

# THE BIBLE AS BOOK OF BEAUTY: ON THE ROLE OF BIBLICAL AESTHETICS IN SECULARISED TIMES AND CONTEXTS

Pieter G.R. de Villiers  
University of the Free State

---

## Abstract

*This article investigates reasons for the decline in relevance of the Bible in social and religious discourse as a result of secularisation in contemporary times. It firstly analyses how a particular scientific ideal in the religious discourse has contributed to this decline, as well as ecclesiastical dogmatism, anti-intellectualism and the weaponising of religion that promoted and resulted in Bible-fatigue. In the second major section, a turn in the state of affairs is analysed, with attention to the contribution of contextual theologies to theoretical reflection about reductionist intellectualism and more recently, the promotion of aesthetic insights. In a third section, the article investigates more fully the aesthetic nature of the Bible that has often contributed to a reinvigorating of the Bible. The article concludes with the proposal that it is a spiritual reading that is explicitly approached from an aesthetical perspective that will create consciousness and knowledge of the Bible's beauty and mediate its transformative potential, and this will help counter the secularising trend that marginalised the Bible.*

**Keywords:** Secularisation; Spirituality; Biblical aesthetics; Epistemology; Hermeneutics; Rationality; Anti-intellectuality

## Introduction

The reception history of the Bible reflects its importance as the foundational guideline for faith communities but also as an aesthetic text that fascinated authors, artists, poets and many other of the creative minds of the past.<sup>1</sup> This contribution it will firstly investigate how and why this special role and place of the Bible has been affected negatively, contributing to the secularisation of societies that characterise contemporary times. It then investigates how the new and influential discipline of aesthetics illuminates and explains the dynamic nature of and vibrant relationship with the Bible in earlier times. The discipline can assist in spelling out within the context of secularisation why the Bible can be regarded as a reliable, authentic source of knowledge with transformative potential and power, thereby revealing the limitations of the epistemology of rationality that has dominated religious discourse since the Enlightenment and contributed significantly to the process of secularisation.

---

<sup>1</sup> This seeks to contribute to the theme of this meeting as it was formulated in the conference announcement, which read: "Biblical Scholarship in Secular and Post-Secular Societies." *What does it mean to do biblical scholarship—research and teaching—in contexts where the Bible seems to be decreasing in relevance for public life? How can/should the Bible be integrated into undergraduate liberal arts education?*

The notions of “secular and post-secular societies” have been discussed extensively by scholars of note, such as Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor (2011), and have elicited a major interpretive trajectory in recent social discourse. Without going into the details of this very comprehensive discussion with all its implications and complexities, I will use these notions in this very limited investigation pragmatically as referring to the loss of relevance of the Bible, theology, the church and religion in social discourse. The aim of this investigation is not to reclaim authoritarian or privileged positions of faith communities and their sacred traditions of earlier times or to restore the Bible to the way in which it was (ab)used and (mis)interpreted in some earlier contexts and times. It is the contention of this contribution that reading the Bible through an aesthetic approach can illuminate its spiritual claims with their transformative consequences and thus offer an alternative to negative attitudes towards and negative experiences of biblical receptions. At the same time, such claims that reveal the life-giving potential of the Bible can counter the negative experiences of religious discourse within secular contexts. All this also does not negate existing biblical scholarship. It rather builds on it and explores insights in scholarship that have paved the way for a more explicit aesthetical approach to the Bible.

This proposal is further offered with the caveat that it is but one attempt to reflect one possible solution to the complex phenomenon of secularisation, although it relates to the Bible as a central, foundational text of faith communities. The understanding and interpretation of the Bible could influence faith communities into a positive, transformative engagement with their members and by implication with the social context in which they exist and can open the eyes for its beauty. There are no easy, quick solutions to the complex phenomenon of secularisation.

### **State of affairs**

Influential authors have provided several reasons for the ongoing secularisation that contribute to the side-lining or disappearance of religion. A brief overview of these reasons provides a framework and context for offering some proposals for responding to secularisation.

### ***The influence of science***

Habermas (1992) has provided three reasons for the ongoing secularisation that highlight the effects of scientific discourse. Scientific progress since the modern era brought many to believe that science offers more logical and rational explanations for life experiences than the Bible with its ostensibly naïve theocentrism and metaphysical thought. Secondly, faith communities have lost their previously unique, powerful position to influence or inform society; they are now no longer as relevant as they were previously. They are now competing with several other institutions and sub-societies as opinion makers (Habermas 1992).<sup>2</sup> Thirdly, it is believed by many that other non-religious institutions offer greater social security than that of communities and their faith beliefs. One could note in this regard that this is true of the Bible itself: it is being viewed in a secular context as pre-modern and outdated with contents that are of minor, if any,

---

<sup>2</sup> He (1992) argues that the pluralism of values undermines the authority of traditional metaphysical and religious worldviews. See also: Charles Taylor, 2007, *A secular age*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

relevance to modern societies. These reasons can be further understood in other ways, as will be done now.

### *The reputation of faith communities*

Not only these scientific and social developments but also developments specifically within faith communities are contributing to their decline and loss of relevance. These developments contributed to the diminishing role and influence of faith communities in social settings. The following are some of the more striking ones.

### *Anti-intellectuality*

One reason for secularisation is to be found in the anti-intellectual attitude and the hostility towards science of some faith communities that created a negative image of faith communities. Religious discourse in these communities is often perceived by the secularised person as uninformed about and even hostile towards science. It is a phenomenon that has been present from early modern times, as for example, in the persecution of Galileo (see Zanatta et al. 2017). It is, however, still prevalent in present times, especially within communities with fundamentalist convictions about scriptural inerrancy and their rejection of theories on evolution and their embracing of creationism (Pigliucci 2005).<sup>3</sup>

This anti-intellectuality was operative within faith communities in their distrust of academic discourse and its intellectual activities.<sup>4</sup> This is shown further in their criticism of theological scholarship, as well as in the defence of discrimination and violence,<sup>5</sup> as will be discussed in more detail now.

### *Weaponising religion*

It is ironic, furthermore, that the response of faith communities to secularising trends in society has actually intensified those trends. Faith communities are aware that they are being marginalised by post-war technological, educational, political and social progress. They sought to regain and retain their power by vigorously and even aggressively asserting their beliefs and agenda within the public sphere through political activism.

---

<sup>3</sup> Pigliucci (2005) analyses the relationship between faith and science with some contemporary examples. He observes, "However, even in the USA, creationism is certainly not the only battleground between fundamentalism and science and, in some respects, it is not even the most crucial one. The current administration under President George W. Bush, for example, has systematically overruled or ignored scientific findings in areas ranging from global warming to drug safety, to affirm their ideologically determined set of priorities..." He also refers to examples from Europe "with the often-irrational positions taken by the Green parties, pro-life groups and environmental groups in Germany and England who indiscriminately reject stem-cell research or genetically engineered crops. Or the fact that Italy has become the most restrictive European country on matters of stem-cell research and *in vitro* fertilization, largely owing to the strong influence of the Catholic Church in Italian internal political affairs." It should, however, be added that there are religious traditions that view science positively and even hold it in high esteem. Cf. e.g., Wolfe (2000). And for a South African perspective, see van Dyk, (2013).

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed exposition and an example of anti-intellectual opposition to academic research, see Pieter G.R. de Villiers (2019). In contemporary times, the anti-intellectual attitude of faith communities is evident in the withdrawal of clergy from faculties of theology in universities to train them in their own seminaries, as happened, for example in the Netherlands and Germany. For an overview of this trend in Pentacostalism, see Nel, (2016).

<sup>5</sup> Cf., in the case of Western Europe and North America, the church's support of slavery, racism, violence in two world wars. And in the case of third world countries, the church's role in colonialism and missions.

This is evident, for example, in the United States, but also in Asian and African countries where evangelical churches pursue a fundamentalist, conservative agenda to impose their radical political and social views through social and political control. In culture wars, they weaponise the Bible against their opponents.<sup>6</sup> Religion plays a key role, for example, in conspiracy theories, opposition to climate change, the arms race, vaccination activism and other ethical issues.

The recent invasion of the Capitol in Washington D.C. provides an example of the radical role of Christianity and the Bible in political discourse.<sup>7</sup> This event illustrates the apocalyptic mindset of religious groups who feel that socio-political developments or political actions are destroying the social fabric. They regard themselves as part of the apocalyptic struggle of the end times against the forces of evil, and they claim that they are entitled to resist them. The result is the weaponising of religion and more specifically, instrumentalising of violence as a political weapon. This was also evident, for example, in a seminal moment of the January 6 insurrection, when a group invaded the Senate chamber and one of their leaders, Jacob Chansley, “actually asked the rioters to pause in their rampage and join him for a moment of prayer to God. ‘Thank you for allowing the United States to be reborn,’ Chansley said, standing on the dais occupied a few hours earlier by Vice President Pence. ‘We love you and we thank you. In Christ's holy name, we pray.’... The rioters, many of whom had quietly removed their hats, erupted in a cry of ‘Amen!’” (Gjetlend 2021). Such language reveals both a nationalism and patriotism that is fortified by Christian language.

This example indicates why some faith communities are regarded as being dangerous and a threat to social stability, even to unhinged radicality and violence. Outsiders are alienated by the cultural wars that undergird and inspire this infighting. They experience this situation as unworthy of the transformative role that religion should play in bringing together faith communities and healing society through its compassionate outreach. Such actions have intensified a growing resistance against religion and religious communities because religion is being used for partisan ends through and in the adversarial, even violent behaviour of faith communities (see for instance, Campbell 2020). This, in turn, promotes the sidelining of religion and, therefore, the secularisation of society. This would, inadvertently, affect societies attitude towards the Bible as the foundational text of faith communities.

### *Bible fatigue*

Not only the above negative perception of faith communities but also developments within faith communities contribute to the secularising process. Bible readers, for example, feel far removed from the Biblical thought world with its angels, devils and other mythological beings, as well as societal customs like polygamy and rituals like animal offerings. Unable to experience this world as relevant to their the realities of contemporary times and contexts, communities find the ongoing uncritical and repetitious interpretations of this world uninteresting, if not boring and tedious. As a consequence, the Bible increasingly loses its influence on faith communities.

---

<sup>6</sup> There is, however, also a long trajectory of religious activism on the left. Cf. Spector, (2021).

<sup>7</sup> Edsall (2011) . Edsall notes that the religious dimension of the insurrection often goes unnoticed. He lists a number of important publications that indicate the strong presence of religious beliefs that cloak the political agenda.

They are not helped by Biblical research with its highly technical and sophisticated approach as it has been developed in recent centuries. In this case, communities find it difficult to follow, or experience biblical research as irrelevant to their spiritual journey or as a threat to their faith.<sup>8</sup> This is even the case within the theological discourse where scholars from other theological disciplines than biblical studies are puzzled by or cynical about contemporary biblical research. Unable to engage meaningfully with the discipline, they resort to traditional, pious remarks when they present their “application” of biblical passages to others in language that is not really different from traditional God speak. They thus rehash the kind of language that faith communities offload on biblical texts that are experience once again as of little value for the spiritual journey. Biblical scholarship is relegated to the margins of the theological discourse with minimal impact on communities’ spiritual life.

This negative trend is exacerbated by the secular context in which Biblical Studies as an academic discipline is located and that inhibits Biblical Studies from engaging in “theological” or spiritual analyses (see de Villiers 2018). Implied in this trend is the conviction that such analyses reflect or promote sectarian positions or subjective/dogmatic impositions that supposedly do not fit in academic contexts. Often, institutions of higher learning overtly or covertly promote a secular approach in which even Biblical scholars argue that universities should not engage in “theological” views, which they regard as belonging to the domain of the churches. In this way, traditional, uncritical language is ironically imported into academic discourse.

The irrelevance of the Bible and theological scholarship that is reflected in these developments is ironic, given the significant contribution they have made to social discourse in the past. The innovation brought about by the Enlightenment initially empowered Biblical research to liberate many readers of the Bible from fundamentalism by questioning the literalist interpretation of Scripture that imposed abusive readings on generations of faith communities. Historical-critical approaches broke the fetters of authoritarian dogmatic eisegesis with which earlier exegetes and ecclesiastical authorities directed and shackled the understanding of the Bible. They revealed how such readings were later impositions on biblical texts that obfuscated the original proclamation of the Gospel. Biblical research also played a key role in the struggle against the many forms of social abuse and discrimination of minority groups in the name of the Bible and religion. Such outcomes illustrate the relevance that the Bible can have for society and suggest how valuable a reinvigorating of biblical research potentially can be to the transformation of society. It is striking, therefore, that this very intellectual approach is now causing a Bible fatigue.

---

<sup>8</sup> These developments within religious discourse overlapped with a perception of academic culture as being regressive and speculative, which gave rise to what was called Sayre's law: The American politician, Henry Kissenger, formulated his version of this law when he stated in 1979 that the intensity and bitterness of academic politics stand in inverse proportion to the importance of the subject they are discussing. He added, "And I promise you at Harvard, they are passionately intense and the subjects are extremely unimportant."

## **The turn**

Recent developments reflect a turn in the above-described situation. There are indications that can contribute to the reinvigoration of the Bible and biblical research.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Efficacious presence***

There have been some early developments in theological discourse that reflect how vibrant and relevant readings of the Bible can be. Contextual theologies such as liberation, feminist, womanist, black, and other theologies have criticised traditional readings of the Bible for their esoteric, detached nature that is not efficacious and transformative since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Faith communities should rather seek a praxis that makes a difference in and to their world. A primary aspect of this praxis would be to recognise the privileging of the poor in the Bible and to transform their deprivation and suffering. This praxis begins with a special and programmatic societal analysis that is then related to biblical material. This approach was popular in Bible study groups who applied the see-judge-act method to determine the exigencies of their times so that faith communities could act efficiently against oppression and discrimination. These contextual theologies thus pursued from the very beginning the transformational impact of biblical texts. It was the explicit intention to integrate biblical readings in the community's life experience.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the Bible became acutely relevant.

### ***The proper place of science***

On a more theoretical level, some researchers reflected on the relationship of faith and science, particularly in terms of Enlightenment thinking that would promote the reinvigorating of the Bible but also explain its loss of relevance. For a long time, a rational approach renewed and invigorated theological discourse. Theologians felt challenged to account for the legitimate contribution of science to biblical understanding and to accommodate critical thinking in the theological enterprise. Part of this trend was the explicit approach of promoting a "neutral" position in theologising. The Bible had to be investigated rationally like any other book.

However useful and necessary critical thinking may be for theological discourse, some argued that theology and biblical research should take the Bible more seriously in terms of its own claims about its nature. Hauerwas (2001), for example, challenged attempts to legitimise Christianity vis-à-vis the epistemological claims of science. He argued that secularity cannot be countered by reconceptualising Christian beliefs in the light of science, that is, by pursuing knowledge for knowledge's sake or by privileging the conceptual.<sup>11</sup> For him, the task of the church is entirely different: it is about

---

<sup>9</sup> This refers to many who argue that religion is clearly part of the fabric of modern societies, as is clear from the role of religion, religious themes and religious institutions in contemporary social discourse. Cf. Dreyer and Pieterse (2010).

<sup>10</sup> Rubinstein (1985–1986). He describes how traditional Western theology has been determined by the secularisation of society: its theological aim was to counter the theological and intellectual doubts fostered by the Enlightenment. Liberation theology, on the other hand, wanted to address the injustices, exploitation and misery that resulted from the Enlightenment and its scientific and technological progress. Theology's task for them is not about intellectual debate but rather about practical engagement and involvement with the poor.

<sup>11</sup> Wessman (2016) offers one example of the debate with Hauerwas, who insists that witness is the way out of privatised religion and secularisation. For the intellectualising reputation of modern theological discourse, see de Villiers (2016)

witnessing: “Christianity is unintelligible without witnesses, that is, without people whose practices exhibit their committed assent to a particular way of structuring the whole” (Hauerwas 2001:214). Where this is done, theology will flourish and the Bible will regain its relevance.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore not merely about proclaiming some Gospel truths but rather about embodying in a real and tangible manner the transformation that is inherent in the biblical proclamation. Here, too, there is a strong emphasis on the central role of the praxis of faith.

This response moves beyond the previous preoccupation with intellectuality: the praxis of witnessing speaks about commitment, that is, to accounting for theology’s function and setting in life. Theology in this context is about experiencing its object of research, not merely knowing *about* God and faith. This, though, means that theology has a participatory character: it realises that an exclusively apologetic approach is reductionist in nature. Theology, then, has to do with an imaginative, creative appropriation of faith and of theological traditions. Such creative engagement will avoid rehashing traditional interpretations. It will reinvigorate and renew those traditions. Embodying the biblical witness in a new context will sensitise faith communities to the power of their sacred traditions.

This does not mean that theology as praxis has an anti-intellectual attitude, but it does require a reading of the Bible as a premodern text that needs to be reconsidered and reinterpreted for later times – albeit with the help of science, but always with an awareness of the limitations of Enlightenment thought. What is needed is to read the Bible for the purpose of praxis, understanding that it is a praxis that will not merely repeat biblical insights but appropriate them in an adequate manner for a different, new time and context.

### ***Spiritual values***

Here, too, one has to understand the complexities of religious discourse. Praxis is a reinterpretation, but at the same time it implies a validation of the sacred traditions. There are indications that prominent biblical themes can contribute to the identity and life-enhancing image of the church. Interestingly enough, this approach implies a reintroduction of theological contents: Miroslav Volf, for example, noted that the theological language of joy has the potential to attract and inspire communities. Here, he reveals the spiritual beauty of the biblical image of joy: it is a sad state of affairs, he notes, that joy is not usually the first word that comes to people’s minds when asked about Christianity or the church. In fact, they face an image of a fatigued, even miserable community of faith. Volf’s vision for the theological enterprise is spelled out in his project with the name, *The Theology of Joy and the Good Life project* which seeks “to restore joy to the center of Christian reflection on the nature of the good life and to restore the question of the good life to the core of Christian theology, the world’s colleges and universities, and our most significant global conversations.”<sup>13</sup> Joy is the crown of the good life, integrating all positive emotions as well as including and expressing in its own way the responsibility “to lead our lives well and to construe both the world and the good

---

<sup>12</sup> This insight is confirmed by a recent collection of books on missions as a core focus of theological reflection that requires the church to engage with its cultural context. Cf. Sharon E. Heaney et al. (1987–2008).

<sup>13</sup> See the web page: <https://faith.yale.edu/legacy-projects/theology-of-joy>.

rightly.” Communities of faith will flourish if joy characterises their image. Joy is therefore, as a spiritual motif, reflecting exceptional beauty and transformative power.

These remarks imply that the Bible and faith should be rediscovered for their beauty, which empowers people to flourish. Not only joy but especially that which brings about joy needs more attention.

The approach of positions like those of Volf is about spiritual values of beauty and joy that provide direction and content to this new trend of reinvigorating theology and the Bible. It is, however, not a simplistic, sentimental approach: the vision of joy is not merely about happiness and feeling good or about emotional outbursts and ecstatic experiences. It is a vision that results from the joyful experiencing and becoming conscious of the liberating, transformative power of the Bible that resists evil and struggle against serious challenges to faith. It finds beauty in the deadly confrontation that challenges evil with the power of good. This implies a more profound understanding of beauty: beauty is not about what is nice and pretty. It is about that which transforms, which brings one to move out of desperation, morbidity, unhappiness and the darkness of hopelessness and discover the power of energy that can overcome the hard grip of ugliness. Beauty is then also about fathoming and then challenging the deep emptiness of evil and pursuing that which speaks of fullness.

These are a few examples of a turn that seeks to reinvigorate theology. They reflect on and propose ways of overcoming the negative image of religion in order to spell out the Bible’s spiritual relevance in a new context without a repetitious rehashing of traditional positions. This must be discussed in more detail and as a new part in the reinvigorating process now.

### **Rediscovering the Bible as a spiritual text**

An important new phase in theological discourse can be traced to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when biblical scholars almost simultaneously published theologies of the Bible in which they developed theological insights based on historical-critical scholarship. This reflected the need to spell out the theological implications of previous historical scholarship in a systematic manner.

New developments about the same time also wanted to move beyond historical-critical approaches, specifically with regard to biblical spirituality. This approach noted the claims of the Bible as being a spiritual text and as a text about the life experiences of early Christian communities. These claims have since been continued and validated by faith communities who appropriated the Bible spiritually so that it imbued patterns of Christian life. This shows that the Bible is a spiritual book about a "self-transcending faith in which union with God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit expresses itself in service of the neighbor and participation in the realization of the reign of God in this world" (Schneiders, S.M. 2002).<sup>14</sup> Biblical spirituality is then about the relationship between the divine and humanity that has transformative power in an ongoing spiritual journey

---

<sup>14</sup> She notes that the spiritual life is adequate only to the degree that it is rooted in and informed by the Word of God. Cf. similarly also McGinn, ed. (2006:ix), who underlined the foundational role of Scripture in mystical writings, noting that mysticism is rooted in an “existential reading” of the Bible. This reading is not an intellectualist exercise in the sense of seeking to expound doctrine or motivate morals, but it reflects the desire of mystics "to penetrate to the living source of the biblical message, that is, to the Divine Word who speaks in and through human words and texts."

(Waijman 2006). Seen from this perspective, the relevance of the Bible is ultimately to be found in how it reflects and transforms the life experiences of faith communities. The Bible is not merely about theological insights but especially also about the experiential reality that helps to shape those insights. This integrates the Bible in a life situation as a text that is directly relevant for the spiritual well-being of faith communities. The basic thrust is to discover the beauty of the Bible as a book that has inspired its readers to a new life and a firm commitment to overcome evil.

The interpretation of Scripture as a spiritual text therefore moves beyond a socio-historical interpretation that reflects on it primarily if not exclusively as a document of and for its time. A spiritual reading is, as the name indicates, about the spiritual – about the life enhancing nature and implications of a text that originated in a seminal moment of religious discourse but that is also seen as relevant for the life of later readers. It studies the spiritual dynamics under the surface of the biblical text that continue to exert their power in the ongoing journey of communities. It has to do with the flourishing of life in all its beauty that characterises this reality (Waijman 2002:689–773).<sup>15</sup> Peterson (2006:5–6), for example, contrasted a spiritual reading with a mere critical analysis that stores the Bible in academic mothballs as a text that is to be “‘handled’ – dissected and analyzed and then used for whatever we want them for.” A spiritual approach moves beyond such a noncommittal analysis, revealing how the Bible is presently alive, self-implicatory, participatory and transformational (de Villiers 2008:99–121).<sup>16</sup>

A spiritual reading is an important, even unique source of knowledge. It enralls because it posits beauty by providing insights in matters such as relationships, transformation, love, joy and communion – all spiritual facets of human existence that elude scientific knowledge and that are operative in religious texts. As such, it is different from scientific knowledge, which views reality in terms of rational, analytical and logical processes of cognition. Spirituality is open to the intuitive mode of consciousness and analyses the presence of beauty in the affective, the unseen, and the feeling depths of reality (von Balthasar 1968:115–116).<sup>17</sup> It thus offers the knowledge that scientific knowledge marginalises, ignores or does not investigate.

This insight helps pave the way for the reinvigoration of theology and indicates where one has to look to rediscover the relevance of the Bible and consequently its beauty. It explains that theology has become disenchanted because it has been bereft of the beauty that inspires and invigorates. This insight is also confirmed in a different way by research that indicates why people are attracted to religion. Claussen (2005), for example, pointed out that religion presents itself to people in aesthetic guise: religion appeals to people

---

<sup>15</sup> *Lectio divina* as contemplative reading remains one of the earliest examples of a spiritual reading. It comprises a critical, also distanced meditation on the text but is also about a prayerful desire to be found in a relationship with the divine and about experiencing the divine in contemplative reading. For an extensive discussion of *lectio divina*, cf. Waijman (2002:689–773), especially his discussion of “critical analysis” as part of *lectio divina* (746–755).

<sup>16</sup> This does not imply that a careful, critical reading is not needed. A spiritual reading assumes and uses all the critical tools that biblical studies offers for the interpretation of the Bible.

<sup>17</sup> Von Balthasar (1968:115–116) writes that theology that limits itself to scientific knowledge will forego beauty and joy. “*It is* a world without women, without children, without reverence for love in poverty and humiliation – a world in which power and the profit-margin are the sole criteria, where the disinterested, the useless, the purposeless is despised, persecuted and in the end exterminated – a world in which art itself is forced to wear the mask and features of technique.”

because of its compelling aesthetical qualities. Without aesthetics, religion becomes dull, repetitive and unattractive. It is the beauty of Christianity that attracts. People embrace Christianity not so much because of the biblical message or of doctrine but are attracted to it also and especially because of its style, as, for example, the singing, preaching, dress and church buildings (Claussen 2005).<sup>18</sup> People feel attracted to Christianity because of its beauty: it is well-known, Claussen (2005) states, that people who would not affirm many Christian tenets would be attracted to Biblical narratives, Christian hymns, music and architecture.

These observations make sense when one considers the nature of the Bible. The Bible is, firstly, a “beautiful” text in the *formal* sense of the word. It was skillfully composed through various literary techniques and devices. It overflows with poetry, song, prayers, liturgy, stories, symbols, metaphors, rhetorical features, stylistic devices and many other aesthetical characteristics. Countless uses of biblical texts and their contents in the praxis of faith witness to the way in which the Bible inspires. In general, beauty is about form that represents harmony, elegance, grace, integration, ultimacy and unity amidst all the varying and contrasting relationships in human existence – something that is characteristic of biblical texts as well. Schüssler-Fiorenza (1986:14), for example, reads Revelation in terms of the struggle for justice, for example, but also draws attention to its dense, allusive and “poetic-evocative” language that is permeated with many figures of style, including rhyme, rhythm, assonance, and alliteration, but especially chiasm, inclusio, parallelisms and ring compositions. It is language that engages a living experience of faith that addresses all the senses (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1986:14). The beautiful notion of justice that speaks of the conquest of evil assumes a confrontation with the ugliness of injustice and unrighteousness.

The Bible is also, secondly, beautiful in terms of its *contents*, with special spiritual themes and values such as love, mercy, perfection, holiness, hope, and community, which inspire and invite to be shared or experienced. It contains stories that narrate the praxis characterised by these values. Motifs like sacred locations, for example, have a profound aesthetical nature in Revelation that creates feelings of awe and trust in the divine. The highly aesthetic nature of the temple, for example, has been discussed by Francis A. Schaeffer (1976:14), who notes that the temple was covered with precious stones for beauty and for no pragmatic reason. The stones had no utilitarian purpose. “God simply wanted beauty in the temple. God is interested in beauty... And beauty has

---

<sup>18</sup> Claussen (2005) notes, “Die verbreitete Geringschätzung des Christentums entzündet sich nicht so sehr an der Botschaft selbst als an den neueren kulturellen Hervorbringungen der Kirchen. Die Phänomene sind altbekannt: die Schlagerlieder, das Kanzelgerede, die Mehrzweckhallenarchitektur, die Kleidungsgewohnheiten kleinstädtischer Kirchentagsbesucher usw.” Note also the following blog entry of Brian Zahnd (2010) in which he presents the same argument in a simpler manner: “The Western Church as heirs of the Enlightenment remains tempted to respond to a renewed spiritual interest with logical arguments for the truth of Christianity (apologetics) and perhaps also by making the case for the moral goodness Christianity can produce (ethics). This is all fine. But what about beauty? Is it possible that what Prince Vladimir found most persuasive about Christianity in the tenth century and what Prince Myshkin advocated in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* is the very thing that could draw a new generation of spiritual seekers to faith in Jesus Christ? Is it possible that the Christian message can be communicated in terms of beauty? Along with apologetics and ethics is there also an aesthetics that belongs to the gospel of Jesus Christ? Yes! Beauty is integral to the gospel.” One should, however, not read beauty and aesthetics as relating only to what is pretty. Aesthetics also incorporates the ugly and despicable. This is best illustrated, for example, by “Revelation” as a highly aesthetic text that incorporates extremely evil and dangerous characters.

a place in the worship of God" (Schaeffer 1976:14). Similarly, Revelation's exuberant, beautiful and joyful imagery of the bride, of a wedding feast and of paradise, also mediates beauty and joy about the union with the divine.

Also significant, thirdly, is the *function* of biblical aesthetics. The Bible as an aesthetic text appeals to readers in such a way that they are drawn into, participate in and are inspired by its experiential reality.<sup>19</sup> This happens because readers are, in Wilder's (1976:1) words, "more deeply motivated by images and fabulations than by ideas." This involvement in the text happens subtly. Brueggemann emphasises that the ostensibly disconnected beauty of prophetic language has an even more powerful socio-political impact than would have been the case should they have addressed specific issues. In an interview with Tippett (2016), Brueggemann said the following:

That's what's extraordinary about the poetry, that it's so elusive that it refuses to be reduced to a formula... It is astonishing that the Old Testament prophets hardly ever discuss an issue. They don't discuss matters like "abortion, Panama Canal or anything like that. And I think what they're doing is they're going underneath the issues that preoccupy people to the more foundational assumptions that can only be got at in elusive language. Every time you find another way of saying it, the reality of God is opened very differently and that's what they did. (Tippett 2016).

## Conclusion

An aesthetical reading of the Bible focusses the attention on its beauty. It is part of a spiritual interpretation of a biblical text that notes how its aesthetical qualities have repeatedly and continuously empowered its readers to flourish and to contemplate its beauty. "What is typical of the aesthetic experience is the desire to go from a joyful acquaintance with a beautiful object to a contemplative attitude characterized by the desire to dwell on it again and again" (von Hildebrand 2004) Dwelling on it again and again speaks of beauty as a love affair with what cannot be fathomed or conceptualised. Beauty that is present in the biblical text lovingly draws readers deeper and deeper into love in order to discover more and more about the nature and qualities of the other, who seems to have an inexhaustible source of insights and understanding.

The Bible as a text about beauty is therefore ultimately about contemplation, an awareness of being in the presence of the ineffable and transcendent. It evokes a contemplative relationship in which one repeatedly engages with the One who is present in the midst of the deepest life experiences. The text is not merely about the conceptual readings of historical-critical approaches. It is also and especially about an experience that draws the reader into the text to participate in the experiential reality that inhabits

---

<sup>19</sup> This aesthetic nature assumes and requires a major role for imagination and creativity in the understanding of the Bible and all aspects of religious life – which would help explain its reinvigorating effect. Wilder (1976) notes, "imagination here should not be taken in an insipid sense. Imagination is a necessary component of all profound knowing and celebration; all remembering, realizing, and anticipating; all faith, hope, and love. When imagination fails doctrine becomes ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow, and ethics legalistic. The important role of imagination was already mooted by reader's response as an approach to biblical hermeneutics. Iser (1978), one of its main proponents, published his groundbreaking work on this approach. For a more recent discussion, see also Vondey (2010) and Nolte (2012).

its spirituality. Precisely how this will be done will depend on the particular text and the particularities of its aesthetical qualities.

An aesthetical approach therefore explains why the Bible has transformative power, but it also signals to contemporary readers of the Bible what is really at stake in religious discourse. The role of the Bible in a secular and post-secular context will be determined by how its beauty is portrayed and how this beauty resonates with the lives of faith communities.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barnes, H., Bretherton, L., Buxton, G., Chester, T., Collinson, S.W., Collwell, J.E., Gibb, R., Heaney, S.E., Holmes, S.R., Lawson, J., Muskus, E.J., Penner, M.B., Perriman, A., Rauser, R., Stanley, A.P., Strange, D. and Walker, A. 1987–2008. *Missional theology collection (15 vols.)*. Exeter: Paternoster.
- Campbell, D. 2020. The perils of politicized religion, *Daedalus* 149(3):87–104.
- Claussen, J.H. 2005. *Religion und Ästhetik: Dreieinhalb Sondierungen in einem weiten Feld*, JPT (9):95–116. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/IJPT.2005.006>.
- De Villiers, P.G.R. 2008. Spirituality and the spiritual mind, *Acta Theologica* 8:99–121.
- De Villiers. 2016. Re-enchanted by beauty. On aesthetics and mysticism, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4), a3462. Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3462>.
- De Villiers, P.G.R. 2018. Apocalypses and mystical texts: Investigating prolegomena and the state of affairs. in Collins, J.J., De Villiers, P.G.R. and Collins, A.Y. (eds), *Apocalypticism in ancient Judaism and early Christianity*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 43–47.
- De Villiers, P.G.R. 2019. The role of theology in the interpretation of the Bible: Towards a synergy between theological and historical approaches to biblical studies, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(1). Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5205>
- Dunn, J.D.G. 2006. *The theology of Paul the apostle*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans.
- Dreyer, J.S. and Pieterse, H.J.C. 2010. Religion in the public sphere: What can public theology learn from Habermas’s latest work?, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66(1), Art. # 798, 7 pages. DOI:10.4102/hts.v66i1.798
- Edsall, T.B. 2021. The Capitol insurrection was as Christian Nationalist as it gets, *The New York Times*, 28 January. Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/28/opinion/christian-nationalists-capitol-attack.html>.
- Frey, J. 2007. Zum Problem der Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments. in Breitenbach, C. and Frey, J. (eds), *Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, WUNT 205. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 3–53.
- Gnilka, J. 1994. *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. Freiburg: Herder.
- Gjetland, T. 2021. Militant Christian nationalists remain a potent force even after the Capitol riot. Available from: <https://www.gpb.org/news/2021/01/19/militant-christian-nationalists-remain-potent-force-even-after-the-capitol-riot> [19

January 2021].

- Guthrie, D. 1981. *New Testament theology: History, method and identity*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity.
- Habermas, J. and Taylor, C. 2011. Dialogue. in Medieta, E. and Van Antwerpen, J. (eds), *The power of religion in the public sphere*. New York: Columbia University Press, 60–69.
- Habermas, J. 1992. *Postmetaphysical thinking: Philosophical essays*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Hahn, F. 2005. *Theologie des Neuen Testaments. 1 and 2*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Hauerwas, S. 2001. *With the grain of the universe: the church's witness and natural theology*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Brazos Press.
- Hubner, H. 1990–1993. *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments. 1–2*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- Iser, W. 1978. *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- McGinn, B. (ed.). 2006. *The essential writings of Christian mysticism*. New York: Modern Library.
- Nel, M. 2016. Rather spirit-filled than learned! Pentecostalism's tradition of anti-intellectualism and Pentecostal theological scholarship, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37:19.
- Nolte, S.P. 2012. One text, many stories: The (ir)relevance of reader-response criticism for apocryphal literature in the Septuagint, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68(1):43–53.
- Peterson, E.H. 2006. *Eat this book: The art of spiritual reading*. London, Sydney, Auckland: Hooper & Stoughton.
- Pigliucci, M. 2005. Science and fundamentalism, *EMBO Reports* 6(12): 1106–1109. Available from: doi:10.1038/sj.embor.7400589.
- Rubenstein, R.L. 1985–1986. The political significance of Latin American Liberation theology, *World Affairs* 148(3):160–161.
- Schaeffer, F.A. 1976. *Art and the Bible*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Schneiders, S.M. 2002. Biblical spirituality, *Interpretation* 56:133–142.
- Schüssler-Fiorenza, E. 1986. *The Book of Revelation: Justice and judgment*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Spector, J. B. 2021. Religion and politics: Strange bedfellows, *The Daily Maverick*, 30 January. Available from: [https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-01-30-religion-and-politics-strangebedfellows/?tl\\_inbound=1&tl\\_groups\[0\]=80895&tl\\_period\\_type=3&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=168%20Newspaper%20Edition%20-%20Workshop17&utm\\_content=168%20Newspaper%20Edition%20-%20Workshop17+CID\\_2e4e57c0608c5f0ec9413021c1e1b848&utm\\_source=TouchBasePro&utm\\_term=Religion%20and%20politics%20strange%20bedfellows](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-01-30-religion-and-politics-strangebedfellows/?tl_inbound=1&tl_groups[0]=80895&tl_period_type=3&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=168%20Newspaper%20Edition%20-%20Workshop17&utm_content=168%20Newspaper%20Edition%20-%20Workshop17+CID_2e4e57c0608c5f0ec9413021c1e1b848&utm_source=TouchBasePro&utm_term=Religion%20and%20politics%20strange%20bedfellows).
- Taylor, C. 2007. *A secular age*. Cambridge, MA.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Tippett, K. 2016. *Becoming wise: An inquiry into the mystery and the art of living*. London: Corsair.
- Van Dyk, P.J. 2013. Opinions about science and faith amongst southern African clergy and theologians from the Reformed church tradition, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34(1),

121–129. Available from:

[http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S2074-77052013000100015&lng=en&tlng=en](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2074-77052013000100015&lng=en&tlng=en).

- Vodey, M. 2010. A biblical-theological aesthetic of imagination and creativity and its application for leaders, *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 3(1):3–12.
- Von Balthasar, H. 1968. *Love alone: The way of revelation*. London: Shhed & Ward.
- Von Hildebrand, A. 2004. *Debating beauty: Jacques Maritain and Dietrich von Hildebrand*. Available from:  
<https://www.crisismagazine.com/2004/debatingbeauty-jacques-maritain-and-dietrich-von-hildebrand-2>. [1 June 2017].
- Waaijman. 2002. *Spirituality: Forms, foundation and method*. Leuven; Paris; Dudley, MA.: Peeters.
- Waaijman, K. 2006. What is spirituality?, *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 8:1–18.
- Wessman, R.A. 2016. The church's witness in a secular age: A Hauerwasian response to privatized and individualized religion, *Missiology* 45(1):56–66.
- Wilder, A.M. 1976. *Theology and the religious imagination*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Wolfe, A. 2000. The opening of the evangelical mind, *The Atlantic Monthly*, October.
- Zahnd, B. 2010. Beauty will save the world. Available from:  
<https://brianzahnd.com/2010/12/beauty-will-save-the-world/>. [25 March 2021].
- Zanatta, A., Zampieri, F., Basso, C. and Thiene, Gaetano. 2017. Galileo Galilei: Science vs faith, *Global Cardiology Science & Practice* 2(1/11).