, church, faith, religion, culture, and society" (Ganzevoort 2009:7).

Ganzevoort clearly indicates that the focus is not only on the church and the offices of the church, but also on culture and society. This may even change the priorities of churches to ask the question: What could be learned from outside the boundaries of the church or congregations (Hermans 2018:13). The state and society are putting forward questions to be answered, but the challenges and choices also come from the margins where people are suffering. This fork as a choice, due to the influence of contingency, compels churches and congregations to widen their scope of interest and ministry.

This section first discusses the influence of contingency on churches and denominations. It then explores the influence of contingency on congregations as the local community of faith. Churches and congregations are complex organisations. According to Joubert (2013:125), complex systems involve non-linear processes that are open to random externalities capable of generating rapid transformational change. The challenge is to accommodate diverse viewpoints within the church. The challenge that moral and ethical issues are putting to churches over the past two decades may be used as an example to elaborate on this point. The diversity lies not only in different confessions and denominations, but also in different responses to moral and ethical issues.

The South African Constitution grants equal rights to all its citizens, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation. The acceptance of gay people, same-sex marriages, abortion and the abolition of the death penalty have led to various debates and differences between religious denominations, their membership and the general public. The criticism and controversy provoked by the Dutch Reformed Church to admit gay members and the reactions from, for example, the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches illustrate the point (Kotzé & Loubser 2018:2).

In Table 4, the findings on responses from different religious traditions on selected moral issues indicate that "over the period 2006 to 2013 all the people in the study have grown more liberal with regards to every moral issue under investigation, with the single exception of the death penalty" (Kotzé & Loubser 2018:4). It is also interesting to note that Protestants tend to have more conservative views, but "it is important to note that, although there appears to be a trend towards more liberal attitudes, the levels of acceptance among various groups differ widely on all matters" (Kotzé & Loubser 2018:7). This requires ecumenical dialogue between churches and a hermeneutical process to navigate between the different viewpoints and arguments. The various responses clearly illustrate the diversity of choice and opinion.

Table 4: Moral issues and religion[3]

Are the following ever justifiable?	Protestant		Roman Catholic		African Independent Churches		Non-religious	
	2006 %	2013 %	2006 %	2013 %	2006 %	2013 %	2006 %	2013 %
Homosexuality								
Never	70	64	65	45	77	57	72	47
Sometimes	17	18	24	23	13	17	14	22
Always	14	18	12	33	10	26	14	31
Prostitution								
Never	81	75	76	46	82	61	80	47
Sometimes	10	12	14	21	10	16	10	22
Always	9	13	10	32	8	23	10	30
Abortion								
Never	75	70	75	45	81	61	77	49
Sometimes	13	12	10	23	11	14	13	24
Always	12	18	15	32	8	26	10	27
Euthanasia								
Never	67	54	65	40	72	55	70	42
Sometimes	17	22	21	25	19	20	17	27
Always	17	25	15	34	9	26	13	31
Death penalty								
Never	50	49	58	43	64	48	55	39
Sometimes	20	15	14	18	17	16	22	20
Always	31	36	28	39	20	36	23	40

Churches and denominations need to navigate between different viewpoints. This challenges the hermeneutical skills of the leadership. The hermeneutical interpretation creates a community of dialogue and conversation and is based not on dogma, but on the practical implications of the hermeneutical interpretation. This

[3] The World Values Survey (WVS) data is used as presented by Kotzé and Loubser (2018:3-5). The author revised the table from the original.

is not a static process; it is open and continuously evolving (Meylahn 2012:13). "The church is no longer an institution created and sustained by the proclamation of a *truth* and the *correct* administration of the sacraments, but a hermeneutical space of listening and discerning." (Meylahn 2012:38). This challenges churches and denominations to create a strategy for a humble, open and vulnerable space to enable difficult conversations. The critical question would be: Are the various churches and their leadership capable of accepting this challenge?

Contingency also challenges the ability and willingness of a congregation to transform and adapt to a changing context. How are the congregations and their membership responding to the challenges and changes they are facing? A congregation has a shared understanding of the way they name God and live in His presence (Hermans 2018:12). This should be understood as part of the congregational identity, what the congregation is doing within its context (its calling), and how to do it as the ministry of the congregation. The interaction between congregational identity, calling and ministry within a specific context attests to the relevance of the congregation and its ability to adapt to new challenges. The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) may be used as an example to illustrate this.

Table 5: The congregational direction[4]

How would you describe the current direction of the congregation?	2010 %	2014 %
Shrinking or dying	3.5	6.6
Maintenance or survival	46.3	55
Growing	43.7	33.8
Growing dynamically	6.5	4.6

The vast majority of the congregations in the DRC are in survival or maintenance mode. This trend has increased from 2010 to 2014 (Table 5). Growing congregations are decreasing over the same period. This trend may be part of a more general trend of decline in mainline churches. However, this also indicates that congregations find it difficult to adapt to a changing and challenging environment.

[4] The data is taken from the 2010 (538 congregations) and 2014 (696 congregations) Congregational Surveys.

Table 6: Willingness of the congregation to try new things[5]

The congregation is always ready to try something new	2010 %	2014 %
Strongly agree	25	31
Agree	49	44
Neutral or unsure	18	19
Disagree	6	5
Strongly disagree	1	1

It is understood that the membership of congregations is not willing to accept a change or is not ready to try new innovations in the congregation. Table 6 illustrates that DRC attendees are willing to try something new in their congregations. A critical reflection on Tables 5 and 6 illustrates that most of the DRC congregations are in a survival or maintenance mode. However, the membership is prepared to accept the challenges of change. Older and previous patterns of ecclesial life and ministry are locked unto older forms of ministry. Changes in the way in which people live and relate to their social environment indicate that the church and congregations need to adapt significantly (Ward 2017:24). Congregations and leadership need to adapt in ways the membership is prepared to do; but what would be an appropriate strategy?

It is complex to answer a reflection on the role and place of faith communities in an era of contingency. Working and operating in a challenging environment would make it difficult for a congregation, as a complex system, to have a single or simple model for its ministry. There is no easy answer, but there is a need for a dynamic and creative process seeking innovations. The aim is not to develop a single congregational model to apply to all congregations, or a church growth strategy, but a way of doing theology and being a church (Meylahn 2012:39). The shifts that are taking place seek new and creative strategies:

> *The dimensions within which the church can interpret her identity and her relevance is in the hermeneutical space created by the critical correlational dialogue between the story of God (the Triune Story), the world (context) and the promise of the eschatological kingdom to come that continually breaks open this dialogue for that which is still to come* (Meylahn 2012:39).

[5] The data is taken from the 2010 (12.286 questionnaires from 85 congregations) and 2014 (16.808 questionnaires from 106 congregations) National Church Life Surveys done in the DRC, in a random sample.

Meylahn (2012:53) provides, as an example, the process of decentring knowledge in a faith community. He is not seeking a strategic practical theological model; he wants to imagine a hermeneutical post-foundational interpretation of being a church. This should be translated into practices that are developed through imaginative facilitation within a poetic hermeneutical space. In this regard, congregational leadership plays an important role by facilitating a space for listening and interpreting (Meylahn 2012:54). Meylahn (2012:56-63) uses the metaphor of dance and proposes five dance movements: listening, interpreting, discerning, reauthoring or poetry and embracing-listening as a dance without end. The dance movements as a hermeneutical skill would assist congregations in negotiating the challenges of change and moving towards a more desired position.

The leadership framework and style, as part of the strategic task, are crucial in this regard. The leadership in the congregation and church needs to negotiate new challenges, be prepared to take risks, and recognise uncertainty. Traditional leaders are controllers. Niemandt prefers to talk about the need for complex leaders to identify the following aspects of complex leadership within a changing context:

> *Complex leaders are clear about the core issues, but ambiguous in terms of the rules as to how to achieve them.*
>
> *Complex leaders encourage innovation, establish simple rules and act as enablers of emergent self-organisation by encouraging innovation.*
>
> *Creativity and imagination are closely linked to the work of the Spirit, and a lack of creativity indicates a reduced understanding of God* (Niemandt 2015:n.p.).

Joubert (2013:117) argues that the default position of church leaders is to consider it their responsibility to create unity, clarity, order, stability and a shared purpose for people in the church. This notion is challenged by the increasingly fluid new world that leans more towards the other side. The authority and power of the leader have shifted and…

> *…the act of Jesus's self-emptying (kenosis) helps believers that want to take up positions of leadership to understand the process of self-emptying as something that continues throughout life. It is indeed through emptying ourselves that we are transformed and that it becomes possible for us to serve other people* (Nell 2015:n.p.).

Power has moved away from "monarchical and hierarchical approaches … a shift in perception concerning leadership in the direction of democratic and egalitarian approaches where the priesthood of all believers and the importance of relationships and networks play an important role" (Nell 2015:n.p.). Church leaders need to understand and navigate within a changing and complex context.

Would it be possible for congregations and their leadership to adapt? A case study[6] from the DRC congregation of Philippolis in the southern Free State may be cited as an example of the changes in leadership and processes as strategies to adapt to changes in the context:

- On leadership: "The traditional leadership roles of five to ten years ago have become obsolete in both the congregations and the community. This challenges ministers to be actively involved in the development of the community as mentors and guides." (Van Schalkwyk & Schoeman 2013:782). There is a need for innovative leadership.
- On the process: "This case study showed a way to address the crisis and to help the community to create new values and practices. The available spiritual capital in faith communities is evidently able to create the language and practices to open up new possibilities. People reached out to one another and new relationships were built." (Van Schalkwyk & Schoeman 2013:783). There is a need to develop creative spaces for new practices.

Contingency challenges churches and congregations to build ecclesial practices from below. It is about an inclusive process from below and the first aim is not to provide correct formulated answers or models. Faith communities should listen to the other and the marginalised and this asks from ecclesiology and leadership not an autocratic style, but a strategic endeavour that is pragmatic, adaptive and flexible.

It is also necessary to explore the description of the desired as a third part of the pragmatic task. It should be noted, from the above discussions, that the actual is not static and is changing and that a new understanding of the desired should be formulated. The missional shift is, in this instance, an important marker.

The roots of the missional movement lie in North America with the challenge to the fact that the North American culture could not be defined as "Christendom" and the need for a response from the church as a faithful witness. "The consensus that has shaped the ensuing discussion has been that mission, understood as the *Missio Dei* (God's mission), defines both the nature and the action of the church." (Guder 2017a:52). The paradigm shift away from "Christendom" asked profound questions about the task of the church, and the quest for missional models was problematic "in that it implied that the missionality of the church was programmatic" (Guder, 2017a:57). The way forward is defined as patterns of missional faithfulness and not as programmatic strategies and recipes. The desired should be described in terms of apostolic mission and missional hermeneutics.

This missional movement started in South Africa, in the early 2000s, as part of the Southern African Partnership for Missional Churches (SAPMC). The

[6] For a detailed discussion of the case study, see Van Schalkwyk and Schoeman (2013).

main focus of this movement was to send the local congregation to its local context (Marais 2015). There was a need for the development of "innovative missional practices that provide leadership with doable missional alternatives" (Marais 2015:77). "The issue was not to develop strategies for the effective maintenance of the inherited church, but to foster and support the basic biblical and theological reflection that will result in faithful witness." (Guder 2017b:222). This is a key aspect of the understanding of the missional church as the desired goal. The inherited traditions of Christendom have reduced and compromised the original apostolic mandate of the church (Guder 2017b:225). There is a need for the formation of faithful witnessing communities within a new and changing context, also within the South African context, in the formulation of a missional strategy as the desired outcome.

Transformational leadership and strategies must develop transformational practices in order to navigate between the actual and the desired. The implications of contingency are not only outside the church and congregations. Contingency also has consequences within the church and congregations for congregational life and ministry.

7.7 Conclusion – a practical theological research agenda for Communities of Faith in the South African context

In practical theology, "we study the field of lived religion in a hermeneutical mode, that is, attending to the most fundamental processes of interpreting life through endless conversations in which we construct meaning" (Ganzevoort 2009:4). This task involves decentring and an open process of listening. It entails a position of not-knowing in the construction of meaning and strategy. The pragmatic task "seeks to faithfully join the actions of God based upon their faithful reflection on what has been done or needs to be done in a locale that has been richly described, interpreted, and placed into conversation with theological perspectives" (Root 2009:68). Because these four tasks are hermeneutical, one may, in fact, start with the pragmatic task. Thus, practical theology asserts that the pragmatic task is not simply the application of its own research programme; it is epistemic in itself (Root 2009:68). This is an important point in reflecting on the research agenda starting from the pragmatic task.

The following may be on the research agenda for practical theology and, more specifically, for Congregational Studies as a subdiscipline in the South African context:

- Religion is playing an important role in South African society, but there was a significant repositioning of religion within society. The value of secularisation "is not and never has been in predicting outcomes, but rather in offering a useful description of the societal situation in which we find ourselves with respect to religion" (Beyer 1999:299). Secularisation

should be further explored as a concept in order to understand the role of religion in the South African context.

- How should we understand the growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic congregations and denominations in South Africa? The influence of the religious market and consumerism should not be underestimated in this regard.

> *The general effect, then, is that although growth in religious movements has been concentrated in non-mainstream churches, they are so fragmented and so diverse that it has not been easy to grasp the extent of their growth, and generalise about their real and potential impact* (Schlemmer 2008:9).

The religious landscape is diverse and…

> *…ultimately, the largest social challenge facing South Africa is the integration of the divided, unequal, and alienated sectors of our economy and society. Of all the denominations, the Pentecostal churches are probably best able to reach out to South Africa's marginalised communities* (Schlemmer 2008:34).

- South Africa is increasingly becoming a more unequal and divided country. The degree of social inequality affects the options and opportunities to choose from (Joas 2014:73). What is the ethical responsibility of faith communities in building a more just and equal society? Reconciliation needs critical attention from the perspective of faith.
- What are the consequences of contingency for mainline churches? Faith is a precondition for a specific approach to contingency. Under conditions of high contingency, faith may lead to stable commitments to individuals and values, not relativism but "contingent certainty" (Joas 2014:76). There is a need to develop a new narrative in light of contingent certainty (Joas 2014:77). According to Joas, religion remains an option that would enable mainline denominations to build a new narrative within the South African context.
- The desired as part of a normative and pragmatic goal should be formulated and explored within the South African context. A contextual and missional theology should be developed (Burger *et al.* 2017).
- Relevant and transformational leadership within a complex and changing context is crucial.

> *Transformational leadership must always be understood in terms of a Trinitarian and pneumatological*

> *perspective. Missional leadership is living in the Trinity, because a missional church is founded and energised by life within the Trinity* (Niemandt 2015:n.p.).

Contingency has an indefinable effect on the pragmatic task of practical theology and Congregational Studies. "Complexity is not necessarily a problem to be solved; it is just the way things are."(Ward 2017:10). Several strategic shifts need to take place in the study of the church and congregations in the South African context.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beyer, P. (1999). Secularization from the perspective of globalization: A response to Dobbelaere. Sociology of Religion 60(3):289-302.

Burger, C.W., Marais, F. & Mouton, D. (2017). Cultivating missional change. The future of missional churches and missional theology. Wellington: Biblecor.

Cilliers, J. (2012). Between enclavement and embracement: Perspectives on the role of religion in reconciliation in South Africa, 1. Scriptura 111(3):499-508.

Dobbelaere, K. (2009). The meaning and scope of secularization. In: P.B. Clarke (ed.), The Oxford handbook of the sociology of religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 599-615.

Erasmus, J.C. & Hendriks, H.J. (2001). Interpreting the new religious landscape in post-apartheid South Africa. Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 109 (March):41-65.

Ganzevoort, R.R. (2009). Forks in the road when tracing the sacred practical theology as hermeneutics of lived religion. Presidential address to the Ninth Conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology, Chicago.

Guder, D.L. (2017a). The background and roots of the missional movement. In: C.W. Burger, F. Marais & D. Mouton (eds), Cultivating missional change. The future of missional churches and missional theology (Wellington: Biblecor), pp. 52-63.

Guder, D.L. (2017b). The future of the missional movement and missional churches. In: C.W. Burger, F. Marais & D. Mouton (eds), Cultivating missional change. The future of missional churches and missional theology (Wellington: Biblecor), pp. 222-229.

Hermans, C.A.M. (2014). From practical theology to practice-oriented theology. International Journal of Practical Theology 18(1):113-126. doi: 10.1515/ijpt-2014-0009.

Hermans, C.A.M. (2018). Theology in an age of contingency. Unpublished inaugural lecture as Extraordinary Professor. University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

Hermans, C. & Schoeman, W.J. (2015). Practice-orientated research in service of designing interventions. Acta Theologica Supplementum 22:26-44.

Joas, H. (2014). Faith as an option. Possible futures for Christianity. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Joubert, S. (2013). Not by dialogue, nor by order or simplicity: The metanoetic presence of the kingdom of God in a fluid world. Acta Theologica 33(1):114-134.

Kotzé, H. & Loubser, R. (2018). Christian ethics in South Africa: Liberal values among the public and elites. Scriptura 117(1):1-10.

Luckmann, T. (1990). Shrinking transcendence, expanding religion? Sociological Analysis 50(2):127-138.

Marais, F. (2015). The history and challenge of the missional movement in South Africa: Perspectives from an insider. In: C.W. Burger, F. Marais & D. Mouton (eds), Cultivating missional change. The future of missional churches and missional theology (Wellington: Biblecor), pp. 64-79.

Meylahn, J. (2012). Church emerging from the cracks. Bloemfontein: Sun Press.

Naidoo, M. & De Beer, S. (2016). Diversity: Negotiating difference in Christian communities. The changing South African scene. HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 72(1):1-8.

Nell, I. (2015). 'The end of leadership? The shift of power in local congregations. HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 71(3):1-8. doi: 10.4102/hts.v71i3.2934.

Nell, I. (2017). We know to whom we belong? The drama of ministerial practice in a post-colonial Africa context. Verbum et Ecclesia 39(1):1-8.

Niemandt, C.J.P. (2015). Complex leadership as a way forward for transformational missional leadership in a denominational structure. HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 71(3):1-9. doi: 10.4102/hts.v71i3.2951.

Osmer, R.R. (2008). Practical Theology: An Introduction. Grand Rapids: Eersmans.

Potgieter, E. (2017). SA Reconciliation Barometer 2017. Cape Town: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.

Root, A. (2009). Practical theology: What is it and how does it work. The Journal of Youth Ministry 7(2):55-73.

Schlemmer, L. (2008). Under the radar. Pentecostalism in South Africa and its potential social and economic role. Johannesburg: The Centre for Development and Enterprise.

Schoeman, W.J. (2017). South African religious demography: The 2013 General Household Survey. HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 73(2):a3837. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i2.3837.

Turner, B.S. (2012). Post-secular society: Consumerism and the democratization of religion. In: P.S. Gorski, D.K. Kim, J. Torpey & J. VanAntwerpen (eds), The post-secular in question: Religion in contemporary society (New York: New York University Press), pp. 135-158.

Van Gelder, C. (2007). The ministry of the missional church. A community led by the Spirit. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Van Schalkwyk, C. & Schoeman, K. (2013). Klein plattelandse gemeentes as ruimtes om brûe na die hele gemeenskap te bou : 'n Prakties-teologiese ondersoek'. LitNet Akademies 10(3):781-799.

Vorster, N. (2013). Christianity and secularisation in South Africa: Probing the possible link between modernisation and secularisation. Studies in World Christianity 19(2):141-161. doi: 10.3366/swc.2013.0049.

Ward, P. (2017). Introducing practical theology. Mission, ministry and the life of the church. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Chapter 8

Congregational Leadership in an age of contingency

Joseph Pali

8.1 Introduction

Various concepts describe our world, because people want to understand and be up to date with what is going on in their world. According to Morrow (2005:14), we live in a world of change, and this change is often not temporal, but escalates almost daily. In our reaction to this change, Morrow advises that it is best to embrace it. However, we often react to change by becoming anxious; hence, leadership is essential in guiding and containing that anxiety. By contrast, according to Bridle (2008:37), we live in an uncertain world that influences our behaviour to be uncertain and unpredictable. In order to make sense of this kind of world, leadership is essential to help us recognise and embrace uncertainty so that we may not be afraid of, or shy away from it. Moreover, we live in a complex world where what we knew as linear, clear, certain or obvious is no longer so; rather, the world is complex, multidimensional and complicated. In this era, leadership alone is unable to offer a solution to problems, unless all the affected parties in leadership collaborate. We live in a world of ambiguity, characterised by openness to more than one interpretation of a situation or phenomenon. Ambiguity, complexity, uncertainty and change do challenge leadership to learn, adapt and be creative and reflective in understanding the context or the phenomenon.

In light of the above, Joas (2014:64) warns us that our analyses of the world tend to be one sided; instead, we need to integrate these analyses in order to have a multiperspectival dimension and understand the rational core of each of the analyses. Are the analyses of our modern world ambiguous, complex, uncertain and in constant change, or one-dimensional? This depends on the definition of the concept used to analyse the modern world. To get out of this predicament of how to analyse the modern world, Joas (2014:65, 72, 76) analyses the modern world as the Age of Contingency and warns that contingency must not be limited only to this era. According to Hermans (2019:1), contingency involves complexity, uncertainty, unpredictability, plurality, increasing number of decisions people need to make, coexistence of cultures, lifestyles and value systems, greater awareness of options for actions, social life forms, and so on. In simpler terms, contingency can mean the unplanned movement of human social life (Scott 2004:215).

Contingency can be a technical term for what lies beyond prediction and control (Borgmann 2002:6).

The concept ‘contingency’ is not new in leadership studies. It has been used since the early 1970s when scholars in organisational leadership studies linked contingency with leadership practices, in order to develop contingency theories of leadership (Fiedler 1971; Evans 1970). Contingency theories are a tool used to evaluate the effectiveness of leadership in a specific situation such as the workplace and some secular organisations. Yukl (2011:286-294) mentions that these contingency theories were used to assess the effectiveness of leadership in relation to how its traits and behaviour influence the performance of the followers in specific situations. In this article, the concept ‘contingency’ is not similar to the one used in organisational leadership theories. But it is used as a “framework” to analyse our contemporary pattern of thinking and behaviour in everyday life.

Hermans (2019:1) argues that contingency influences all disciplines such as, among others, science, theology, and management theory. This article discusses how the Age of Contingency influences the practice of congregational leadership and focuses specifically on how an understanding of the Age of Contingency influences a general conceptual understanding of leadership, calling and role.

Why focus on the Age of Contingency with reference to leadership? The reason is that there is a shift in the conceptual understanding of leadership that affects the general practice of leadership, including leadership in congregations. An increase in action options has challenged the calling in congregational leadership as open to rejection or acceptance by the one who is called. An increased contingency intensity has the potential to affect the morality of human beings (including leadership). Therefore, how can congregational leadership be helped to avoid immorality caused by an increased contingent intensity? This article aims to find out how contingency affects the role of leadership.

The logical structure of this article starts with a discussion on shifts in conceptual understanding of leadership, calling and role and evaluates them in the context of contingency. Secondly, it discusses the benefits and demerits of contingency in relation to leadership, and draws a conclusion.

8.2 Shifts in leadership

In the contemporary era, it is not easy to define leadership. Definitions of leadership are as many as those who try to define it. According to Burns (1979:1-3), leadership is the most studied, but least understood phenomenon on earth. In the past, leadership was associated with an individual ability or capacity. Nowadays, it is about what happens between the leader and the follower. Leadership has be-

come a complex and multidimensional concept. In an attempt to engage the complexity of leadership, Bass and Bass (2008:15-22) classify the definitions of leadership into three approaches. In this section, I will present the three approaches and evaluate each of them from a biblical perspective. Next, I will describe the markers of the third approach, namely the interactional leadership approach, and evaluate them from a biblical perspective.

8.2.1 Three approaches in the definition of leadership

First, the leader-centric definition of leadership concerns the effect of a unilateral influence, due to the leader as a person (Yukl 2002:12). The focus is on the qualities that differentiate a leader from the followers. A leader-centric definition is about a leader's power and ability to influence the followers to act. The focus is on the leader's personality and attribution, or on the leader as a symbol of a group process. The best biblical example of a leader in this first category is Saul's charisma, physique and war skills that made him an outstanding leader of his time (1 Sam. 9:2; 10:23). However, no single leadership trait or style universally applies to all situations (Yun *et al.* 2006:375). According to Huizing (2011:65), from the biblical perspective, a leader's traits are not essential for appointment to a leadership position. Any attempt to build on a list of specific traits will probably fall short, not because of a wrong combination of traits, but because of a poor list of traits. God's purpose is a priority; hence, He prefers to use the traits of imperfect individuals so that He can work through them in order to achieve His will (1 Sam. 16:7, 12).

Secondly, Bass and Bass (2008:15-22) define leadership as an effect or the cause of some effect. The leader may have assumed leadership by other means than a genealogical process. To exercise leadership authority, the leader depends on the followers' acknowledgement of his/her leadership. Leadership, in this instance, uses authority to mobilise the followers towards positive goals. It appears that leadership initiates the process, and that the followers respond naturally. The best biblical example is Nehemiah (Neh. 2) who had a passion to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem; he was mobilised by his inner will to serve God and change the situation of the citizens of Jerusalem. Nehemiah initiated the process of rebuilding the city walls and persuaded the people to cooperate with him. In short, using the words of Blackaby and Blackaby (2011:37), the responsibility of leadership appointed by God is to move people towards God's agenda, through good communication, modelled behaviour and submission to guidance of the God's Spirit. In this case, God's agenda for Nehemiah was to mobilise the Israel community to rebuild the relationship with Yahweh and the walls of Jerusalem. He did so by using good communication to inspire others, setting an example by inititating the process of rebuilding and organising the material to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Lastly, Nehemiah trusted in God for the success of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and the relations between the Israelites and Yahweh.

Thirdly, Bass and Bass (2008:15-22) define leadership in terms of the interaction between a leader and his/her followers. Gordon (2011:164-165, 167) classifies this kind of leadership with dispersed leadership, where there is less distinction between a leader and a follower, and power and leadership responsibilities are shared. In this category, leadership is assumed to be a two-way interactive process, communication between the leader and the follower, in which the focus is not on the qualities of the leader as such (Northouse 2012:5). In this kind of leadership, authority and influence are shared, implying that the leader affects and is affected by the followers, because both are affected by their situation. The biblical example in this category is Paul and Timothy (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 3:10). Paul's deep quality relationship as father (1 Tim. 1:2) and peacemaker (2 Tim. 3:10-11) to Timothy influences his leadership to be mutual and transforming.

In light of the above, leadership has shifted its focus from the leader's inborn qualities to interaction between the leader and the follower. It emphasises the quality relationship between the leader and the follower through communication and power-sharing. This shift in the definition of leadership has also influenced the contemporary definition of congregational leadership, which is defined as moving people from where they are to where they ought to be (Blackaby & Blackaby 2001:34). Where people ought to be, is where they are able to discern and do the will of God. Leadership is the development of relationships with people as members of the body of Christ to enable individuals and the group to formulate and achieve biblically compatible goals that meet their real needs (Gangel 2006:591). The above definitions clearly indicate that the shift is from individual effort to building relationships, and from achieving personal goals to achieving compatible goals. This shift in the conceptual understanding of leadership has contributed to the complexity of leadership. It is thus evident that not only one definition of leadership suffices, but that a multiperspectival understanding of leadership is essential. This reflects Joas' (2014:64) statement that a phenomenal analysis in the context of contingency needs to reflect a multiperspectival analysis.

8.2.2 Markers of an interactional approach of leadership

This section deals with the actions and orders that serve as a mark for an interactional approach of leadership. First, leadership is no longer located in the leader, but in the quality relationship between a leader and a follower (Wright 2009:3). This implies that, if there is no quality relationship between a leader and a follower, the leadership does not have a genuine influence. For example, often lack of quality relationship between a leader and a follower is due to assymetrical relationship. Carrol (2011:55-65) argues that assymetrical relationship is more common in congregations that uncritically adopt the institutional model of the church where a minister's teachings and decisions are accepted because of his/her

position. Furthermore, in assymetrical relationship and in congregations that uncritically adopt the institutional model of the church, a hierarchy of offices, ranks in spirituality, and differentiation of membership are highlighted, in order to distinguish the congregational leadership from the laity. A need to shift from an assymetrical to a symmetrical relationship has raised the importance of emphasising the significance of the relationship between a leader and a follower and of confronting the issue of the leader's dominance and the undermining of the follower in a leadership process. Jesus' teachings transform relationships among his apostles to be relationships of equality as brothers and sisters (Mt. 23:8), and defy hierarchy as he calls his apostles friends and even commands them to love one another (John 15:15, 17). For a congregational leadership to make a necessary impact in a ministry, the relationship between a minister and members of the congregation and society need to reflect qualities of friendship, love, equality and brotherhood.

Secondly, leadership as a quality relationship has broadened leadership practice, as everyone is able to exercise leadership and influence people and situations (Wright 2009:3). Both the follower and the leader can now influence the context of leadership. Nowadays, the laity is increasingly participating in the practice of leadership and ministry in daily life, through revival of the priesthood of believers and the propagation of ideas that ministry belongs to the people of God (Huizing 2011:67). The fact that members of the congregation are viewed as partners in the ministry of congregations calls for the leadership to practise equality and interdependence for the sake of collaboration and progress in ministry. As a result, the minister as the leader in a congregation has a duty to empower members of his/her own congregation through teachings and setting examples to exercise leadership in their own daily life ministry.

Thirdly, this shift towards leadership as quality relationship has contributed to removing the burden of leadership from an individual to a leadership shared by all involved in the leadership practice (Wright 2009:3). Both leaders and followers share the responsibilities of leadership (Huizing 2011:67). The minister is no longer the know-it-all master and the laity are no longer the passive receivers of spiritual knowledge and services. There is a growing need in congregations to share leadership responsibilities. For example, a minister may lead preaching; music may be led by a choir master, and finances by a finance committee.

Fourthly, the shift in leadership understanding has affected the status of leadership; leadership is now viewed as a service, not a position. For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:5, Paul emphasises servanthood of leadership, not status (Clarke 2006:118). This means that leadership in congregations is expected to serve and honour God through service provided to human beings and other creations of God. The more important the position, the more leadership should show responsibility through the service s/he provides.

Fifthly, the shift towards leadership as quality relationship has contributed to the shift from hierarchical notions of leadership authority towards egalitarian and interdependent use of leadership authority (Carrol 2011:x, 20). This means that, in congregations, leadership authority, position and titles are for service, not for self-gratification. Both a leader and the laity are viewed as servants of God and are appointed to practise leadership in their own context. Hence, both should complement each other and reflect a relationship of equality and interdependence in the ministry.

8.3 Congregational leadership

In this section, I discuss the shift in congregational leadership, its calling and role, and evaluate them from the perspective of the concept of contingency.

8.3.1 Empowerment of laity as a marker of decentring congregational leadership

The shift in leadership understanding has given rise to an increasing interest in the followers (laity) to be a significant part of leadership practice. For a long time, the role of followers was limited to passive obedience and compliance with leadership influence. Followers were viewed as conformers, inferior and lacking in ambition. They were given less responsibilities and relied increasingly on the leader for motivation (Bligh 2011:428). Currently, followers in leadership want to be recognised as significant factors in leadership practice. They want to play an active role in leadership by participating in creating a leadership vision, solving societal issues, and holding leadership accountable, in order to reduce the practice of bad leadership (Bligh 2011:430, 431). There is an upsurge in followership studies in contemporary literature (Grayson & Speckhart 2006; Huizing 2011:58). In congregations, there is an increasing interest, among believers, in priesthood and in how lay people can participate in the ministry in daily life in order to contribute to a solution of daily life problems. As a result, leadership in congregations is now challenged as to how it can empower its followers to practise their responsibility in their own context. According to Huizing (2011:58), this empowerment has to align itself with Jesus' final command to go and make disciples who will follow in his footsteps. There is an increase in how lay people can become active and share in the leadership responsibility. Nowadays, lay people have the option to participate in creating leadership vision and resist bad leadership of immoral, abusive and ineffective ministers.

How can we evaluate this shift in congregational leadership towards a non-hierarchical type of leadership aimed at empowering every believer? The shifts in leadership attest to the fact that leadership is no longer that of the minister alone but also of both the laity and the minister. It calls for reflection on how

leadership in congregations views the lay people. Lay people are no longer viewed as passive and conforming to leadership compliance; they are active participants who can even hold leadership accountable for its decision. This shift towards non-hierarchical leadership has revived the practice of priesthood of believers in congregations. Priesthood of believers has called for a review of how leadership relates with its laity; this relationship must reflect values such as equality, interdependence and communality. The shift towards a non-hierarchical type of leadership compels leadership to continuously review its style of leadership in a constantly changing context. Leadership in congregations should, therefore, not be trapped in maintaining the status quo, but it should adopt leadership frameworks that engage context and facilitate creative solutions to challenges.

According to Hermans (2019:12, 13), contingency implies a decentring of both knowledge claim and the theologian as privileged source of knowledge. The era when the theologian (the leader) knew and provided solutions is over. In a contingent world, leaders should note that it is easy to identify the problem, but more difficult and certainly more contentious to solve that problem (Murphy 1998:113). In order to serve people in need, the theologian (the leader) needs to move away from the centre of knowing and become a watchman for the new world to come (Rev. 21:1; Hermans 2019:12, 13). Carrol (2011:8, 14) mentions that this decentring of the church and the minister is due to the growth of autonomous and global political, economic, and military institutions. This decentring leads to a decline in the minister and the church's scope of authority to influence these social and global institutions towards fulfilling their normative mandate.

8.3.2 The calling to congregational leadership

A calling to congregational leadership involves various levels of responsibilities and priorities. According to Lee (1989:23), leadership in a congregation is called to covenantal relationship with the Triune God, in which God takes the initiative, makes some promises, and puts forward some conditions that the other party must fulfil. Moses (Ex. 3), Gideon (Judges 6), Isaiah (Isa. 6), Jeremiah (Jer. 1) and others were called to leadership by the sovereign will of God to fulfil a specific mandate.

Secondly, a call to leadership in a congregation is a call to a specific position such as that of a minister, a deacon or an elder with specific responsibilities. Once a peron is called to a specific position in a congregation, it is his/her responsibility to discern the will of God for that calling and acquire some skills in order to fulfil his/her calling to the best of his/her given ability.

Thirdly, a calling to a congregation involves a relationship with senior leadership, colleagues, and followers. Failure to recognise and acknowledge this kind of calling exposes the leadership to many challenges such as abuse of power, burnout and failure.

Fourthly, a call to leadership is a call to holiness (Prime 2003:16). Gideon (Judges 6:25) was required to cleanse his father's house before he performed the mandate of Yahweh and Isaiah (Isa. 6:7). Our identity in the Triune God (2 Peter 2:9) compels us to behave with integrity among non-Christians (1 Peter 2:12).

Fifthly, a call to leadership in a congregation is a call to service. It is not a call to a honorary position, but to a service and its responsibilities. Leadership in a congregation has a duty to embody the will of God. Where there is a need, leadership in congregation must confront injustices, advocate for the poor and vulnerable, give counsel, and encourage those who are distressed and hopeless.

Murphy (1998:102) argues that, in the Age of Contingency, a person tends to choose him-/herself, wants to know about the available action options, choices, and possibilities, and resists socially predetermined arrangements. This implies that, in the context of the Age of Contingency, leadership is about the choice we make; in other words, we may accept or reject the call to be a leader or a follower in a specific context. In the context of leadership in congregations, we may, although not necessarily, accept or reject a call to be a minister in a congregation. Members of congregations have available options or the freedom to exercise their leadership within a congregation as a minister or as a lay person.

Appointment to leadership can also be understood as an act of the predetermined will of God about the elected (Ephes. 1:4, 5). However, Murphy (1998:102, 103) states that, in the context of the Age of Contingency, the life of a contingent person is not religiously predetermined. That person will use his/her available human audacity and determination, effort and insight to oppose any predetermined arrangement. Hermans (2019:4) clearly indicates that an immutable order is abandoned in a contingent world. This leads to tension between the socially predetermined order in society or rather the predetermined will of God and the available action options of the contingent person. In light of the above, the contingent person believes that God has the options to change his predetermined action and that human beings have the will to resist or not the predetermined action of God.

Once those elected by the eternal will of God are convinced of their calling, they are expected to adhere to specific norms and standards. In terms of contingency, a contingent person is aware of the available options, choices and possibilities that sometimes undermine the practice of good values. The contingent person is aware of the options to be a good person/leader and, once that choice is made, there are specific rules and norms that go along with the position.

8.3.3 Role of congregational leadership

According to Resane (2014:2-6), the main responsibilities of the minister in a congregation is caring, courage, and guiding. First, caring involves the ability to counsel, discipline, and encourage members of the congregation through the

Word of God. Caring is about showing concern for those who are lost, lapsed in faith, vulnerable, and victims of injustices. As part of caring, the minister has the responsibility to feed those in his/her care. Feeding implies providing the right teachings for interpreting the word and the context. It denotes safeguarding against false teachings of the gospel for the purpose of spiritual health, growth and strength. Lastly, caring also involves helping to deliver the lambs. This implies inviting the inexperienced, those who are lost and vulnerable to develop towards what they ought to be in their communion with the Triune God.

Secondly, the minister in a congregation needs to have courage, confidence, and boldness if s/he is to be effective in assuming his/her responsibilities, serve, challenge the status quo, and participate in changing the environment. Some contemporary ministers are faced with a temptation to be too busy and suffer from burnout because of fear to delegate some responsibilities in the congregational ministry. Others have the urge to transform their congregations and society, but their efforts are thwarted and they are forced to conform with the status quo. To avoid the temptation of being too busy in a congregation, ministers need to have the courage to make bold decisions and to prioritise some ministerial duties they will do and delegate. Furthermore, often society is not a safe haven for the minister and neither is the congregation because of the serious and violent conflicts and resistance to change that occur in both society and the congregations. Nowadays, if ministers in congregations challenge the status quo and facilitate change, they need to have the courage and the will to risk suffering and exclusion for the sake of the change desired by gospel.

Thirdly, a minister in a congregation has the responsibility to guide and lead the members of the congregation. For this, the minister needs to understand his/her identity and what is expected of him/her. The role of the leadership in congregations is to preserve the Christian identity of church as the body of Christ in the midst of a changing context (Carrol 2011:91, 93). Preserving the identity involves doing all that Jesus commanded us to do with integrity, honesty, and humility. The congregational leadership's identity distinguishes it from other secular leadership. Identity of the minister in a congregation is multidimensional. According to Oates (1964:17, 43), a minister represents God the Father, serves as a reminder of Christ, is a follower of the Holy Spirit, an emissary of a specific church denomination, and a servant of both Christians and non-Christians. The identity in the Triune God takes precedence over others and guides the minister's duty to his/her denomination, other Christians and non-Christians. The ultimate purpose of the leadership in congregations is to bring human beings into communion with the life of the holy Trinity. Our experience with communion with the holy Trinity must enable us to model the values and service that can transform our context and enable others to become what they ought to be in God.

Despite all these attempts to define the role of leadership, Van der Borght (2005:237) argues that there is a growing uncertainty as to the role and responsibilities of ministers, due to the present challenges facing the congregations. The

Age of Contingency has influenced the role of leadership to become not only uncertain, unpredictable, and complex, but also to experience increased tension. In the past, the minister had to offer religious services and have the answer to every challenge of the members of the congregation. Nowadays, Hermans (2019:13) mentions that no leader can claim to have the knowledge to improve the situation of those suffering and in need of change. Hermans (2019:6) states that, in a contingency world the, human being is not identical with what is given, and is liberated from any given order of existence.This means that, in a contingency world, our identity can no longer determine how we should live; we have various action options to decide on the direction of our life. This understanding brings into conflict the issue of identity of the leadership in congregation and what is expected of him/her. Furthermore, if leadership in congregations fails to act in line with his/her identity, this could lead to many serious challenges that may result in conflict and rejection by God (Ezek. 34:1-10). However, leadership in congregations also has the option to allow their divine identity influence their order of existence, because increased action option in a contingency world also gives us the freedom to commit to our values or divine will.

There are other specific action options that create tension for leadership in congregation to perform his/her role. According to Deuel (1995:224), caring for the people should not be the responsibility of the minister, but rather of deacon, because the minister must focus on the ministry of the word and prayer. This further complicates the discussion about the role of the minister and the understanding of the "shepherd" metaphor (John 10:1-17) as a framework of the congregational leadership. Furthermore, contemporary literature argues whether a minister must practice management or leadership in the congregation. On the one hand, Means (1993:33) emphasises that, in order to focus on vision and the development of others, a congregational minister must adopt a leadership role instead of a managerial role, because it tends to emphasise control and maintenance. On the other hand, Rendle (2001:14) states that both management and leadership are needed in a congregation. A minister must know when to lead and when to manage (Rendle 2001:14).

How to evaluate the roles of congregational leadership in an Age of Contingency? According to Murphy (1998:105), the Age of Contingency produces nothing new, because, in a contingency world, there are many truths somewhere that are waiting to be discovered. Hence, in the Age of Contingency, the issue of universal truth, general truth or common ground is contested. To get the truth, we must dig into the past, in order to recollect bygone items, and review their value for the purpose of redeeming them from the debris of the past. In the process of recollecting the items and redeeming values from the past, we receive new truths with devoutness and devotion. In light of the above, the role of leadership in the Age of Contingency is to dig out past knowledge, practices, and values with the purpose of reviewing and redeeming them, in order to acquire some new truths from them. As a result, it is correct to say that the key role of leadership, in the

context of the Age of Contingency, has become one of reflection, discovery, and engaging unexpected changes (Huizing 2011:66; Niemandt 2015:4). This means that the role of leadership in the congregations is to dig into previous ministerial practices, history and knowledge in order to discover the truth. In-depth reflection on these old truths gives us a new understanding and new truths to redeem and use in the modern era. It is to reflect and review practices of leadership in the midst of unexpected changes. In light of the above, it is no wonder that contemporary literature revisits and reviews the practice and understanding of bibilical leadership frameworks such as servant, stewards and shepherd leadership (D'Souza 2001). Lastly, it can be said that the shift in leadership practice opens up not first, but new possibilities of practising leadership. These new possibilities were already there; they have now been discovered, recollected, redeemed and treated with devotion. These new possibilities in the context of congregational leadership were discovered and recollected from sources such as Scriptures, Christian tradition, and guidance from communion with the Holy Trinity.

8.4 Benefits and demerits of contingency on congregational leadership

According to Joas (2014:73), actions that mark an epochal era of the Age of Contingency involve a massive increase in individual action options and a growing number of experiences that result from this massive increase. According to Murphy (1998:101, 103), action options is about "choosing and re-choosing a purpose or activity no matter whether it is trivial or not, transient or not, irrelevant or not". It is about alternatives to the things we love, pursue and inhabit. Hence, to Murphy, the Age of Contingency is a choice- and freedom-centred form of existence. It is a world that values the freedom to exercise one's action options. It is a world that resists restrictions posed by social or religious arrangements that predetermine our progress and future in relation to our social life, social position, status, gender, race, or nationality. It is a world where human beings have the capacity to pursue potential options, choices, and possibilities for the sake of the future and progress. This section raises the question as to how this epochal change affects congregational leadership? We address this issue specifically related to the role of congregational leaders towards faith and morality of their congregants.

8.4.1 Benefits of contingency

The first benefit is that the Age of Contingency has a strong sensitivity to the increased action options we encounter in our lives, because they expose us to the randomness of what we experience in our lives. We can now opt to use a new narrative that understands itself in light of contingent certainty (Joas 2014:76). This implies that our tradition, historical creeds, and the historical narrative of the denomination should not hinder the practice of increased action options or a creative solution to a problem. The tension between the historical past and the new

developments should be embraced and used creatively to select appropriate options for our situation or phenomena. Hence, the use of social sciences and empirical methods is available as an alternative option to enhance our understanding of the modern world and leadership practice. I concur that these alternatives should be used with sensitivity so as not to undermine the theological value in the modern world and leadership practice.

The second benefit is that increased action options have the potential to produce new forms and requirements of social life, enabling us to intervene appropriately in contemporary social challenges (Joas 2014:84). For example, in the past, the dominant approach in Practical Theology concerning social intervention was the confessional approach, whereby only biblical intervention was assumed to be proper and relevant. Nowadays, there are various social intervention options such as correlation, contextual and hermeneutical approaches that not only use the scripture, but also involve the cooperation of scripture with other disciplines and the adoption of empirical methods. These options of doing Practical Theology give us various alternatives and a tenable flexibility to enhance our involvement with social challenges.

The third benefit is that, in religion, the experience of increased action options may lead to an experience of redemptive liberation or burdensome requirements to make decisions. From the story of a good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37): the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan all had various options to help or not to help, with the potential that each action option could contribute towards a new redemptive liberation or not. For example, the priest and the Levite seem to have faced a burdensome situation with an option to help and simultaneously risk defilement, a delay on their journey, or incur some costs. By contrast, they also had the option not to help, in order to maintain their purity, arrive on time at their destination, and save on costs to help the injured man. Both the priest and the Levite decided not to help the injured man and their action option does not seem to have contributed towards the redemptive liberation of the injured man. What assures us that the action option of both the priest and the Levite did not contribute to the redemptive liberation of the injured man? The notion that "the incapacity of human beings to act (e.g. to forgive, to love, to touch and be touched, to promise etc.) leads to an incapacity to do good (e.g. to act towards a fullness of life with and for others)" (Hermans 2019:8). This means that the incapacity of the priest and the Levite not to help the injured man led to their incapacity to do good. Hence, their action option of not helping the injured man did not contribute towards the redemptive liberation of the injured man.

By contrast, the good Samaritan had the option either to delay his journey and help the injured person or to avoid helping the injured person, save the costs and be on time in his journey. It should be noted that, for the good Samaritan, it was neither necessary nor impossible to help, but he decided to help. His exercise of increased options contributed towards the redemptive liberation of the injured man. In other words, it was burdensome to help, but he made the decision to help

and contribute towards the redemptive liberation of the injured person. In this instance, this good Samaritan's capacity to act led him to the capacity to do good and contribute to the fullness of life with, and for others. Hence, his act to help led to the redemptive liberation of this injured man, causing his soul and body to be restored to normal.

The fourth benefit is that increased action options expose us to an increased capacity of freedom and wealth of experiences that need not lead to a threatening situation, due to an increase in contingency intensity. This threatening situation is understood as a loss of values, trust, relationships, and faith. Murphy (1998:101, 106, 111), on the other hand, seems to be concerned that the insensitivity to good values in the Age of Contingency promotes the undermining of a person of good character. Murphy identifies modern values such as dynamism, progress, development, innovation, experimentation, change, transformation and self-determination that tend to contribute towards loss of consistency and coherent pattern of social or individual action and meaning. This is due to their contribution towards a constant shift in meaning and an increase in unlimited options. The consequence of this is the abuse of freedom attained, due to increased action options, causing human beings to develop the insatiable urge to accumulate unlimited wealth. This has an undesirable effect on their future. However, Joas (2014:78, 83) states that such a loss of values need not happen, although he warns us that an increased contingency intensity can creatively influence our commitment to others and to values. For the influence of commitment to others and to values to be beneficial to the individual, Joas (2014:85) mentions that coordination and discussion, and a sensitivity to the nature of a given situation and to others' needs are essential.

The fifth and last benefit is that increased options and the growing pluralism of truth do not give rise to relativism and secularisation. They may lead to "fragilization and strong faith". Murphy (1998:105, 107) states that a contingency world is dominated by the spirit or paradigm of pluralism. Murphy understands the paradigm of pluralism as a plethora of truths, reasons, and meaning that are available to modern man, including sources to those available truths, meaning and reasons. In high contingency intensity, the human being is often fragile, and has the available choice, possibilities or options for actions that could enhance his/her faith or not. A good example is the biblical story of Job (Job 2, 4, 8, 11) who, after losing his children and wealth, was compelled by his wife to curse God and die. His friends blamed Job for his miserable situation and compelled him to repent. In this contingent situation, Job had the option to assume the probability of being guilty and repent, curse and turn against God, or to maintain his integrity and strong faith of innocence and trust in God. In short, although Job was faced with increased action options and various possible truths on the source of his miserable situation, his fragile contingent situation did not deter him from maintaining his integrity and strong faith in God.

8.4.2 Demerits of contingency

Besides the benefits, we also need to ask if there are demerits related to the increased capacity of freedom that characterizes the Age of Contingency. Murphy (1998:101, 111, 116) warns that, within the Christian context, our preference in increased action options should not necessarily be guided by our increased capacity of freedom, but by our choice to be a good citizen and a person of good character who benefits the wellbeing of all.

Concerning the first demerit of the Age of Contingency, Joas (2014:73, 75) mentions that, in religion, an increase in individual action options may give rise to paradoxical problems that restrict individual *de facto* action options by either longing for fewer options or seeking to eliminate options. For example, some contemporary South African churches, especially those of mainline denomination, are faced with a challenge of making homosexually oriented people to become ministers in their congregations. Some of these mainline churches reject the ordination of homosexuals as ministers by using biblical texts such as Romans 1:26-28, Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 and church order to support their argument. By contrast, those who are sympathetic to the ordination of homosexuals for ministry use biblical texts such as Ja 4:12, Hebrews 13:1-5, and John 8:7-11 and the court of law to enforce the bill of rights, as it appears in the South African *Constitution*. The above discussion implies that South Africa's new democratic dispensation has presented mainline churches with new and unexpected possibilities that may become reality. The previously marginalised homosexually oriented community, which was for a long time labelled as sinners, suddenly challenge the church not to sideline them, to stop labelling them as sinners and to accept them as potential leaders in the congregations. In finding a solution to this paradoxical problem, those who are pro homosexuals try to facilitate this possibility by rejecting the use of the Scripture and church order to label and condemn the homosexuals. By contrast, those who are anti homosexual ordination make all the effort to resist the power of the court of law, the constitution of the country and the misuse of the scripture in order to validate the ordination of the homosexuals to be ministers in the church. In my understanding, with increased action options, the freedom to choose, and the consistent undermining of the divine will, the anti homosexual group may ultimately run out of *de facto* action options to prevent homosexuals from being ordained for ministry, unless new possibilities emerge that favour their side.

The second demerit is that the experience of action options is affected by the inequality and inability to view action options as an opportunity and not as something dangerous. According to Hermans (2019:2, 3), the experience of increased action option may adversely be affected by factors such as in which part of the world you were born, or within which family were you born. I have recently observed that, in the democratic South Africa, the majority of the emerging churches adhere to preaching the prosperity gospel. The majority of the ministers in these emerging churches have no formal theological training and qualification.

Their only training was mentoring by their own senior ministers, and, if ever they have qualifications, they are not from theological training but from other secular training. Despite the many benefits of the prosperity gospel, lack of proper training and qualifications compel the majority of these ministers from emerging churches to use theories and ministerial principles not espoused by Scripture. This sometimes leads them to abuse their power and exploit congregation members for their financial gain. Due to a lack of positive exploitation of the benefits of the prosperity gospel, many of the South Africans view some of these emerging churches and their ministers as manipulative, exploitative and abusive, instead of viewing these emerging churches as contributing to the numerical growth of the Christian faith, and giving hope to the hopeless.

The third and last demerit is that increased action options have exposed human beings to an increased capacity for freedom and unlimited options. According to Murphy (1998:111, 114), increased action options have induced human beings to have a strong sense of presence of other alternatives, thus developing an attitude that their world abounds in unlimited possibilities. This exposure to unlimited possibilities may lead to potential challenges to healthy spirituality. For example, most of the ministers from the majority of emerging churches have the increased freedom to initiate and creatively use unconventional approaches to ministry. Some of the unconventional approaches to ministry include using technology such as television satellite, cellular phone and the internet to read the Scripture and preach the gospel. These unlimited action options to access the Scripture and preaching of the gospel has encouraged some Christians not to have the Bible in their home, but rather on their cellular phones and to avoid attending regular worship service, thus reducing contact with other believers. This practice could lead to loneliness and a lack of personal interaction with other believers and, ultimately, to a lack of healthy spirituality.

8.5 Conclusion

This article discussed, from a leadership perspective, the Age of Contingency as a social analytical paradigm that helps us understand why people think and behave as they do within the modern world. In leadership, there is a shift from a leader-centric approach to leadership as a process of interaction or quality relationship. The contemporary conceptual understanding of leadership reflects a multiperspectival dimension, due to a lack of common definitions.

This shift in the conceptual understanding of leadership has given rise to actions that mark new possibilities of doing leadership and that consequently affect the role and calling of leadership. Due to these shifts in leadership, leadership is now understood as quality relationships of influence between a leader and a follower. This shift affects leadership to interact and share responsibilities, while reflecting values such as interdependence, equality and communality.

In the Age of Contingency, leadership in congregations has the freedom to allow its divine identity to influence its role and character, thus showing commitment to divine will and values. By contrast, leadership in congregations may also opt to allow its identity not to determine its order of existence. This may, however, give rise to potential conflict and rejection by God. In the Age of Contingency, to be a person of good character is a choice and such a person is often marginalised. This happens when the contingent world prioritises procedure over ethics, in order to protect the integrity of the modern experience of possibilities, options and choices. However, a decline in morality need not happen, as one has the option to use one's influence of good character, coordination, discussion, and sensitivity to the nature of a given situation and to others' needs to help take options beneficial to humanity.

In an Age of contingency, rejection of the socially and religiously predetermined arrangements in society and the calling of leadership clash. In the contingent world, humanity has increased options and the freedom to accept or reject the calling to leadership. Lastly, in an Age of Contingency, the role of leadership in congregations has become complex and uncertain, due to the changing context and the challenging of the naïve understanding of the leadership role. Hence, continuous reflection of the leadership role is essential to evaluate its relevance and effectiveness in its context.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bass, B. & Bass, R. (2008). The Bass handbook of leadership: Theory, research and management applications. 4th edition. New York: Free Press.

Blackaby, H. & Blackaby, R. (2011). Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God's Agenda. (Revised and expanded). Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Publishing Group.

Bligh, M. (2011). Followership and follower-centred approaches. In: A. Bryman, D. Collinson & K. Grint (eds), The Sage handbook of leadership (London: Sage), pp. 425-436.

Borgmann, A. (2002). Contingency and grace in an age of science and technology. Theology Today 59(1):6-20. [Online]. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/004057360205900102 [03.03.2019].

Bridle, P. (2008). Recognising uncertainty. Management Today 24(8):37.

Burns, M. (1979). Leadership. 1st edition. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

Carrol, J.W. (2011). As one with authority: Reflective leadership in ministry. 2nd edition. Eugene, OR:Cascade Books.

Clarke, A.D. (2006). Secular and Christian leadership in Corinth: A socio-historical and exegetical study of 1 Cor 1-6. Milton Keynes: Paternoster.

Deuel, D.C. (1995). The pastor's compassion for people. In: J. MacArthur, Jr (ed.) & Master's Seminary Faculty, Rediscovering Pastoral ministry. Shaping contemporary ministry with Biblical mandates. (London: Word Publishing), pp. 217-230..

D'Souza, A.A. (2001). Leaders for today. Hope for tomorrow: Empowering and empowered leadership. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa.

Evans, M.G. (1970). The effects of supervisory behaviour on the path goal relationship. Organisational Behaviour and Human Performance 5(3):277-298.

Fiedler, F.E. (1971). Validation and extension of contingency model of leadership effectiveness. A review of empirical findings. Psychological Bulletin 76(2):128-148.

Gangel, K.O. (2006). Christian leadership. In: D. Horton (ed.), The portable seminary (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers), pp. 590-609.

Gordon, R.D. (2011). Leadership and power. In: A. Bryman, D. Collinson, K. Grint, B. Jackson & M. Uhl-Bien (eds), The Sage handbook of leadership (London: Sage), pp. 195-203.

Grayson, D. & Speckhart, R. (2006). The leader-follower relationship: Practitioner observations. Leadership Advance 4:1-6. [Online]. Retrieved from: http://www.regent.edu/acad/sls/publications/journals/leadershipadvance/issue_6/pdf/grayson_speckhart.pdf [03.03.2019].

Hermans, C. (2019). Theology in an age of contingency. Unpublished inaugural lecture, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

Huizing, R.L. (2011). Bringing Christ to the table of leadership: Moving towards a theology of leadership. The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership 5(2):58-75.

Joas, H. (2014). Faith as an option. Possible future for Christianity. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Lee, H.W. (1989). Effective church leadership. A practical source book. Augsburg: Augsburg Fortress.

Means, J.E. (1993). Effective pastors for a new century:helping leaders strategize for success. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books,

Morrow, D. (2005). Characteristics of effective leadership. Management Today Yearbook:14-16.

Murphy, P. (1998). The age of contingency. Daimon, Revista de Filosofia 17:101-117. [Online.] Retrieved from: https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/23415/1/23145_ Murphy_1998.pdf. [26 February 2019].

Niemandt, C.J.P. (2015). Complex leadership as a way forward for transformational missional leadership in a denominational structure. Reformed Theological Studies 71(3):1-9. [Online.] Retrieved from: http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts. v71i3.2951 [19.08.2019].

Northouse, P.G. (2012). Introduction to leadership concepts and practice. 2nd edition. London: Sage.

Oates, W.E. (1964). The Christian pastor. Revised and enlarged edition. Philadelphia: The Westminister Press.

Prime, D. (2003). Pastors and teachers. Christian books for Africa and Asia. London: Alresford.

Rendle, G.R. (2001). Leading change in the congregation: Spiritual and organisational tools for leaders. Durham, NC: Alban Institute Publications.

Resane, K.T. (2014). Leadership for the church: The shepherd model. Reformed Theological Studies 70(1):1-6. [Online.] Retrieved from: http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts. v70i1.2045 [23.06.2019].

Scott, P.M. (2004). We have never been gods: Transcendence, contingency and the affirmation of hybridity. Ecotheology 9(2):199-220.

Van der Borght, E.A.J.G.(2005). To be or not to be: The identity of the minister in terms of his office within reformed tradition. Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif 46(1 & 2):234-246.

Wright, W. (2009). Introduction: Mentor to mentor. In: E.O. Jacobsen (ed.), The three tasks of leadership (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans), pp. 1-16.

Yukl, G. (2002). Leadership in organisations. 5th edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

(2011). Contingency theories of effective leadership. In: A. Bryman, D. Collinson, K. Grint, B. Jackson & M. Uhl-Bien (eds), The Sage handbook of leadership (London: Sage), pp. 286-297.

Yun, S., Cox, J. & Sim, Jr, H.P. (2006). The forgotten follower: A contingency model of leadership and follower self-leadership. Journal of Managerial Psychology 21(4):374-388. DOI 10.1108/02683940610663141

Chapter 9

The struggle to be an agent and to facilitate agency at the same time: A missiological perspective

Eugene Baron

9.1 Introduction

Hermans (2019) made a significant contribution, particularly his emphasis that theology has to reflect on its position in an age of "multiple realities" and "options". He contends that this phenomenon would change the "content" and "aim" of the four tasks of practical theology.[1] The 'age of contingency', therefore, necessitates a modification in our ethos: We should expect the unexpected! Neither should we reflect on knowledge in terms of a "binary logic" (true/false), because "epistemologically, a contingent cannot be known for certain" (Hermans 2019:3). Theologians should, therefore, be susceptible to new possibilities from the margins.[2] Hermans subsequently argues that there should be a shift from sufficient reason (first ground) towards thinking from a reserve and the emergence of an event. Hermans (2019:5) opines that, in terms of "ontology of contingency", there can be no "general" or even universal, but only "plural". According to him, an "ontology of contingency" entails a shift from the one (*i.e.*, general) towards the many (plural) and difference (non-identity) and a shift from common ground to the unknown (undisclosed), emergence (event) and the potentiality of what is possible.

Although Hermans' (2019) contribution focuses on methodological issues in practical theology, it also raises broad concerns on 'doing' theology. Therefore, it is crucial for all 'theologies' to take his discussion seriously. As a missiologist, it is fair to say that "intercultural dialogue" and "encountering the other" is central to a study of missions. Missiology is about "crossing new frontiers", "crossing boundaries" and "breaking barriers" whatever that would constitute for each context. The recent 2013 mission statement of the World Council

[1] A brief description of Osmer's (2008) four tasks: Descriptive-empirical task (*What is going on*?); Interpretative task (*Why is it going on*?); Normative task (*What ought to be going on*?), and Strategic task (*How might we respond*?).

[2] Hermans connects this particularly to the 'interpretative task' of practical theologians – concerning the common practical theological method of Osmer (2008).

of Churches' (WCC) "Together towards life. Mission and evangelism in changing landscapes" asserts: "The dominant expressions of mission, in the past and today, have often been directed at people on the margins of societies. They have generally viewed those on the margins as recipients and not as active agents of missionary activity." (TTL, p.17)

David J. Bosch in his seminal work *Transforming Mission* (1991) transcends the discourse on 'mission field' or issues of 'contextuality', but also addresses 'agency' in mission and "transformative encounters". In Kritzinger's 'praxis cycle',[3] the 'agent' and 'agency' are at the core. Kritzinger uses the praxis cycle to address, as an antidote, the mission practice during the imperial/Christian mission epoch. In the 'praxis cycle', the agent is instrumental throughout the process of mission practice. In fact, the process starts with the agent who should identify (being in solidarity) with a particular community (identification) (step 1); analyse the contextual (historical, social, cultural, economic, ecclesial) factors that shape the community (step 2); reflect theologically on what is happening (step 3), and only then, after what emerges, draft a strategic mission plan (step 4). However, the spirituality of the mission agent and the kind of spirituality evident in the community are constantly integral to the process.

This serves to demonstrate in what manner Hermans' approach agrees with current mission practice. In his article, which particularly speaks to practical theology,[4] his integral arguments are not as distinct as what has been at the heart of Bosch's emerging ecumenical paradigm (1991). Nonetheless, other contemporary missiologists and colleagues of Bosch at the University of South Africa (Unisa) such as, for instance, JNJ (Klippies) Kritzinger, Nico Adam Botha and Willem Saayman also fostered such an ethos "Expect the unexpected!" in their approach to mission. Furthermore, Saayman's appreciation and awareness of context as a novice approach in mission theology gained ground in the corridors of the then Faculty of Theology at Unisa (late 1990s) (Botha 2002).[5]

About the recent developments in missiology and mission practice, most of the arguments discussed by Hermans are indeed not foreign to the current trends and discourse of South African missiology. Mashau (2012) and Niemandt (2019) recently stated that missiology should be contextual. At an annual academic conference of the South African Missiological Society (SAMS) in January 2019, Niemandt referred to a "missional hermeneutic for the transformation of theological education in Africa". He contends that a missional hermeneutic will take all South Africans' ("epistemic communities") narratives seriously. He concurs with Maluleke (2000:28) that "there is no united, homogeneous Africa or African identity" – there are and should be countless and various expressions of

[3] See Kritzinger (2002). He adapted the pastoral cycle of Holland and Henriot.
[4] He extensively builds on the work of the practical theologian, Richard Osmer (2008).
[5] See Botha (2002).

being an African and this should inform the texture of theology taught in the academia.

However, Hermans' (2019) article also transcends the discussion on engaging marginal communities and accentuates the emergence of new possibilities that should emerge (transformation). Therefore, a discussion of this dimension (transformation) in mission theory focuses on a specific case study[6] in terms of what transpired between mission agents and homeless people, in a community engagement project of the University of South Africa (Unisa), namely 'meal of peace' (MoP).[7]

This article commences with the seminal work of Bosch (1991), with a particular focus on how he (1991:356) conceptualizes mission practice in 'an age of contingency'.

Subsequently, it discusses the strides that have been made in 'mission practice and thought' engaging the recent mission statements from the global ecclesial societies. This would provide a framework and a window to assess the extent to which the ecclesial community has embraced the shift in mission thought since the work of Bosch and other missiologists.

The article then discusses the meta-analysis of the 'meal of peace' (MoP) community engagement project, with particular focus on the approach of the mission agents and the process they followed to enable the transformation in the situation of a group of homeless people in the City of Tshwane. This is followed by an analysis and critical discussion of the emerging publications borne out of such an engagement, to focus narrowly on the agent's role in the transformation of the homeless group.

The article aims to answer a few fundamental questions relating to Hermans' (2019) paper. Is the facilitation of 'new possibilities' evident in the mission encounters? Whose 'perspectives' in an 'age of contingency'? Who is the problem owner in mission encounters? A few remarks on the form and shape of mission encounters in the future are provided.

9.2 Bosch (1991) and Hermans (2019): an identical approach?

This section of the article draws particularly on the commonalities with the current approach and tenets in missiology and the discussion of Hermans (2019). In

[6] This is in addition to the short reference to one such case – Dion Forster's research in Hermans' (2019) paper.

[7] The project name became to mean two things: 'meal' refers to an actual 'meal' that was shared with the participants and the academics involved in the community engagement project, and 'peace' refers to God's *shalom* (peace) to come, and to be fulfilled within the city.

the third part of his *magnum opus*, Bosch (1991) explains a new emerging missionary paradigm that will inaugurate a fundamental epistemological break from the past, namely the enlightenment (modern) paradigm and its influence on missionary thought and practice. He lists seven characteristics of such a paradigm and the challenges it poses to missionary thought and practice in a postmodern society.

Bosch (1991:349-362) contends that Karl Barth, with his "theology of crisis", was the first to break fundamentally with the liberal theological tradition and to inaugurate a new theological paradigm. He states that research then started to take the role of history, the human subject, and the social group more seriously. Two pioneering publications are important in this regard: Polanyi's *Personal knowledge* (1958) and Kuhn's *The structure of scientific revolutions* (1970), which documents the influence of history and context on all human knowledge. These two publications argue for the transformation of the sciences in 'postmodern' times. The opening of the latter book reads: "History, if viewed as a repository for more than anecdote or chronology, could produce a decisive transformation in the image of science by which we are now possessed" (Bosch 1991:351). These two publications radicalise the notion that knowledge is the outcome of "objective, instrumental, and mechanistic research", but that it is also the "product of historical circumstances and intersubjective communication" (Bosch 1991:351).

Bosch (1991:352) argues that the emerging paradigm challenges theologians (missiologists) to transcend beyond rationality in order to describe reality, because such a reality should include "experience". He further calls for the collapse of the 'subject-object scheme', the "dominance over and objectification of nature and the subjecting of the physical world to the human mind" (Bosch 1991:355). He argues that "[w]e should think holistically, rather than analytically, emphasize togetherness rather than distance, break through the dualism of mind and body, subject and object, and emphasize 'symbiosis'" (Bosch 1991:355). He also refers to how linear causal reasoning, a Darwinian approach, focuses on inherent biological laws in nature – that things will systematically change for the better. This would mean that, in theological circles, a new dawn would not materialise on earth outside of the 'predictable'. In response to the Darwinian approach, Bosch (1991:356) argues that, in the twentieth century, there has been a break from "non-eschatological" to "eschatological theology". Therefore, it is no longer the case that "everything has to be a predictable or contrived consequence of some law, some immutable given" (Bosch 1991:356):

> *The category of contingency and unpredictability has been reintroduced. The notion of change – the belief that things can be different, that it is not necessary to live by old and established patterns, that everything does not operate by unchanging laws of cause and effect – has again been recognized as both a theological and sociological category, and is creating almost*

> *boundless hope in the hearts of millions, particularly among the less privileged (Bosch 1991:356).*

It is evident that Bosch's emerging paradigm – to transform the mission enterprise – agrees significantly with Hermans' (2019) discussion. Both refer to the time after the enlightenment epoch as an age of "contingency" – a moment of "multiple possibilities" that creates for the church an opportunity – a space for drawing from the wells and wealth of "contextual experience".

Considerable strides have been made in mission discourse since the seminal work of Bosch (1991). It is, therefore, crucial to note how ecclesial societies responded to Bosch by focusing on their recent (the 2000s) mission statements.

9.3 A renewed mission practice: ecclesial mission statements

In the 2013 publication of the World Council of Churches' (WCC) "Together towards life. Mission and evangelism in changing landscapes" mission statement, delegates at the conference reflected on the question: "How do we re-envision God's mission in a changing landscape?". The commission appeals in such a changing landscape for a "missionary spiritually" that has "a dynamic of transformation which, through the spiritual commitment of people, is capable of transforming the world in God's grace". The WCC (2013: 5) also states:

> *Now people at the margins are claiming their key role as agents of mission and affirming mission as transformation. This reversal of roles in the envisioning of mission has strong biblical foundations because God chose the poor, the foolish, and the powerless (1 Cor. 1:18-31) to further God's mission of justice and peace so that life may flourish. If there is a shift of the mission concept from "mission to the margins" to "mission from the margins," what then is the distinctive contribution of the people from the margins?*

The Evangelical community responded during the 2010 Cape Town commitment. In their paper, Pippert and Kwashi (2010) request a "fresh approach to witness for the 21st century":

> *As Christians and as the church of Jesus Christ we are called by our Lord to 'Go and make disciples'. The call to bear witness is part of God's plan to bring the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Yet many of the evangelistic 'magic bullets' that worked in the past are now not effective, particularly in the West.*

The Evangelical community, therefore, calls for a dissimilar strategy. They offer a number of strategies for evangelism. For instance, "Jesus teaches us much about the art of conversation: How to listen respectfully and to dialogue, how to ask

good questions and handle their questions, how to use everyday language and adapt what we say to the situation of the person". Finally, they focus on the skills of communicating the gospel: "Learn to tell His story, learn to tell our story, learn to communicate the gospel in a contextually sensitive way".

This and other contributions to the conference indicate the new approach that is evident in mission and evangelism.

The Catholic community responds through the mission statement, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013:97), presented by Pope Francis, that we are *all* missionary disciples:

> *In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries", but rather that we are always "missionary disciples".*

Furthermore, Pope Francis refers to Benedict XVI: "Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive discretion" (Francis 2013:7). The Pope argues that "God's word is unpredictable in its power, the gospel speaks of a seed which once sown, grows by itself even as the farmer sleeps. The Church has to accept the 'unruly freedom' of the Word, which accomplishes what it will" (Francis 2013:22).

In 2019, the South African Missiological Society's (SAMS) conference[8] focused especially on decolonising missiological education. The presenters and members discussed new ways of interpretation (missional hermeneutic) (Niemandt 2019), as well as a proposal to "remix" (African and Reformed tradition) the content of missiology (Nel 2019). The Conference begged for a conscious process of inclusion of "all" South African experiences in the curriculum of missiological education.

[8] This conference took place at the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus.

9.4 Discussing the role of the mission agent in social transformation

This section discusses the work of the missiologists Bosch and Kritzinger, and, in particular, their discussion on the role of the agent in facilitating transformation with 'epistemic' and communities on the margins. However, much has been written on the role of the agent in mission. Drawing on the work of these two scholars, this section revisits the agent's role in the process of transformation. Should the agent act passively? On the other hand, is s/he already part of the problem? Should s/he not only be an observer, but also constructively contribute to the discussion? The authors argue that the agent or facilitator of 'transformation' is merely objectively interacting with a group and taking their information "as is". However, s/he has his/her own prejudices and biases in the process of delivering (production) that needs further interrogation.

Bosch (1991:38) appeals for a "mission spirituality" that mission agents should embody. The embodiment of such a spirituality will mean that space will be created not only for transformation, but also to "resist" and transform all life-destroying values and systems wherever these are at work in our economies, politics, and any other community. The mission agent who subscribes to such a spirituality will also "confront idolatrous assumptions, unjust systems, politics of domination and exploitation in our current world economic order". Therefore, the mission agent will not only be concerned with the salvation of the soul, but also seek economic justice as a matter of faith for the communities s/he serves (Bosch 1991:38). "Mission spirituality motivates us to serve God's economy of life, not Mammon, to share life at God's table rather than to satisfy individual greed, to pursue change toward a better world while challenging the self-interest of the powerful who desire to maintain the status quo" (Bosch 1991:38).

Bosch (1991:38) argues that the mission agent should "acknowledge, respect, and cooperate with life-giving wisdom in every culture and context [and not] denigrate cultures", but recognise the wisdom of the local people and their culture:

> *We lift up testimonies of peoples whose traditions have been scorned and mocked by theologians and scientists, yet whose wisdom offers us the vital and sometimes new orientation that can connect us again with the life of the Spirit in creation, which helps us to consider how God is revealed in creation* (Bosch 1991:38).

Bosch (1991:38) affirms that the spirit enables mission encounters to become "transformative", because agents practise "the life of the spirit" that reconnects them with each other. It is also crucial to discuss the notion of "encounterology" as a theoretical framework for mission practice. The MoP project used the notion

"encounterology"[9] as a hermeneutical lens to conceptualise their mission engagements.[10] This notion suggests that, through an agent's encounter with the other (mostly marginalised people), ideas and possibilities emerge that will "facilitate" the kind of transformation that is needed. However, in a critical sense, it is not always certain what the markers of such encounters will be so that new possibilities can emerge. Kritzinger coined the notion of 'encounterology', and it is, therefore, important to explain what it entails.

> *In a real encounter, both partners are transformed and border-crossing encounters are basic to a Christian epistemology: we will not fathom the depth of God's love until we know it 'together with all the saints' (Eph 3:14-20) … Jesus himself discovered God's will in the course of his ministry and the same applied to the early church: they discovered what the gospel was and how to articulate it through encountering new people and challenges … they were agents of transformation while being transformed* (Kritzinger 2013:4).

He further argues:

> Mission is always about impactful encounters between Christians and others, aimed at (some form of) transformation towards the reign of God. However, if one only studies one side (the Christian side) of the encounter, it makes the "others"[11] into passive receivers or "targets". Christians do not "write on blank slates"; they encounter people with their faith, culture, history, and tradition – often with their forms of mission. For this reason, I [Kritzinger] have called missiology encounterology: a critical reflection on the dynamics of encounters between forms of Christian praxis and other forms of praxis (Kritzinger 2013:3).
>
> Far too little of our academic research ever reaches the religious communities we study, which means that we actually do research "on people" or "behind people" without helping them to understand themselves better and without learning from them which important issues need to be researched (Kritzinger (1995:6).

Kritzinger (1995:6) refers to how one can take "epistemic" communities on the margins seriously:

> *[T]here is a great need for renewed historical research of how African Religious Communities have acted as agents of change*

[9] Kritzinger coined this word.
[10] See Kritzinger's (2002) article 'Faith to faith: Missiology as encounterology'.
[11] In this insgtance, Kritzinger refers to other religions.

> *since mission histories were so often written as the stories of how white missionaries came to change Africans. Not only must we trace the development of African Initiated Churches (AICs), but also revisit the histories of the 'mission' churches, to let the spotlight fall on the creative role that African translators, evangelists, women, youth, and other leaders have played from the very beginning.*

Kritzinger (1995:6) suggests that it "is also an important part of Africanising missiology to develop a program (perhaps even a certificate course) for members of African churches and congregations to help them build up their church archives and write their histories". Kritzinger's suggestion on "mission history" on African initiated Churches (AICs) is not new. However, it has not been adequately included in South African academia. The thread running through Kritzinger's notion of encounterology is that those on the margins and periphery of society should charter the way and take ownership of their situation.

9.5 An analysis of the process of the 'meal of peace' (MoP) project

This section explains concisely the methodology used by mission agents – grounded on the undergirding notion of "encounterology". It unpacks the process and method used by missiologists at the University of South Africa (Unisa) to engage in social transformation.[12]

In his contribution, Hermans (2019:13) refers to the work of Dion Forster and the methodology he employed when he engaged with two focused groups, "ordinary bible readers of different cultures" (epistemic communities) that had different understandings of forgiveness. Forster then brings the two focused groups' understanding in conversation with each other; this "created an opportunity for transformation". The mission agents used a similar approach. They used West's (1993) Contextual Bible Study (CBS) method. West distinguishes between the "trained reader" and the "ordinary reader" of the Bible. The "trained" reader focuses on a particular biblical text in the hope that new interpretations will emerge that will bring about transformation and address pressing issues in the situation of the vulnerable and the marginalised. The Bible is cardinal in the process and serves as a hermeneutical tool to interpret South Africa's realities. It

[12] I want to refer to other contributors and that is Gerald West's (1993) Contextual Bible Study approach, in which he refers to a process of reading the Bible (West 1993) He addresses the question: What does it mean to read the Bible contextually? He refers to the four commitments people make when participating in contextual bible studies, namely a commitment to read the bible from the perspective of the South African context, particularly from the poor and the oppressed; a commitment to read the Bible in community with others, particularly with those from contexts different from our own; a commitment to read the bible critically, and a commitment to individual and social transformation through contextual bible study.

is crucial to take cognisance of West's hermeneutical method. The Bible becomes an instrument to 'interpret' God's voice in terms of the current issues that are troubling, challenging, and threatening the vulnerable group. Is this not what Hermans proposed? To see God entering the vulnerable people's 'reality' to establish new 'possibilities/actuality'?

West's approach allows researchers to use the Bible as a central "text" to serve as a hermeneutical lens through which the marginalised groups can discuss and imagine a new future amidst the challenging social realities. The participants' role is valued as they are assigned a specific role, as "ordinary" readers of the biblical text, which will serve as a hermeneutical key to interpret their own lived experiences. In the event of the "meal of peace" (MoP) project, they were particularly focused on their own experience – one of which was that they are homeless. They were never treated as a monolithic block and were allowed to write down their ideas, which were not altered during and part of the documentation process and the collection of the data (their responses).

The mission agents acted as facilitators in the MoP project by suggesting a relevant theme and an appropriate corresponding biblical text. Subsequently, homeless people were selected to read those specific biblical texts and interpret them in light of their challenges. The mission agents then requested the homeless people to reflect on the biblical text in terms of a particular contextual challenge. In terms of West's Contextual Bible Study (CBS) method, the facilitators provided their own "trained" reader's response of the biblical text and allowed the homeless people to act as "untrained" readers. The "trained reader" is responsible for constructing a "synthesis". However, not all of the homeless people's concerns were documented *verbatim* in the respective publications.

Over the five years, the themes focused, *inter alia*, on justice, migration, gender-based violence, the South African land question, economic justice, and human trafficking. At the end of the discussions, the facilitators would serve a lunch meal for the day to the participants. During the conversations, light refreshments sponsored by the University of South Africa (Unisa) would also be served.

This summary of the research process begs critical reflection. It is essential to ask: Why were the mission agents, and not those on the margins, responsible for selecting the biblical text? While we are still getting rid of the colonial past and colonial expansion, which agenda Christian mission served in the past, it is crucial to ask whether the meal was for the "bait" or whether it was a genuine and honest attempt to contribute "materially" to the situation of those on the margins.

9.6 A meta-analysis of the publications of the "Meal of Peace" (MoP) project[13]

This section focuses on the facilitation of transformation during the mission encounter by conducting a meta-analysis of the publications that emerged from the research (2014-2018), which attempted to facilitate agency on the margins.[14] The researcher asked the following questions during the meta-analysis: Whose knowledge in an 'age of contingency'? How did (or not) new perspectives/possibilities emerge? Whose 'perspectives' in an 'age of contingency'?[15]

In 2013, the MoP project explored the challenging struggles experienced by homeless people on the pavements in the city of Tshwane. This resulted in the first book publication *Pavement encounters for justice: Doing transformative missiology with homeless people in the city of Tshwane* that documents the voice of the homeless people in terms of their social realities on the streets of Tshwane. This article discusses three contributions that formed part of the publications from the mission encounter.

Most of the contributions revealed small nuances in the thoughts and viewpoints of both the homeless and the mission agents. For instance, it is significant to observe the scholars', whom Mashau (2014) employs as his interlocutors, different interpretations on the issue of 'land and landlessness' in South Africa from those of the homeless people during the encounter. Those on the margins revealed a different understanding and interpretation of the South African land question.

Mashau (2014) attempted to make sense of the data solicited during the encounter with the homeless people. His reflection thereon suggests that the homeless people do not address the role of the church concerning the question of land. Mashau (2014:209) emphasises this in detail in the "synthesis" section of the paper:

> *It is striking to note that, whilst the ordinary readers of 1 Kings 21:1-16 wrestled to interpret this text and apply it in their daily struggles, they were silent in terms of what they see as the role of the church of Christian Communities in ministering to their*

---

[13] I thought of not showing the 'transformation', but rather still focusing on the agent, and then discuss what Hermans proposes (that those on the margins should be leading the discussion) and how the 'agents' (Unisa academics) managed this process, by examining more closely the publications emerging from the encounter.

[14] This remains critical in terms of Hermans' proposal on the decentralisation of knowledge and making those on the margins the problem owners – how the experts (academics) were able to manage it. Therefore, in analysing the publication, the central question will always be: Whose knowledge? How did new perspectives emerge in an age of contingency? Whose 'perspectives' in an 'age of contingency'? This is the main research question as indicated at the beginning of the article.

[15] This is the main research question in this article.

> *context. While they were able to identify the Bible as a liberating tool, they were not able to map out how best religion could be used to fight their struggles.*
>
> *The only difference that one can glean from the foregoing is that the ordinary readers of the text were not able to make a biblical appeal to Biblical text that reveals God as the owner of the land, with human beings as custodians.*

He also writes significantly: "Urban researchers and practitioners in the City of Tshwane help us to complement what the ordinary reader could not achieve, by unmasking the missionary role of the church in the context of landlessness and power dynamics" (Mashau 2014:209).

Nonetheless, the valuable contributions are evident in Mashau's article on the land question: "There is a need for Africans to reclaim their land" (Mashau 2014:207). In a pragmatic sense, "take the government and those who dispossessed them of their land to court … intend to use political power and government money to regain their land … all policies [regarding land] in the country to be revised" (Mashau 2014:206). In his article, Mashau does not expand on at least three issues that form part of the contribution of the homeless people (ordinary readers), nzmely money, land, and class. The homeless people regard these as critical to the discussion in order to complement Mashau's (2014:205) arguments.

In their paper, Mangoedi and Mogashoa's (2014) comments are striking. They reflect on one of the homeless people who articulates his/her pain as "spiritual":

> *I was once one of the women at the Potters house and I had a newly-born child who had two disabilities: He was blind and deaf. I believed in God the Healer. I prayed and trusted God for his healing. My disabled baby was miraculously healed, now 14 years old, he is healthy, strong and a child of God. Thanks God* (Mangoedi & Mogashoa 2014:96).

They also note: "The Bible is a highly respected source among the black communities. Many ordinary readers do not want to be critical of the Bible" (Mangoedi & Mogashoa 2014:95). This remark reflects how the authors attempt to cast irony on the way in which "ordinary readers" would deal with their pain and their response – to require and prefer more than 'spiritual' reasons – as a response from the ordinary readers to articulate their pain.

However, Mangoedi and Mogashoa (2014:94) also seem to accept such an interpretation of pain:

> *The spiritualizing of hardship and pain tends to serve as a coping mechanism to make sense of life. This is not about denial per se, but a means of gaining strength to face life, cope with*

> *their existence of hardship and to use a resource (faith in this case) that is so personal that it cannot be taken away from them.*

This seems to suggest that the participants take control of their situation and, while the mission agents are present, sense afterwards that a 'new possibility' has emerged for the homeless which they never controlled.

9.7 Mission encounters in an 'age of contingency'

In terms of the theoretical framework, methodology, approach and outcome (academic publications) relating to the mission encounter with the homeless people in the City of Tshwane, the MoP project addresses the core questions that Hermans (2019) raises in his paper. It agrees, to a large extent, with what Bosch and consequently other missiologists have accepted since his seminal work (1991). However, it remains questionable whether mission agents, in this specific mission encounter, were able to enter that marginalised community genuinely and authentically, as conceptualised by Bosch, Kritzinger, and Hermans (2019).

The MoP project is considerably well and logically structured and described in subsequent publications to demonstrate its faithfulness to Kritzinger's approach and the notion of "encounterology". Nevertheless, the meta-analysis of the publication demonstrates that there exists a constant challenge between the discussions of the respective authors of the publications and the inclusion of the voices of the marginalised. The neatly packaged approach and method expose the manner of control exercised over the knowledge production and position of the marginalised in the process. The question could be posed: How do we know, in terms of Kritzinger's argument (2013:40), that "border crossing" did occur, that both partners are transformed in the pragmatic task (Osmer & Hermans 2019), and that the ownership of knowledge is decentralised?

Although the responses from the homeless people were taken "as is", it went into the hands of the 'academics' (mission agents) who had a specific "logic" in their respective contributions. It is, therefore, not possible to see the transformation of both, because the authors take the information and process it off-site – making sense of what is regarded as crucial and responses that are salient to those on the margins (homeless people). The mission agents (missiologists) were also responsible for preparing the synthesis. Does this reflect the powerful role of mission agents over the construction of 'new' (?) knowledge? However, this again raises an epistemological question: What kind of knowledge?

It is evident in the first series of publications that one of the authors decided to "copy and paste" – without any alteration – some of the photographs of the whiteboards with the notes into the article (Nel & Mangayi 2014). The question is: How do mission agents remain self-critical and cautious to not impose an external agenda (or that of the organisation) when facilitating agency on the mar-

gins. It is not certain whether this copy-and-paste serves as a deterrent not to interfere with the information. However, this reflects the serious and challenging tension that exists – not to 'assume' or to 'co-opt' the homeless people in the agenda of the mission agents.

9.8 Concluding remarks

If missiologists want to contribute to transformation, they cannot constantly position themselves in such a way that they are at the centre of knowledge production (owners of knowledge). The words of Pope Francis (2013:22), as stated earlier in this chapter, cautiously remind us that "God's word is unpredictable in its power, the gospel speaks of a seed which one sown, grows by itself even as the farmer sleeps. The Church has to accept the 'unruly freedom' of the Word, which accomplishes what it will".

Mission agents should ensure that they do not create a situation that reflects on the current situation from a position of "sufficient reason" (first ground), but from a "reserve",[16] and begin to re-imagine a new future that is possible together with the community they enter.

Mission encounters can be fruitful if the mission agents do more than listening to the voices on the margin and creating space, and demonstrate a sensitivity to the context. It should allow those on the margins to chart the way – to allow them to interrupt their 'reality'. Mission agents should continuously question their "logic", as Hermans (2018) argues that it is not certain what the new "possibilities" will be. The buck cannot stop with the mission agents in any encounter, but it should stop with the vulnerable.

The mission agents should facilitate in such a way that the homeless become the problem owners. Indeed, it is difficult to negotiate participation, which can only be built on trust, respect, and honesty that is needed, as it brings integrity in the process of the encounter. Mission encounters should not repeat the way in which mission was done in the past in terms of patronage.[17]

Marginalised groups often do not have a dream for the future. Nevertheless, mission agents must permit the vulnerable and those on the margins to dream of a new future. Therefore, the answers in the publication could not be the end, but rather a follow-up discussion with the homeless in terms of how the discussions and mission encounter allowed them to envisage new possibilities. In terms

[16] See Hermans' (2019) argument.

[17] Another issue is perhaps a frank question: What would happen if people want the meal and do not want to participate in the Bible study? Surely, there were some consent forms, but do those who have nothing else to eat and the meal that follows the research have a choice?

of Hermans' (2019) contribution, we will never know how the future for the marginalised will unfold, but those on the margins should be inspired to dream a new vision for life. Mission agents cannot dream without those on the margins, but they should allow them to dream about what is the 'good', in order to emerge from their struggles. The biblical texts can indeed help in achieving that, because God is the only one who would be certain of the future. The biblical text, therefore, serves as a hermeneutical key to 're-imagine' their situation for new possibilities. It cannot only be achieved through a 'synthesis' from the mission agents who can never envisage the dreams and possibilities for the marginalised in their offices, but who should allow the homeless to dream.

9.9 Conclusion

Missiology has indeed made many strides since the seminal work of Bosch, Kritzinger, Saayman, and Botha who were his colleagues. The article clearly indicates that the mission praxis has fundamentally changed in terms of the missiological discourse, as well as how mission practice has to be done in order to bring about societal transformation. However, the article provides some pitfalls and actions that would stifle transformation at the grassroots. Mission agents should thus allow those on the margins to dream of a possible future and be the owners of the problem. It also highlights the gap in the discourse in terms of fine-tuning the role of the agents and those on the margins – that would not only take the challenges of the marginalised seriously, but also allow them to come up with a new future and possibilities and take control of their situation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bosch, D.J. (1991). Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts In Theology Of Mission. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Botha, N.A. (2002). A discourse between Saayman's contextual missiology and some tenets of reformed theology. In: M. Karecki (ed.), The making of an African person: Essays in honour of Willem Saayman (Pretoria: SAMS), pp. 22-29.

Francis, P. (2013)). Evangelii Gadium. The Joy of the Gospel. Rome: Vatican Press.

Hermans, C.A. (2019). Theology in an age of contingency. Germany: Litverlag.

Kritzinger, J.N.J. (2002). A question of mission – A mission of questions. In: M. Karecki (ed.), The making of an African person: Essays in honour of Willem Saayman (Pretoria: SAMS), pp 144-173.

(2013). Mission in prophetic dialogue. London: Sage.

(2008). Faith to faith: Missiology as encounterology. Verbum et ecclesia, Vol 29 (3): pp.764-790

Kuhn, T. (1970). The structure of scientific revolutions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lausanne Movement (2010). The Cape Town commitment. The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, Cape Town, 6-25th October.

Maluleke, T.S. (2000). 'The rediscovery of the agency of Africans: An emerging paradigm of post-cold war and post-apartheid black and African theology', Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 108, pp. 19–37

Mangoedi, L. & Mogashoa, M.H. (2014). Mission from the margins: A reflection on faith by "women" displaced or trafficked into forced labour in the City of Tshwane. Missionalia, Vol 42 (1/2): pp. 88-106

Mashau, T.D. (2012). A reformed perspective on taking mission and missiology to the heart of theological training. Die Skriflig/Luce Verbi 46(2). http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ ids.v46i2.64

(2014). More than just a piece of land: Power dynamics in the land discourse within the city of Tshwane. In: T.D. Mashau & J.N.J. Kritzinger (eds), Pavement encounters for justice. Doing transformative missiology with homeless people in the City of Tshwane (Parow: Acadsa), pp 17-35.

2018. Standing where God stands. Doing encountering missiology with homeless people on the pavements of the City of Tshwane. Parow: Acadsa.

Nel, R.W. & Mangayi, C. (2014). "… no longer visible …". Justice and healing for the individual in the City of Tshwane. In: T.D. Mashau & J.N.J. Kritzinger (eds), Pavement encounters for justice. Doing transformative missiology with homeless people in the City of Tshwane (Parow: Acadsa), pp. 98-110.

Niemandt, N. (2019). 'A missional hermeneuticfor the transformation of theological education in Africa', HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 75(4), a5406. https://doi.org/ 10.4102/hts.v75i4.5406

Osmer, R.R. (2008). Practical theology: An introduction. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans.

Pippert, R.M. & Kwashi, B.A. (2010). A fresh approach to witness for the 21st century: A global perspective. Cape Town 2010 Congress. Lausanne Commitment.

Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes, ed. J. Keum (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), at http://missionstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Together_ towards_Life.pdf; hereafter TTL

Polanyi, K. (1958). Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

West, G. (1993). Contextual Bible Study. Parow: Cluster Publications.

Chapter 10

Everything can change: A response to my conversation partners

Chris Hermans

10.1 Introduction

Recently a book was brought to my attention that is 'going viral' in the world of religion and spirituality namely a conversation between Andrea Riccardi, who is the founding father of Sant'Egidio, and Massimo Nero, a theologian. I have 'borrowed' the title of the book[1] as a title for this chapter, because it captures the gist of he char Theology in an age of contingency'.

Let me explain this before entering into conversation with my partners. First, a short introduction to the community of Sant'Egidio.

> *"Sant'Egidio is a Christian community born in 1968, immediately after the second Vatican Council. An initiative by Andrea Riccardi, it was born in a secondary school in the centre of Rome. Over the years, it has become a network of communities in more than 70 countries of the world. The community pays attention to the periphery and peripheral people, gathering men and women of all ages and conditions, united by a fraternal tie through listening to the Gospel and a voluntary and free commitment to the poor and to peace. Pr**ayer,** the **poor** and **peace** are its fundamental points of reference [2]"*

The community of Sant´Egidio is characterised by Riccardi as a 'dreaming' community (Riccardi 2019, 259). In a world with few dreams and visions, we need to restore the power of hope and even of utopia. In the Bible, dreams are not fantasies but events, in which a person is called by God to cooperate in His plan for the world.

Dreams create an attitude that makes ou go in a new direction. To dream is an act of disruption in a world that thinks that no change is possible. For Riccardi, dreams are connected with acts of transformation in a world in which people are resigned to their existence because they have lost all hope, or feel numbed

---

[1] The title of the original edition is *Todo puo cambiare* (2018). The book has now (July 2019) been translated into German, French and Dutch.

[2] https://www.santegidio.org/pageID/30008/langID/en/THE-COMMUNITY.html (accessed 19 July 2019).

by consumerism In this dream, the calling also 'emerges' to connect specifically with the poor and marginalised, and with their need for transformation.

> *"In Africa one can dream of a different future, not only for that immense continent but also for the whole world. Maybe I am a utopian. Sant'Egido has had a feeling for years (or say, has been called) to root themselves in the many Africas, small or large, strategic intersections or marginal worlds. There one can dream of a beginning, with hope and without escaping from those countries. There, a promising and hopeful world must be built up for young people."* (Riccardi 2019, 265; my translation).

Dreaming that everything can change, and that what is not can emerge, is deeply rooted in the way human beings deal with time. Dreaming is not just of the future, but also of the past and the present. To explain this interconnectedness, Riccardi refers to a quotation from Pope Francis:

> *"A young person's utopia grows well if she is accompanied by memory and discernment. The utopia looks to the future, the memory to the past, and discernment is needed in the present. Historical awareness binds and causes the fire of utopia to flare up. Memory and utopian fire are not opposites, but show the true path of growth."* (idem: 264; my translation)

There is a deep longing for what Riccardi calls a 'prophetic dreaming' in our world, which needs to become a vision of how to change the world. The function of the community of Sant'Egidio – as a community of laypeople – is to disrupt the world with prophetic dreams, and be a sign of transformation into this emerging future.

When Sant'Egidio began, it was a project; but it has become a community. Riccardi uses different biblical images for community: the charisma of friendship; embrace; the meal. Community is characterised by an absence of difference between those who serve and those who are served (idem: 93).

> *"The poor that we care for cannot only be seen as recipients who remain on the periphery. In the end, those who are helped in turn help others. Children take care of parents by visiting them, by breaking their exile in unity. But again, the elderly care for children, and for homeless people and immigrants."*(idem: 88; my translation)

The thing that connects people in the community is the gift. Every person has a gift: the poor, the young, the old, the sick. Relationships within the community are not defined by reciprocity ('I give to you and you give me something in return'), but by the gift, i.e. it is more joyful to give than to receive (idem: 93); everybody has a gift to give to others, even the poor. The community is never allowed to give a negative answer to someone who wants to give (idem:80).

Riccardi acknowledges that there is much incapacity in human beings, and a reluctance to take responsibility for giving a future to others in the community. But

this incapacity can be solved at the level of the community. There is always something valuable that can serve ourselves and others.

> *"The genius of the community is to find a place for everyone, and to encourage everyone to do what he can. (...) We must distinguish in everyone what they can do for others, and help them realise this." (*idem: 80; my translation)

Riccardi took this idea from the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. Buber reminds us that this 'in-between' between myself and the other is an infinite space (idem: 78). From a Christian perspective, it is Christ himself who is present in the poor who call us to take responsibility. The gift is not something that is diminished or reduced by this process of sharing, because it comes from above. The future which is set in motion by the gift which comes from above is therefore also infinite, beyond limits; a surplus of meaning.

> *"With all his being and with all his actions, every person determines the destiny of the world, to a degree that is unknowable to him and to every other person"* (idem: 78; my translation).

What happens in the encounter between me and the other in this community of the gift is that alterity between me and the other is blurred. The poor are in me; the young are in the old; the wounded are in the strong; et cetera. We are all transformed by the gift: those who serve and those who are being served.

The outline of this chapter will follow the structure of the first chapter of this volume: 'Theology in an age of contingency'. This means that my response will follow the structure of the topics of the first chapter: contingency, naming God, a hermeneutic of the event, decentring the theological knower and knowledge, and a practice-oriented methodology. The reason is that my conversation partners address more than one topic in their contribution. In the sections, I will refer to the practice of the Sant'Egido community.

10.2 Contingency

There are good encyclopaedic introductions to the concept of contingency in the *Religion in Geschichte und Gesellschaft* encyclopaedia[3]. Several authors in the field of theology and religion provide a good overview of the discussion, such as Dalferth and Stoellger (2000), Gudde and Jonkers (2008), and – in the field of philosophy of religion – Kurt Wuchterl (2011; 2016, 2019). In Chapter 1, I did

[3] In the 1959 edition of *RGG*, Blumenberg (1959) refers to the problem of a metaphysic that is grounded in a first-ground contingency of the modern understanding of 'human freedom'. The latest edition of *RGG* (2007) has four different entries under the heading of *`Kontingenz`:* I. *Naturwissenschaftlich;* II. *Religionswissen-schaftlich;* III. *Philosophisch* and IV. *Systematisch-theologisch.* The English edition also has an introduction to the concept of contingency by Stoelger (2007).

not present a genealogic description of contingency in different disciplines (as Venter would have preferred), but gave a multi-perspective introduction on contingency, from four angles or points of view: sociological, epistemological, ontological and ethos. Some of my conversation partners took one perspective as a point of departure (notably the sociological perspective of Joas); others entered the conversation from different angles. My first reaction is that it is congruent with the presumption of contingency that there are multiple perspectives, and that none is necessary, comprehensive or essential. For example, a scholar such as Joas is understandably very critical of any monothematic explanation of modernisation, because it lumps so many phenomena together and leaves many things 'unseen' , many voices 'unheard' and much 'suffering' concealed (see also Dreyer). Some conversation partners (notably Venter) become confused, because contingency seems to include everything.

What I will do first in this section is describe a common ground behind the concept of contingency. I will connect this common ground to the reading of the letters of Paul by Continental philosophers, starting with Heidegger. Next, I will show that scholars take different positions in relation to this shift. Specifically, I will discuss a theological position that aligns with postmodernism. I will present some critical remarks on this position, and formulate an alternative position based on ideas from Richard Kearney. Finally, I will give arguments that the concept of contingency is an opening towards meaningfulness, purpose, and mystery[4].

First, the concept of contingency marks a shift from the given to the possible, where the given is connected to the essentialisation of human life with and for others, and the possible to the transformation of life with and for others. Contingency creates an open space for the emergence of new possibilities for human subjectivity and community, for a new world and a new future, for just institutions and a sustainable society (see Hermans in this volume). Without the emergence of new possibilities, there can be no transformation. Contingency rejects the essentialisation of a given identity, and embraces alterity and contextuality (as Dreyer in this volume states correctly[5]. According to the Dutch philosopher Ezra Delahaye, the concept of contingency and the rejection of essentialisation are interconnected principles (Delahaye 218: 221)[6], and can be seen as different

[4] See Venter**,** section 5. I disagree with the idea that this is a Christian interpretation of contingency, and I also disagree that this is absent in the Continental philosophy of religion (see Wuchterl 2016; Dalferth and Stoellger 2000), or in the Continental philosophy on contingency in general (see Van der Heiden 2016; Delahaye 2018).

[5] It does not necessarily reject post-modernity, as Dreyer states; in contrast what Venter thinks (see footnote 2 in his chapter) . On this, see below

[6] This is the result of a study of Heidegger, Badiou and Agamben's interest in Paul (Delahaye 2018). There are nuanced differences between these philosophers, which I refer to for further reading. Delahaye did his PhD under the supervision of Prof. Vedder and Prof. Van der Heiden, who are the former and present chairholders in metaphysics

perspectives on the same paradigmatic shift. According to Delahaye, philosophers such as Heidegger, Badiou and Agamben were as interested in reading Paul as they are because Pauline subjectivity entails a transformation of subjectivity.

> *"Non-identity denotes the fact that Pauline subjectivity is not an identity marker that is applied to a subject. Rather, the transformation in subjectivity revokes every identity. Pauline subjectivity always eludes every attempt to be solidified in a static identity."* (Delahaye 2018: 22)

Essentialisation implies that some markers of reality are final (absolute) when characterising the essence of human life with and for others, such as masculinity, femininity, race, nationality, a certain religious background, language, etc[7]. Rejecting essentialisation does not mean that the facts of reality are denied – such as the political order in society, the economic order (both nationally and globally), the social-cultural order of majority and minority groups, ethnicity, male and female. It implies that no fact has an ultimate 'grip' on the identity of human beings or communities, a rebuttal of any essential interpretation of human subjects, communities, and also societal phenomena such as modernisation and secularisation (see the rebuttal of any monothematic explanation of secularisation by Joas). In a Pauline sense, the given is still there; but we live 'as if not' the given has a complete and exhaustive grip on us.

Where the rejection of essentialisation refuses to accept any prior given as the final word on the identity of a person or community, the principle of contingency denotes both the fact that one must accept the insecurity of life, and the idea that life is no longer ruled by necessity. Contingency refers to the moment when a possibility appears in reality, and the essence of this appearance is that it is unexpected: 'what is' (a relationship, a healthy body, harmony with nature, a job) is no longer there, and 'what is not' unexpectedly appears as a possibility (a relationship, a healthy body, etc.). An experience of contingency is subjective: the same fact can be interpreted as contingent by one person, and not by another. Contingency that prioritises the possible – in contrast to the necessity of the given – embraces difference, alterity, contextuality, human freedom. It is radically op-

---

at Radboud university. I am very much indebted to this team of philosophers and their in-depth study of the concept of contingency in Continental philosophy. In my opinion Delahaye' s book should be obligatory for any student in theology, in order for them to understand the deep connection between the concept of contingency (and event, possibility and freedom) and the letters of Paul.

[7] 'Non-identity' implies the rejection of any form of essentialisation. The text of Galatians 2:19-20 shows what is at stake for these philosophers when reading Paul. Christ's arrival definitively changed life, and this change was a change internal to life: "The emphasis of life is not shifted away towards a different life in a different world (…) but on a transformation of subjectivity." (Delahaye 2018: 19).

posed to all forms of identity politics, hegemonism, and totalitarian or exclusionary thinking. Everything 'that is' is seen from the possibility 'not to be'; and 'what is not' is seen from the possibility 'what is'[8].

Secondly, scholars take different positions regarding the implications of the fact that life is marked by contingency. What they have in common is that they accept contingency (and *eo ipso,* reject essentialisation). But they differ deeply in their views on the implications of this acceptance of contingency. Some scholars (such as Caputo), who identify themselves as post-modernist, hold the opinion that contingency implies radical difference, total otherness, impossibility, completely unknown, beyond comprehensibility[9]. In his radical hermeneutics, Caputo (2000) criticises the dominant Gadamerian hermeneutics on two points[10]. The first is the loss of historicity or finiteness of human understanding, and the second is the loss of alterity of the other. Human understanding is finite because of the ontological structure of human existence as historical (Caputo 2000: 44) Our interpretation of existence cannot escape the confines of history[11]. Second, we have no access to the alterity of the other. The other is by definition a shore that we cannot reach, a *terra incognita* which is not just unexplored, but unexplorable. The alterity of the other shakes my foundations, because I cannot be prepared for the coming of the other. There can be no adequate preparation for what is totally unexpected and completely unknown (Caputo 1999).

Kearney mentions three problems regarding the radical hermeneutics of Caputo. First, there is the problem that religion ends up with no points of recognition or identification in the 'given' world as we know it (Kearney 1999: 127). The wish to break radically with onto-theology as the metaphysics of the presence of God pushed Caputo to the opposite extreme of religion without any discernible presence in the world. I agree with this critique, and in the chapter 'Theology in an Age of Contingency' I constantly stress the connection of the new possibility to an event where it emerges of/ in actuality. A second criticism is that we are unable to speak about the totally O/other. Although Kearney is not unsympathetic towards this view, there is more to it. According to Kearney, narrative imagination has a mediating role in relation to what is beyond the limits of existence

---

[8] The 'preliminary question' of Venter (see this volume), as to whether contingency can carry the burden of a post-colonial, inclusive thinking, can be answered with a wholehearted 'Yes'. What's more, it may be considered the ontological and epistemological 'ground' of this type of thinking.

[9] For a more extensive analysis of this debate, see Hermans (2004).

[1010] The reason for Caputo to criticise the Gadamerian hermeneutics is the neglect of an eschatological consciousness in hermeneutics. It is interesting that in the introduction of the second edition of *Truth and Method,* Gadamer is well aware of this neglect of a utopian or eschatological dimension (Gadamer 1989: xxxviii).

[11] According to Caputo, essentialisation is characterised by "the various claims to be *in on* The Secret and thereby to have surpassed the limits of offering a mere mortal interpretation" (Caputo 2000: 3).

(Kearney 2001: 7). Language also permits us to go beyond the conventions of meaning, to create possible worlds through metaphorical speech, and inter-animation between texts[12]. The third criticism of Kearney is that a radical hermeneutics offers no criterion for deciding whether the impossible that is coming to us is good or evil. Postmodern sublimity is marked by the experience of radical alterity, which transgresses the limits of representation (Kearney 2003: 88). Lying beyond the limit-of-not-knowing, how should we judge whether it is the good God or evil powers manifesting themselves? To be able to judge something as abject or monstrous, we need a criterion. But deconstruction leaves us emptyhanded[13].

I would now like to make a third clarification regarding the concept of contingency; namely that it can be an access point to meaningfulness, purpose and transcendence – but it need not be. In order to explain this, I refer to the theory of handling contingency by Kurt Wuchterl, a philosopher of religion. The experience of contingency is subjectively interpreted, and individuals may react differently to the same event (Wuchterl 2011; 2014; 2019). For example, it is possible that a person could get cancer, but they may not. Yet it could happen to me, or to someone dear to me! Some people react to this situation in a rational manner, looking for an explanation as to why it has happened to them, and try to cope with the experience emotionally. For such a person, in this situation, there is no subjective experience of contingency. Wuchterl would call this 'denying' contingency (the 'as if' life is not characterised by contingency). Acknowledging (or accepting) contingency refers to the experience of the unexpectedness of an event – in the sense of 'possible', but not necessarily 'rational'. Acknowledging contingency *eo ipso* implies acknowledging the limits of reason, and accepting the possibility of 'the Other of Reason' (Wuchterl 2019). For Wuchterl, this Other need not only be religious:

> *"For Kant it is things in themselves (Dinge an sich), for agnostics it is the unknown, and for Christians the religious dimension of the encounter with God."* (Wuchterl 2019: 6).

---

[12] The same objection is raised by H. Berger (2000: 309-311; Derrida tries to exclude the subject, but this destroys the possible creativity inherent in people that enables them to cross boundaries. Berger compares this with a work of art. It is not just the subject that gives meaning to the work. At the same time there can be no interpretation without the subject, which is precisely what Derrida tries to establish.

[13] There is something contradictory in Caputo's argument. He distinguishes between deconstruction of religion and deconstruction of God. "Religion, which is a human practice, is always deconstructible in the light of the love of God, which is not deconstructible" (Caputo 2002: 113). But how can we save God from deconstruction? If by God we mean the totally other (*le tout autre*), this is nonsense, because we do not know the impossible. If by God we mean our images of God, it is also nonsense, because all our images are open to deconstruction. Caputo clearly tries to escape his own system, but in so doing he exposes the weakness of his theoretical model based on Derrida.

This openness towards 'the Other of Reason' is not yet the meaningful purpose or human fullness experienced in the *encounter* with 'the Other than Reason'.

> *"Encountering contingency does not mean mere acknowledgement, leaving the content open, but rather the conviction of the existence of something that reveals itself beyond reason, which we call revelation."* (Wuchterl 2019: 10).

In our research group at Radboud University, we were able to test the presumptions formulated by Wuchterl. Not every person who reports acknowledging contingency also reports encountering contingency (Copier et al. 2019); the purpose that persons formulate in contingency encounters may be religious, but also non-religious (agnostic) (Copier et al. 2019b); for both religious and non-religious people, a purpose holds a surplus of meaning that cannot be fulfilled in factuality (Van Dalen et al. 2019; Van Dalen 2019).

10.3 Naming God

What does this shift towards contingency imply for the act of 'naming God'? The shift towards the ontology of the possible, contingency and the issue of free will demands a re-imagining and rethinking of all our theological concepts[14]. Practical theologians like to frame their theory from the perspective of the human agent (individual and communal) and human practices (lived religion; lived spirituality). The problem of human fragility and capacity is at the heart of human agency and living with and for others (the social and political realm). Life is a risk, and we experience the enigma of fallibility as well as the fault. The two authors (Ricoeur and Kearney) I present in this section position themselves between a traditional metaphysics of being and a sceptical deconstruction of postmodernism (Kearney 2010: 49). Both authors want to safeguard the free will and contingency of the human agent to initiate an act and to speak within the social realm (*polis*). In Chapter 1, I referred to Naming God as the eschatological possible/present, and referred to a Capable God in relation to the issue of a capable man. The object of my initiative is the good life with and for others, in just institutions, and a sustainable society. First and foremost it considers the community, and the future of every individual in that community – notably the ones denied a future (the poor, the marginalised). What I want to clarify is the meaning of eschatology in relation to this capacity to be capable and to take the initiative regarding the good life with and for others.

According to Richard Kearney (2010: 14), we can read the work of Ricoeur on the capable man as an eschatology of restored capacity. The narrative of the human condition as characterised by "the enigma of a fault held to paralyse

[14] To give some examples: we need to rethink our soteriology (Pröpper 1991); concept of mercy (Rosenbauer 2018); and the idea of divine providence (Wintzek 2017).

the power to act of the 'capable being' that we are; and in reply, the enigma of the possible lifting of this existential incapacity, designated by the term 'forgiveness'" (Venema 2010: 65). Forgiveness is a gift that liberates selfhood, with the affirmation that 'you are better than your actions'. Forgiveness is a contingent experience: it is possible, though not necessary; but it can become actual. The possibility that a person is capable of something other than her offences and her faults is an unexpected eschatological gift.

Secondly, eschatology refers to the *how much more than possible* of superabundance. One needs to distinguish between wo kinds of possibility. The first possibility is that which is possible in the sense of 'predictable', according to a phenomenology of human capacity (or what Derrida calls "the programmable"). Next there is "the possibility for the 'more than possible', the surplus that makes all things possible in hope and love, the arrival of something more than can be measured by the expectation of what is possible" (Treanor & Venema 2010: 3). Eschatology refers to a surplus of possibility, human fullness and flourishing, perfect happiness. In his interview, Riccardi expresses a strong belief in what the effect could be in the future, even of an act or word spoken in a very modest way. The future that is set in motion by the gift which comes from above is therefore also infinite, beyond limits, a surplus of meaning.

Thirdly, eschatology refers to the completion of action where possibility emerges in actuality. Under the human condition of contingency, human capability is often characterised by incompletion, where possibilities are not actualised, and what needs to become actual lacks the imagination of possibilities. In the chapter 'Theology in an Age of Contingency' I connected this completion of action to the Name of God (Ex. 3.13). This is not the first link in a chain of causality (as in an onto-theological frame)[15], but the coming of a new beginning (as in an ontology of contingency). And what is more, it is an actualisation of this new beginning of or in human life with and for others. Eschatology without actualisation can never be a transformative power, as feminist and liberationist theologians would argue (De Haardt 2018). This is where Kearney (2001) refers to God as *posse* linked to *Being-as-the-power-of-the-possible*. While acts of forgiveness are always conditional and contingent, we presume an unconditionality of forgiveness which is grounded in the ontology of contingency. The possibility of forgiveness will emerge in actuality[16]!

Do we know what the challenges of 'I can' will be in the future? We do not, as I like to agree with Jan Albert van den Berg (see this volume). He connects

[15] See Venter in this volume.

[16] The concept of *posse* as a Name for God comes from Nicolas of Kusa. This new imagining of God is used by many theologians to rethink the Name of God in an ontology of contingency. See also my article 'God as pure possibility and the wonder of possibilisation' *(Acta Theologica*, 2nd issue 2019).

contingency to a challenging metaphor of "shadows of things that have not happened, but can possibly happen in the time before us" (see Van den Berg).

> *"A shadow is created by an object that blocks the source of light. Through this disharmony, different shades of shadow are brought about and projected. Using the concept of 'contingency' assumes different shades of shadow that are associated in particular with possibilities and choices."* (See Van den Berg in this volume.)

For the author (Van den Berg), the rise and meaning of the Fourth Industrial Revolution is the object that throws shadows on our understanding of what *could* happen. What is more, do we know what human capability demands from us in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and what it means to be human and to survive in a digital world? Interesting questions, which we never raise in our theological reflections.

10.4 A hermeneutic of the event

> *"The event concerns the singular occurrence by which our world changes, since it interrupts something in our world or interjects something new in t."* (Van der Heiden 2014a, 17)

A hermeneutic of the event tries to understand the event to which a text owes its existence. Kobus Kok (in this volume) gives an interpretation of John 5 as a meaningful event in life, in which our understanding of ourselves and the world is transformed. An event in human life often starts with an unexpected (and sometimes disruptive) encounter with someone else. You can also see it in the growth of the community of Sant'Egidio: it is not a structured or planned growth, but encounters with concrete persons (preferably the poor) and the transformation of the members of the community through these encounters[17]. Back to John 5: the situation to which the text owes its existence is culturally unheard of and unprecedented; and yet it happens. Kobus Kok (in this volume) describes the transformation of the Samaritan woman who meets a man at the well, who reveals himself as the Messiah. She believes that Jesus is the Messiah, and this coming of the Messiah opens new, unprecedented possibilities for her: social, normative and religious. The most remarkable sign of this transformation is the fact that she – an unclean and marginalised Samaritan woman – becomes the first missionary, who brings many people (i.e. the city) to belief in Jesus as the Messiah. And this

[17] There is an old Dutch saying (17th century): *'d'een Mensch den ander ontmoet, dat gheen gheberght of heuvel doet'* (A person meets another person, which doesn't happen to mountains or hills). The verb *'ontmoeten'* expresses a contingent encounter: it could happen, but it need not happen (see Stoett, F.A. 1923-1925, *Nederlandsche Spreekwoorden, Spreekwijzen, Uitdrukkingen en Gezegden*, 4e druk, Zutphen).

whole process is set in motion by the Gift from above that Jesus brings: a gift that opens a surplus of or in life, compared to the 'limitedness' of drinking water[18].

Frederick Marais (see this volume) incorporates the event hermeneutic in pastoral and organisational practices. He refers to the real presence of Christ in the Church where people meet. What is not clear is whether this presence can be understood from an ontology of contingency. This question is more urgent, because it is framed in the context of the reign of Christ, where the reign of Christ is contrasted with the rules of the Church. This is quite different from the theological statements of Dirkie Smits on the contingency of God.

The author eloquently describes generative listening as a contingent practice. I think that many meetings in congregations and churches are 'framed' as dialogues; but in reality, they are exchanges of ideas that people already had before entering the communication. 'Generative' refers to events in which new possibilities emerge that are unexpected for the participants. It breaks with the theory-practice model, and defines the generative dialogue as an event through which new possibilities for God's future can emerge. 'Discernment' is the name of the collective practice which describes "how to engage in generative listening and dialogue".

Dreyer (see this volume) advocates a pragmatist hermeneutic, because it can "steer between the Scylla of an essentialist view and the Charybdis of a postmodern view" (see Dreyer, in this volume). He aligns with Widdershoven and Van der Scheer (2008:25), who define this approach in the following manner: "Pragmatic hermeneutics stresses the importance of practical processes of meaning-making, related to concrete problems." I like this focus, but the author must explain how this pragmatist hermeneutics deals with tradition, historicity and alterity in view of an ontology of contingency (see Section 1 of this chapter).

But the reference to pragmatism gives me the opportunity to stress the connection between the possible that emerges as actual, and the willingness to act 'as if' (Hermans 2004: 256-257). Peirce makes a distinction between a 'logical' possibility and a 'real' possibility. The first type is completely open, and has "no real ontological status, no real claim to reality or existence. It is a world by itself, separated from everything else." (Prawat 2001: 701). Only when possibility emerges as an actuality of or in reality does it become 'real'. There is "a sense that things *might* be otherwise, the glimmering of an idea that might resolve the difficulty" (Prawat 2001: 688). For Abraham, this 'sense that that everything can change' introduced the possibility that a woman might fall pregnant in her old age. What if 'x' were to happen to Sarah? It would resolve the difficulty that

[18] What is not clear in the text is how Chrysostom derives the idea of the 'debtor-friend' from the actions of Jesus in John. Does the Samaritan woman in the story need this idea in order to transform? The concept of a debtor-friend presumes the idea of a debt, as well as the idea that one gets this debt free, for nothing. But why this debt? How does this connect to contingency and free will?

Abraham's descendants would not be numerous and some would not be kings. The difference between a mere 'logical' possibility and a 'real' possibility is that a person is prepared to act on the latter, because it has grounds in reality. Abraham accepted the emerging possibility because he accepted the condition 'if x'; that is, Sarah falling pregnant in her old age. It need not happen, but it could happen! He accepted it as a 'real possibility' and acted accordingly, 'as if' the possible were real. Only through his willingness to direct his life according to a possibility does it become a justified belief. As a mere logical possibility, people can say anything; but the truth of what they say cannot be established! It is only through the intentionality of an acting subject that the truth claim of a possibility can be justified. The human actor justifies the truth of his belief by living according to what may be – a possible reality[19].

10.5 Decentring the theological knower and knowledge

Several papers touch on the issue of the decentring of the theological knower and knowledge. Strong truth claims (essentialism), where human persons and communities are framed by an absolute and final word about their identity, are still heard in discussions within the church.

> *"Although essentialism has been largely discredited, (...) I see traces of essentialism in the endless debates about gender (and racial) issues, same-sex marriages and the role of women in the church."* (Dreyer, see this volume**)**

Decentring implies listening and collective discernment, as Kobus Schoeman states. He describes some interesting facts regarding the situation of the church in South Africa. First, he shows that mainline churches lost a third of their membership between 1996 and 2016 (from 35.9% to 23.9%). In that same period, the Pentecostal churches doubled their membership. If the claim is true that "the Pentecostal churches are probably best able to reach out to South Africa's marginalised communities" (Schlemmer 2008: 34), what does this say about the capacity of the mainline churches to listen to the marginalised? What does it say about the ability of the mainline churches to address the real-life issues of the marginalised? The author shows that churches and denominations must navigate between different viewpoints on moral issues such as homosexuality, abortion and euthanasia. For me, the most interesting data was Table 2, on reconciliation and the role of the church. The author presents a table in which we can compare (on the horizontal axis) the percentages for different levels of agreement about the progress

[19] Peirce formulated this rule in what he called the 'pragmatic maxim': "The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditional upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol." (Peirce 1934, 5: 438).

made in reconciliation since the end of apartheid[20]. What we see is that most people who say that the role of religious or faith-based organisations is not important, or a little or somewhat important, see no progress in terms of reconciliation, or are neutral. And of the people who claim the role of the church is quite or very important, almost one third state that no progress has been made or are neutral. Some people claim that the church is a space creator and space setter for reconciliation (see Kobus Schoeman). If this claim is true, why do so many people who are neutral or see no progress on the issue of reconciliation consider the role of the churches and faith-based organisations to be 'little' or 'none'? What does this say about the kind of role the mainline churches play, in light of the fact that they lost so many members from the marginalised communities?

With this last question, we touch the issue of leadership. Joseph Pali (see this volume) describes a shift in leadership conceptions, from leader-centric leadership to a relational type of leadership. The author puts the interaction between the leader and the congregants at the heart of the type of congregational leadership that is needed in an age of contingency. It is unclear to me if the author accepts that the theological knower (the minister) should step out of the centre of knowing (strong truth claims). The author sees growing uncertainty among congregational leaders. This raises the question of whether the leadership in congregations is capable of dealing with the uncertainty and plurality of our age of contingency. According to Pali there is a willingness among the members of the congregation to try something new in the struggle for survival. Do our church leaders know how to navigate in a context of change, differences within the congregation, and contingent certainty? Here the author could have been more critical, in light of the essentialising language still used by the church.

Marais wants to embrace contingency as a core condition for the reformed confession. We raised some questions on this issue (above), but he wants to create an open space for discernment in the congregation; and in order to get there, he embraces a decentring of the theological knower and knowledge. His proposal demands no essentialising of identity, but acceptance of contingency and contingent certainty. For him, decentring of the theological subject implies a type of collective leadership that engages in corporate discernment. The story of Sant'Egidio may cast light on the task ahead. The struggle of many DRC congregations is great, as Schoeman shows. But a future of abundance could emerge, if one thinks in terms of a community beyond the essentialisation of identity. And the emergence of this community requires re-thinking the meaning of the gift.

Eugene Baron (see this volume) asks some good questions with regard to the agency of the researcher and the researched. Whose knowledge? How did new perspectives emerge in an age of contingency? Whose perspectives in an age of contingency? His meta-analysis of publications by the researchers of the so-

[20] The rule is: if the numbers add up to 100% vertically, we can compare the categories vertically.

called MoP (Meal of Peace) project shows the struggle between the ideas of the respective authors of the publications, as well as doing justice to the inclusion of the voices of the marginalised. Does the neatly packaged approach of the MoP project expose the kind of control of knowledge that academia still has over the 'future' of the vulnerable and those on the margins? How do we know (in terms of Kritzinger) that the border crossing did occur, and that both partners are transformed? Has the theological knower moved out of the centre of knowing if the researcher has the leading role in formulating the new knowledge? Here, the story of Sant' Egidio can inspire us.

10.6 A practice-oriented methodology

Eugene Baron presents a meta-analysis of the MoP project in which several missiologists from UNISA participated. I will use the four characteristics of practice-oriented methodology reported in the first chapter as the structure for my reaction.

5. the general and the singular, i.e. the unknown, unexpected, different or other;
6. the role of the possible in transforming the actual;
7. building a theory of contingent certainty; and
8. that the researcher is not the problem-owner.

Firstly, we can read a strong concern for context and encountering the other in the approach of the research team (see Baron in this volume). The researchers use the steps of the pastoral cycle to structure the engagement of the 'agent in mission' who should identify with a particular community. These steps follow the so-called action cycle in research methodology (Verschuren 2009), and position this cycle in a pastoral theological framework. In practice-oriented research we call this the practice stream, in which the researcher acts as a change agent. What is missing in the methodology of the research project is the knowledge stream where (new) theory is developed, based on qualitative or quantitative data gathered from those researched[21]. The streams are interconnected, but the researcher has different roles in the theory stream compared to the practice stream: developing knowledge vs. problem solving; different objectives; advancing theory vs. supporting practice; different attitudes; being objective and independent vs. supporting practice (see Hermans & Schoeman 2015, Table 3). From an academic point of view, it is unclear what data are gathered, how they are analysed, how theory is built in relation to this empirical data. But in the practice stream, it is unclear what transformation is accomplished in the life of the marginalised (see below).

[21] Baron uses the metaphor of two agendas and the mixing of these agendas by the researchers.

Secondly, Baron states that the objective of the MoP project is the transformation of the marginalised. According to the author, it is unclear what transformation has occurred in the situation of the poor, in what way it is connected to their action problem (i.e. not knowing how to change their situation for the better), or if this change is sustainable. As formulated by Baron, the change agents of the project create new knowledge on an academic level ('synthesis') and create space for the voice of the poor in society. This is important; but if this observation is correct, the transformation emerges in the knowledge stream and not in the practice stream. I think that it is the ambition of the researchers of the MoP project to make a real change in the lives of the marginalised, but this is not what is reported. And of course, I am aware that the condition of scarcity of the 'marginalised' makes realising transformation very complex (see Hermans 2017). But if we do not yet know how to do this, we need to learn!

Thirdly, we like to transform the fact that agents (notably the marginalised) are not able to transform their actual situation towards the desired situation. 'Not able to' I described in the chapter *'Theology in an Age of* Contingency'on the perspective of agencs an incapacity to speak and act for change. In the first chapter we said that this incapacity must be transferred into 'I can' by the gift of a new possibility. This gift is an 'event' in which new possibilities emerge. Our theory is about the *explanandum*[22] of the event, i.e. 'what new possibilities for the good life with and for others emerged'; it is not based on the causality of a predictive theory. No deduction is made based on the given; rather, there is an abduction[23] of a possibility that is not a given but an emerging possibility, from which people speak and act (as a real possible, see above). I would agree with the researchers of the MoP project that an encounter is crucial in the event. In the interview with Riccardi, we are reminded that at the heart of the encounter there is a gift which transforms both the giver and the receiver. How do we organise our practices with the participants in such a way that this event might emerge? What imagining emerges in this event about new possibilities of or in the actuality of the marginalised? And how do we involve the community in this transformation? Perhaps these questions could accompany us in the next years, to help us to understand how transformation emerges in the life of the marginalised. Maybe we can also learn, from the interview with Riccardi, that the transformation of incapacity is the genius of a community. He expresses the belief that everybody has capacities; it is in encounters with others in the community that a person becomes aware of this. If this is a strong mechanism, how can we incorporate it in our practices with the marginalised where we like to sow the seeds of transformation?

[22] The *explanandum* in research methodology is the *interpretandum* in the hermeneutic (see Chapter 1 of this volume.

[23] On the difference between abduction and deduction, see Hermans (2004).

Fourthly, Baron does not report what happened with the poor after the researchers left. In practice-oriented research we incorporate a problem owner who accepts responsibility for the action problem, and therefore accepts responsibility for improving the situation of the marginalised (see Chapter 1). If there is no problem owner, one observes that the researched (the marginalised) are left alone in their situation also makes ustch situation, we call this 'knowledge valorisation': what is the societal field doing with the ('how to change') knowledge to transform the situation of the poor? To get funding for a research project, this criterion is as important as the academic quality of the project plan. Perhaps it also makes us aware of the community in which the participants of the project are embedded, or a community that acts responsibly towards the future of the marginalised. It seems closely aligned to the typical African perspective of *ubuntu* to incorporate the responsibility of the community into our research projects.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berger, H. (2000). Tegen de negatieve filosofie. Dionysius – Kant – Derrida [Against the negative philosophy]. Leende: Damon.

Blumenberg, H. (1959). Kontingenz. K.Galling (ed.), Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft (Dritter Band H Kon). Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, Sp. 1973/1794.

Caputo, J.D. (1997). The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion (Indianapolis: Indiana University.

1999. God is wholly other – almost: 'Différance' and the hyperbolic alterity of God. In: O. H. Sumerell (ed.), The Otherness of God. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press (pp. 190-206).

2000. More Radical Hermeneutics. On not knowing who we are. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

2002. On Religion. London: Routledge.

Copier, J., Hermans, C. & Van DeR Zee, Th. (2019). Experiencing contingency receiving & formulating future aims. Journal of Empirical Theology 32(2) (accepted; to be published in the second issue of 2019).

Van Dalen, E., Hermans, C., Van Laarhoven, H.,. Wiegers, G. & Scherer-Rath, M. (2019). Tragedy as acknowledging contingency. Journal of Empirical Theology 32(2) (accepted; o be published in the second issue).

Van Dalen, E. (2019). De interpretatiecrisis bij ongeneeslijke kanker. Een religiewetenschappelijk onderzoek naar verklaringen, het onverwachte, tragiek en de gewaarwording van het andere

[The interpretation crisis in incurable cancer. A religious study approach into explanations, the unexpected, tragedy and the awareness of the other]. Münster: LIT Verlag.

Delahaye, E. (2018). It is no longer I who lives. Heidegger, Badiou and Agamben on subjectivity in the letters of Saint Paul. Nijmegen. Dissertatie Radboud Universiteit.

Dalferth, I.U. (2016). Radical Theology. An essay on faith and theology in the twenty-first century. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. Kindle edition. https://doi.org/10.2307/j. ctt1b3t6tc.

Dalferth, I.U. & P. Stoelger, P. (2000). Einleitung: Religion als Kontingenzkultur und die Kontingenz Gottes. In: Dalferth & Stoelger (eds.), Vernunft, Kontingenz und Gott. Konstellationen eines offenen Problems [pp.1-44]. Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck.

De Haardt, M. (2018). '... een innig fluisteren'. Over hoop, verlangen en verandering [A heartfelt whispering. On hope, longing and transformation). Nijmegen: Radboud University Farewell Lecture.

Gadamer, H.G. (1989). Truth and Method (second revised edition by J. Weinsheimer & D.G. Marshall). New York: Continuum.

Grube, D. M., & Jonkers, P. H. A. I. (Eds.). (2008). Religions challenged by contingency: Theological and philosophical approaches to the problem of contingency. Studies in Theology and Religion, No. 12). Leiden: Brill.

Hermans, C.A.M. (2001). The other in dialogue. Interreligious communication from a socio-cultural perspective. In: Ziebertz, H.-G., Schweitzer, F., Häring, H. & Browning, D. (eds.). The Human Image of God (pp. 285-309). Leiden: Brill.

(2004). Abductive Hermeneutics. A pragmatic key to the learning paradox. In: H. Lombaerts, H. & D. Pollefeyt (eds.), Hermeneutics and Religious Education (BETL 180). Leuven: Peeters (pp. 95-120).

(2012). Towards a 'U-turn' by the churches: how (not to) possibilise the future. Religion and Theology. A Journal of Contemporary Religious Discourse, 19: 237-264.

(2017). Love in a time of scarcity: An event-hermeneutical interpretation. Acta Theologica 37(2): 30-50.

Kearney, R. (1997). The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

(2001). The God Who May Be. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

(2003). Strangers, Gods and Monsters. New York: Routledge.

(2010). Capable man, capable God. In B.Treanor & H.I. Venema (eds.). A Passion for the Possible. Thinking with Paul Ricoeur. New York: Fordham University Press (pp. 49-61).

Prawat, R.S. (2001). Dewey and Peirce, the philosopher's philosopher. Teachers College Record 103(4): 667-731.

Peirce, C.S. (1934). Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (eds.); Volume 5. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Pröpper, Th.: (1991). Erlösungsglaube und Freiheitsgeschichte. Eine Skizze zur Soteriologie [Belief in Salvation and History of Freedom. A sketch of soteriology]. München: Kösel Verlag.

Rosenhauer, S. (2018). Die Unverfügbarkeit der Kraft und die Kraft des Unverfügbaren. Subjekttheoretische und gnadentheologische Überlegungen im Anschluss an das Phänomen der Kontingenz [The Unavailability of Power and the Power of the Unavailable. Theological considerations from the perspective of Subject Theory and Mercy Theological in relation to the Phenomenon of Contingency]. Verlag Wilhelm Fink. Kindle Edition.

Schlemmer, L. (2008). Under the radar. Pentecostalism in South Africa and its potential social and economic role. Johannesburg: The Centre for Development and Enterprise.

Stoelger, P. (2007). Kontingenz. In: H.G. Betz (ed.), Religion Past and Present. Encyclopaedia of Theology and Religion. Leiden: Brill (Volume III Chu-Deu, pp. 459-461).

Treanor, B. & Venema, H.I. (2010). Introduction: How much more than possible. In: B. Treanor & H.I. Venema (eds.), A Passion for the Possible. Thinking with Paul Ricoeur. New York: Fordham University Press (pp. 1-21).

Van Der Heiden, G.J. (2014). Ontology After Ontotheology. Plurality, event and contingency in contemporary philosophy. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Venema, H.I. (2010). The source of Ricoeur's double allegiance. In: B.Treanor & H.I. Venema (eds.), A Passion for the Possible. Thinking with Paul Ricoeur. New York: Fordham University Press (pp. 62-76).

Widdershoven, G. & Van Der Scheer, L. (2008). Theory and methodology of empirical ethics: A pragmatic hermeneutic perspective. In: G. Widdershoven, J. McMillan, T. Hope & L. Van der Scheer (eds.), Empirical Ethics in Psychiatry. Oxford: Oxford University Press (pp. 23-35).

Wintzek, O. (2017). Gott in seiner allwissenden Vorsehung auf dem Prüfstand der Kontingenz. Eine motivarchäologische Kritik des theologischen Kompatibilismus [God in his omniscient providence on the test of contingency. A motif-archaeological critique of theological compatibility]. Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet.

List of Contributors

Eugene Baron

Dr. Eugene Baron (Ph.D) is a Lecturer in Missiology in the Department of Practical and Missional Theology at the University of the Free State (UFS). He is involved in the Editorial of the journal Missionalia. He is also an ordained Minister of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). His email address is: barone@ufs.ac.za.

Jaco Dreyer

Prof Jaco S. Dreyer is professor of practical theology at the University of South Africa and a National Research Foundation (NRF) B-rated researcher. His research interests are the development of a public practical theology and the methodology of practical theology. He is the editor of HTS Section Practical Theology and the president of the International Society of Empirical Research in Theology (ISERT). He is also a past president of the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT). His email address is: dreyejs@unisa.ac.za.

Chris Hermans

Prof Christiaan A.M. Hermans holds the chair in Pastoral theology, especially Empirical Theology at Radboud university Nijmegen (since 2003) and the chair in Empirical study of religion (since 2005). He is an extraordinary professor in practical theology and missiology at the University of the Free state (since 2018). He is editor of the Journal of Empirical Theology (since 2004). His major works include Morele vorming (1986), Wie werdet ihr die Gleichnisse verstehen? (1990), Vorming in perspectief (1993), Participatory learning. Religious Education in a Globalizing society (2003), Religion and conflict (with Antony & Sterkens) (2015). His email address is: c.hermans@ftr.ru.nl

Kobus Kok

Jacobus (Kobus) Kok (PhD; PhD) is Professor and Head of Department of New Testament Studies at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit Leuven, Belgium. He holds an NRF Y1 rating and is extraordinary professor in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. Kobus has a PhD in New Testament Studies and a PhD in Missiology and Religious Studies. His interdisciplinary projects include edited books such as Sensitivity to Outsiders, (Mohr Siebeck), Insiders versus Outsiders (Gorgias), Leading in a VUCA

world (Springer) and Drawing and Transcending Boundaries (Lit Verlag). His email is kobus.kok@etf.edu

Frederick Marais

Dr Frederick Marais is a research fellow of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Stellenbosch and the director for Theological Education of the Dutch Reformed Church (Western Cape). His research focus on missional ecclesiology, missional formation and missional corporate discernment. He co-edit Cultivating Missional Change. The future of Missional Theology and Missional Churches (Bybelmedia 2017). He was a co-founder of the Unit for Innovation and Transformation of Church and Society in collaboration with prof Chris Hermans of Radboud University Nijmegen Netherland, on practice orientated research. Dr Marais serves on the executive of the International Research Consortium Congregational Mission and the Social Sciences. His email address is jfm@sun.ac.za

Joseph Pali

Dr Khamadi Joseph Pali is a lecturer and researcher at University of the Free State (UFS). Besides, lecturing within UFS he is a member of the Acta Theologica editorial board, and coordinator of Community engagement and service learning. Concerning research, his interest is in leadership and congregations within the African context. His recent research is about leadership and congregations in the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, and in Mangaung Metro Municipality. He is also a member of New Testament society in SA, Vice chairperson of Society of Practical Theology in SA, and Christian Network in the Free State. His email address is palikj@ufs.ac.za

Kobus Schoeman

Prof Kobus (W.J.) Schoeman is since 2009 professor of practical theology at the University of the Free State (South Africa) and a National Research Foundation (NRF) C-rated researcher. He served as a full-time minister for more than twenty years in three Dutch Reformed congregations. He specializes in congregational studies and leadership. His research focuses on the development of a practical theological ecclesiology and the empirical analysis of congregations. He was the guest editor of the 2015 Acta Theologica supplementum: The exploration of congregations in South Africa. His email address is schoemanw@ufs.ac.za.

Jan-Albert van den Berg

Prof Jan-Albert van den Berg obtained postgraduate qualifications in Practical Theology, Psychology and Future Studies from the Universities of Pretoria, South Africa, Stellenbosch and from The University of Queensland (Australia).

He served as minister in two Dutch Reformed congregations for a period of 8 years. Jan-Albert has been a lecturer in the Department of Practical and Missional Theology at the University of the Free State since 2003. He specialised in narrative pastoral family therapy with further research in the field of futures studies. At present, his research focuses on expressions of faith in popular culture. His e-mail address is vdbergja@ufs.ac.za

Rian Venter

Prof Rian Venter obtained a DD from the University of Pretoria. He is the Head of the Department of Historical and Constructive Theology at the UFS, Bloemfontein, South Africa. His research work focuses on the doctrine of God and the transformation of theology at public universities. He is editor of the volume Theology and the post(apartheid) condition: Genealogies and future directions (SUN MeDIA, 2016), and co-editor (with F Tolmie) of Making sense of Jesus: Experiences, interpretations and identities (SUNMeDIA, 2017). His email address is rventer@ufs.ac.za