

## FOUR SOUTH AFRICANS' PROPOSALS FOR A CENTRAL THEME TO 'SCRIPTURAL SPIRITUALITY'<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*In this contribution, the proposals made by four South Africans as a viable central theme for "Scriptural spirituality" – that is, a spirituality that seeks explicitly to centre on the Bible – is taken under review. These proposals have been made in:*

- *Du Toit, AB 1993. Lewensgemeenskap met God as essensie van Bybelse spiritualiteit. Skrif en Kerk, Vol. 14/1: 28-46.*
- *Louw, DJ 1989. Spiritualiteit as Bybelse vroomheid in die teologie en die gemeentelike bediening. Praktiese Teologie in Suid-Afrika, Vol. 4/2: 1-17.*
- *Nolan, A 1982. Biblical Spirituality. Springs: The Order of Preachers (Southern Africa).*
- *Snyman, SD 1997. Spiritualiteit – 'n perspektief uit die Ou Testament. In die Skriflig, Vol. 31/4: 375-387.*

*Each of these proposals is briefly described. The problems related to identifying such a central theme are briefly indicated by means of a well-advanced debate within the sub-discipline of Old Testament Theology, on the validity of identifying a "Mitte". In closing, a few remarks are made on the context within which these suggestions on spirituality have been made. This raises questions on the "universalising"/"extrapolation" possibilities inherent in all work on Spirituality: Are all remarks on Spirituality – be they expressions of piety or scholarly contributions (though, naturally, these dimensions are not unrelated) – not always inescapably individualistic, yet thoroughly embedded contextually, and precisely because of these two features, pregnant with "universalising"/"extrapolation" possibilities, if done sensitively and dialogically?*

**Key Concepts:** Spirituality, AB du Toit, DJ Louw, A Nolan, SD Snyman

### 1. The Bible and Spirituality

In this paper, the proposals made by four South Africans as a viable central theme for what may be called "Scriptural spirituality" – that is, a spirituality that seeks explicitly to centre on the Bible – is taken under review. These proposals have been made in three articles and a concise book (a collection of a lecture series, really), each seeking to indicate a theme or a concept with which to summarise the spirituality we find either in the Bible as a whole or in one of the two Testaments.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was read as a paper at the conference "Spirituality today: Reflecting and Researching a New Phenomenon", held at the Theology Faculty Building, Stellenbosch University, 23-24 January 2004.

The characteristic concern of Christian spirituality, that it takes its most important source to be the Bible, remains remarkable, and is a concern I share (cf. also Jonker 1989:290). Faith, the church, and the mission of the church (widely defined) would be the poorer – theologically and practically – if the Bible were afforded a less central place (cf. Lombaard 1999:34-35). To this statement, I propose four provisos be appended, though:

- That the Bible not be misused in the service of whatever ideological, political or socio-cultural programme. It is easy to criticise the way the Bible had been used to promote, for instance, Nazism (cf. e.g. Heschel 1994:587-605) or apartheid (e.g. Cronjé, Nicol and Groenewald 1947), but it is much more difficult to criticise the way the Bible is used to promote ideals we now regard as positive, even sacred, such as democracy or reconciliation (e.g. Gunton 2003; De Gruchy 2002; cf. Farisani 2002). My point here is not for moral neutrality, in different guises, or against faithful/theological engagement with societal agendas, but that any form of piety with which we approach the Bible remain critically analysed. The following three points expand on this.
- That the Bible be used with integrity. “We do not find a consistent system of theological propositions in the Bible” (Nürnberger 2002:v); the concept “theological propositions” may as well be transposed with concepts such as “ethical positions” and “political values”. In addition, apart from the evolution – that is, the development of themes – we find in the Bible (cf. Nürnberger 2002), the reality of parallel, even contradictory biblical texts and traditions (which can be called on to support parallel, even contradictory modern concerns – cf. Le Roux 1987:31-44; Le Roux 1992; Lombaard 2001:61), that should not be ignored. That would be schizophrenic<sup>2</sup> faith. Harmonising the parallels and contradictions in Scripture is always fruitless: It takes leave of the text; it leaves us with a bland artefact; it attends some sort of power play. In short: the Bible is a complex text. With a compositional history of over ten centuries, and thus with a *Wirkungsgeschichte*/interpretational history of over 30 centuries, it could be no other way. The ways in which the Bible is used to nurture faith – that is, “Scriptural spirituality” – should take this into account, and do so in detail. More is required than that we simply “be shaped by the great biblical motifs” (Schneiders 1998:43; cf. Lombaard 2003:440). The complexity of the Bible must come home in personal devotions, church services, and societal involvement. Theoretical and exegetical integrity – a studied awareness of the issues and an informed navigation through the possibilities – is required if the Bible is to be truly afforded the centrality we confess to.
- That engagement with the Bible is dialogically critical. The paragraph above was concerned with what we bring to the text. However, the process is dialogical: the concept of the hermeneutical circle incorporates that the reader remains open to be “talked to”, to be addressed/(in)formed/changed by the text (cf. Thiselton 1992:31-54). Such “conversing” would exclude none of the possibilities: Theoretical, exegetical, existential, functional... That the Bible and the reader converse in many ways is a confession and experience Christian Spirituality cannot do without. The text “reads” the reader critically too. Conversing and conversion (broadly defined) remain always related possibilities.

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<sup>2</sup> I use “schizophrenic” in its correct technical sense of losing contact with reality (in this case the reality of what the Bible is: A book which is also historically situated), and not in its popular sense of a “split personality”.

- That different spiritualities are allowed for.<sup>3</sup> The two paragraphs prior to this one, taken together, implicitly make the case for a pluralism of expressions of Christian spirituality in any given context. What the reader(s) bring(s) to the biblical text(s) and what the biblical text(s) bring(s) to the reader(s) are so varied that one can hardly expect all to express their faith similarly.<sup>4</sup> Yet, in different contexts and times, one or more expressions of the Christian faith<sup>5</sup> come to be more powerful than others. In addition, the most strongly competing spiritualities in any given context may together also constitute a force of sorts that dominates other spiritualities. I am cynical that this will ever change in practice to some idyllic scenario; nor do I think that any and all spiritualities are to be evaluated as equally valid expressions of the Christian faith. I do however judge the existence of a diversity of Christian spiritualities to be a healthy state of affairs. A monochrome spirituality from as colourful a book as the Bible can only result from highly controlled circumstances, which would be repressive. Multiple spiritualities and not only tolerance, but active appreciation of the diversity resulting from the Christian Sourcebook are indicative of a mature, informed situation (cf. Smit 1989:83-84).

With the above as a broad framework of orientation, let us now turn to the foursome proposals for centres to Scriptural spirituality.

## 2. The Assembled Group

The group of scholars I have chosen<sup>6</sup> – because their particular writings under discussion below drew my recurrent interest in the way the Bible is used (this time related to the discipline of Spirituality) – are in some senses diverse, in some senses alike. Three are Dutch Reformed academics: Du Toit is a retired Pretoria University New Testament scholar, Louw is a Stellenbosch Philosopher and Practical Theologian (until recently Dean of the Faculty of Theology), and Snyman a professor of Old Testament at the Free State University. Nolan is a Catholic (Dominican: Order of Preachers) theologian, an academic and a journalist – I think it would be safe to gather all of his professional activities under the heading of “liberation theologian” – who is at present based in Johannesburg. All are committed churchmen, yet all but Louw at times in their careers have had to face accusations of political and/or theological “liberalism” (placed in inverted commas here, because such a term can mean almost anything in the mouth of an accuser). All have an interest in the academic discipline of Spirituality; Nolan is however the most prolific on this terrain, not only in his publications, but also, for instance, in leading retreats. All have in their writings shown strong concern for linking academic theology with, on the one hand, personal piety (e.g. Du Toit 1984; Louw 1995; Nolan 1985; Snyman 1988), and on the other hand, broader societal issues (e.g. Breytenbach and Du Toit 1987; Louw 1987; Nolan 1989; Snyman 1992).

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph has direct implications for ecumenism. Spirituality and ecumenism offer us a most interesting intersection. See also the remarks by Smit 1989:83-84.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it is on this point that religious conservatism and religious liberalism differ most.

<sup>5</sup> Van der Merwe (1989:468) in his opening paragraph echoes many of the different pieties mentioned in Jonker 1989:289-299. The parallels seem too close to be coincidental; however, no references that would clear up this curiosity are indicated.

<sup>6</sup> I have not included Van der Merwe's article “Biblical Spirituality” (1989:468-476) in my discussions here: Despite the title holding promise for my chosen theme, the nature of his article is such that it provides something of a select overview of what may be termed biblical theology.

What binds these four figures most closely together for the purposes of this paper, though, is that all four have written on the topic of the Bible and spirituality. In these writings, each has suggested a central theme for what may be called "Scriptural spirituality" – that is, a spirituality which seeks explicitly to centre on the Bible. Each of these proposals are briefly described and evaluated below.

## 2.1 Du Toit: Living in the Presence of God

Du Toit (1993:29) takes as the essence of spirituality that one lives in communion with God ("lewensgemeenskap met God"). The *Praesentia Dei* forms for him a centralising concept. In the Old Testament, with specific reference to the Psalms, this comes to the fore even when God is experienced as hidden, or when people live as though God does not exist (Du Toit 1993:29). The face of God is a significant symbol of this presence or of a meeting with God, in life generally but most particularly in the cult (Du Toit 1993:29-30). Psalms 42 and 84 therefore present us with "biblical spirituality at its purest" (Du Toit 1993:30, translated). Motifs to do with God living among the people of Israel, also in the tabernacle or *Schekinah*, are additional expressions of the *Praesentia Dei*, though the act of praying is not limited to such special places (Du Toit 1993:30). The latter is even more the case in the New Testament. The motif of living is now intensified: Congregation and body becomes God's temple; Jesus lives among people; God lives with the faithful in the New Jerusalem (Du Toit 1993:31, 40).

The living communion with God is relational. The metaphor of the covenant is significant in Jesus' communion words (a *new* covenant), in Pauline language, and in the book of Hebrews. Here, as in the Old Testament covenants, God's initiative is most prominent in creating the life of communion. Marriage provides the second, related, metaphor with which to express both God's initiative (Ezekiel 16; Ephesians 5 and Revelation 17, 21, 22 most particularly) and his consistent love (Hosea) for those He loves (Du Toit 1993:31-32). A third metaphor is that of the *familia Dei*: in love, God takes the initiative, and cares intimately for the child (e.g. Jeremiah 3:19 and 31:9, but especially Jesus' prayer – Du Toit 1993:33). The individual's experience of faith is in the Bible thus always placed within the corporate character of spirituality, though the New Testament allows for a somewhat greater emphasis on the individual (Du Toit 1993:32, 33).

Other metaphors expressing the *Praesentia Dei* are "knowing God/Christ", particularly among the prophets and Paul; with specific reference to the Old Testament: "Walking with God", and "friendship" (Du Toit 1993:34-36); with specific reference to the New Testament: The Pauline and Johannine literature both refer to an indicative and an imperative, that is, the relationship with God that is, in Christ, at once a given and a command – something that exists, and yet should be worked on ("heiligmaking", which may be translated as "becoming more holy" or "sanctification"). This again involves knowing God, indicating not a mystic union, but a personal relationship (Du Toit 1993:37).

Biblical spirituality, Du Toit (1993:37-39) points out, expresses itself in certain moments of meeting, in which one experiences the closeness of God in a concentrated manner. Such moments include, in ecstatic form, prophetic and apocalyptic encounters, but consist more usually of receiving the word of God within cultic or personal prayer contexts. The Psalms express such meetings-in-prayer particularly grippingly, while in New Testament times the connection with the Holy Spirit becomes crucial, still with the emphasis on prayer. In addition, acknowledging one's transgressions and, hence, humility, are most typical of biblical spirituality. Of further importance are intercession on behalf of

others, the courage of faith (“geloofsmoed”) to dare confrontations with God, and – a theme running through much of Du Toit’s writing since Du Toit 1965 – joy (Du Toit 1993:37-39).

Du Toit (1993:39-40, 45)<sup>8</sup> emphasises that spirituality can never be only inward-looking; strong ethical implications characterise the life style and practice of the faithful. Communion with God implies responsibility to God; life *coram Dei* implies obeying God, with John 15 an important text in this regard. Cultic experiences build ethics into the personal piety of the believer’s daily life.

The brokenness of our experience of God now will – referring to the Isaiah apocalypse (Isaiah 25:6-12) and Jesus’ foundation of the Holy Communion meal – become whole in the *eschaton*. This will be the ultimate experience of the *Praesentia Dei* (Du Toit 1993:40). “True biblical spirituality therefore always has an eschatological crown” (Du Toit 1993:41, translated).

These thoughts are highly typical of the spirituality of Du Toit as I have come to know him: Though he experiences the closeness of God very personally and intensely, it comes over in a highly intellectualised and finely formulated way. Emotions are never to the fore, though one cannot but sense the refined sentiments, even passion, that lies behind the academic style. This is a passion that involves strongly the individual, the church and broader society, and is critical, yet remains loyal. Certainly in Du Toit’s case, his identification of the *Praesentia Dei* as the core of biblical spirituality parallels his own faith experience precisely.

## 2.2 Louw: Godliness in Faith and Life

For Louw (1989:3) spirituality and revelation through Scripture cannot be separated. The Bible is the source of the contents of the faith of the believers, feeding the ways their faith finds practical expression. This biblical piety (“Bybelse vroomheid”) may be hampered by the academic practice of theology, if faith were to be simply cognitised, intellectualised, objectivised (Louw 1989:5, 13).<sup>7</sup> Such a danger is inherent to reformed spirituality.<sup>8</sup>

This risk, can however, be overcome from Scripture itself (Louw 1989:5), because the Holy Spirit works through Scripture, giving rise to existential commitments (Louw 1989:5, 13) – which by their very nature are more than intellectual commitments only – and practical, corporate consequences (Louw 1989:8, 12). This fundamental existential commitment is for Louw (1989:7) encapsulated in the Pauline concept of εὐσεβεία (often given in Bible translations as “godliness”), with specific reference to the 1 Timothy letter. Louw (1989:7) traces εὐσεβεία back to Old Testament wisdom’s *principium interpretatio*, namely the יִרְאַת יְהוָה (cf. Lombaard 2002:756), which he summarises as “geloof in aksie” (“faith in action”; Louw 1989:7 and 10) or “belewe/ervaar ... Geregtigheid en wysheid” (“experience ... Justice and wisdom”; Louw 1989:13). Louw however does not argue precisely how he came to decide on the term εὐσεβεία – he seems to have taken it over from Jonker 1989:288, who mentions εὐσεβεία only briefly – nor the precise relationship of εὐσεβεία with the concept of the יִרְאַת יְהוָה. Nevertheless, the μυστήριον of the (biblical) revelation creates the quality of the practical and the experiential aspects of faith as εὐσεβεία (Louw 1989:8). This is equally important for ordained and lay believers (Louw 1989:13-15).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Steenkamp 1995:68-69 concerning a similar sentiment with Nolan.

<sup>8</sup> Jonker (1989:293) indicates the flipside, namely the danger of the (emotional) experiential side coming to dominate reformed spirituality.

Strong parallels to the thoughts expressed here by Louw can be found in an article of two years earlier by the Bloemfontein theologian Strauss (1987:20-38). Louw gives no evidence of having read Strauss' article, though, which would support a deduction that we find here separate but similar expressions of thoughts on spirituality in the Dutch Reformed Church in the late 1980s.

Louw's article however includes frequent references to dogmatological and practical-theological themes. Interestingly, Louw employs the Bible not as an exegete would, trying to determine in greater detail what, for instance, the concept εὐσεβεία would mean. Louw's interest is in the here and now: What leading a godly life means for believers today. εὐσεβεία is for Louw a key word from which a series of thoughts spring – the mode of the philosopher – and which must find expression in the lives, the mode of the practical theologian of those who have faith in Christ (Louw 1989:7).

### 2.3 Nolan: Old Testament Justice + New Testament Love = Kingdom Spirituality

Nolan has the rare gift (which I have experienced personally at a short retreat he led) of combining historical-critical exegesis (e.g. Nolan 1977:10-19/1986:10-19; cf. Draper 2001:149 and Steenkamp 1995:69, 94-100) with contemporary application, with the application then including both personal piety and wider societal dimensions. It is for the latter (cf. Nolan 1988 and Nolan and Broderick 1987:1-80) that he has become most famous. For Nolan himself, though, Bible, spirituality and social awareness do not lie apart: "A Biblical spirituality, would have to include a very serious attempt to read the signs of our times" (Nolan 1982:22). Nolan (1987:30, 32-33, 38; cf. Draper 2001:149 and Steenkamp 1995:71-77) recognizes with appreciation the hermeneutical circle of context and text when we read the texts of the Bible.

Interestingly, though Nolan's *Biblical Spirituality* includes substantial reflection on "The Spirit of the Prophets" (Nolan 1982:13-27), the New Testament is afforded decisive priority over the Old.<sup>9</sup> The reason for this is not quite clear.

Nolan (1982:29, 36) places *justice* (צדק and צדקה) central to the Old Testament, and *love* (ἀγάπη) central to the New Testament. He stresses, however, that in the New Testament love and justice are intimately related (Nolan 1982:36).<sup>10</sup> This love, Nolan (1982:36-39; see also Nolan 1977:141/1986:141) argues, goes beyond or deepens justice, interiorising it as compassion. Precisely that is "Kingdom spirituality" (Nolan 1982:43-58; the Kingdom of God is explored more extensively in Nolan 1977:44-49/1986:44-49) – the

<sup>9</sup> In the opening paragraph of the closing chapter of *Biblical Spirituality*, titled "Gospel Values", Nolan (1982:61) writes: "The great leap forward from the Old Testament to the New Testament can be described as a leap from the external observance of laws to the internalisation of values, from the letter of the law to the freedom of the Spirit. At some stage in our spiritual lives we will have to make a similar leap forward to freedom." Here "the idea that the New Testament is more advanced than the Old, is quite pronounced" (Lombaard 2003:441). Stated more generally, I would rather argue that "(t)he 'law' against which Paul reacts and which often informs the recurring aversion among some Christians to the Hebrew Bible, is not the Old Testament as a book, but the practice of some of his contemporaries" (Lombaard 2003:443). When the apostle Paul's rhetoric against religious legalism is employed too generally in our times, it leads to an undervaluation of the Old Testament in the contemporary practice and study of spirituality (cf. Lombaard 2003:433-450). Nolan at one stage (1982:62) comes very close to accepting that not the Old Testament itself, but the way it was interpreted and lived in the society to which Jesus responded, was all about laws and superficiality. But his concern there is with secular values ancient and modern, rather than religious practice, so he never quite follows the argument through. (I admit freely, though, that my Calvinistic concern for the equal inspiration and authority of all parts of Scripture lies at the bottom of my argument. This un-Catholic issue is mine, and not Nolan's.)

<sup>10</sup> Is that not equally the case in the Old Testament?

“*destiny* of the human race” (Nolan 1982:46), “based upon a concern for the salvation of the whole world” (Nolan 1982:48).

Thus, the Old Testament is about *משפּה* and *שׂרָקָה* “righteousness, uprightness, integrity, honesty or judgement” (Nolan 1982:29). “The God of the Old Testament... puts wrongs right and he wants his people to put wrongs right in every area of life” (Nolan 1982:32). The text of 1 John provides for Nolan a bridge between the two Testaments, but he does not employ it overtly as such: He states that the analysis of love in 1 John 4:7-8 is specifically paralleled with the analysis of justice in 1 John 2:29, conclusively tying these two concepts together, and with the 1 John 2:29 text repeating ideas found in Jeremiah 22:16. The two Testaments are thus tied together in different ways: not only by the linked concepts of justice and love, but also by liberation as a theme running through and, by implication, unifying the Hebrew and Greek sections of the Bible (so most explicitly, Nolan 1982:53-54; 1987:36-38; most extensively Nolan 1988:106-133; cf. Nolan 1987:30).

The only reason one can construe from *Biblical Spirituality* for the sense that the New Testament is given priority over the Old, is Nolan’s statement (1982:22) that God’s “revelation of new things *ended* with Jesus and the last book of the Bible”. Elsewhere, though, he writes more clearly on this matter: That we must understand the Old Testament and the God of the Old Testament patriarchs the way Jesus understood them (Nolan 1977:137/1986:10-19). It seems that, for Nolan, Jesus, as laid bare historically-critically, is the key. Whatever queries one might have on this way of relating the two Testaments,<sup>11</sup> for Nolan *justice* is the foundation to the Old Testament, and *love* to the New. “Biblical spirituality is Kingdom spirituality” (Nolan 1982:57); and specifying both parts of that sentence: “The message of the gospel is the message of freedom” (Nolan 1982:58).

Nolan’s concern for the political scene in pre-1994 South Africa and his interpretation of the Bible echo each other precisely. Justice and love are neither socio-political concerns alone nor a biblical affair alone. These two are linked together inextricably in the way Nolan reads the Bible and lives his life.

#### 2.4 Snyman: Living Before God

Snyman (1997:376) regards *coram Deo* as the expression that would come closest to formulating what the Old Testament – his particular focus – would understand as spirituality (see also Smit 1989:85). He employs the tripartite division of the Old Testament into Torah, Prophets and Writings in order to present brief samples relevant to explaining what spirituality in the Old Testament is (Snyman 1997:377).

Spirituality starts, for Snyman (1997:377-378) with God (cf. Jonker 1989:293-294), and with God crafting a relationship with people, beginning with the revelation of his Name (Exodus 3:14-25). *אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה* denotes, with reference to a range of Old Testament Theologies, God as the always present. God’s essence is in fact his presence. This is a line that runs through the whole of the Old Testament, and continues into the New (“Immanuel” in Matthew; “I am...” in John). In the Old Testament we thus find that spirituality is that one lives one’s life “in the continued presence of God” (Snyman 1997:378, translated).

<sup>11</sup> See the argument followed in footnote 7. More importantly here, though, one might critique Nolan’s optimism at being able to find (the real thoughts of) the real Jesus behind the New Testament texts. The different waves of research into the historical Jesus have borne many results, but none definitive. All researchers tend to find their own Jesus (by now a well-known point) – an insight that has important implications not only for the philosophy of science, but also for thinkers on spirituality: See the fourth section of this essay titled “Context, individuality and extrapolation”. (To be clear: My problem is not with the historical-critical methodology; that I find positive. My problem is with the too optimistic outlook that often accompanies such research.)

In the Torah, this presence centres on the concept of the covenant, which extends to both the cultic and non-cultic life, and stresses love, obedience and gratitude (Snyman 1997:379).

The prophets emphasise turning back to a life in close communion with God, which implies faithfulness to Yahweh and social justice. The prophets, however, also struggle with God (e.g. Jeremiah and Habakkuk), in the event indicating that God and God's answers at times remain incomprehensible, and that at other times the conversation with God is in itself enough (Snyman 1997:380-382). "Spirituality in the Old Testament is ... living in the presence of God even if realities and the incomprehensibility thereof speak against it ... living as people who see God..." (Snyman 1997:381, translated). Lastly, the prophets also find themselves astounded before the mystery of God, as expressed in the prophetic doxologies (Snyman 1997:382).

Among the Writings, the Psalms, and most specifically Psalm 42, receive particular attention (Snyman 1997:382-383): Life *coram Deo* is an attractive theme even when experiencing God's absence, be it individually or corporately.<sup>12</sup> Proverbs 4:23 addresses the more personal piety: one's thoughts influence one's whole life (Snyman 1997:384). Living one's life according to Old Testament wisdom's *principium interpretatio*, the *רָצוֹן יְהוָה* referred to above (cf. Lombaard 2002:756), is typical of Old Testament spirituality. That is the "art of life" (Snyman 1997:5, translated).

In Snyman's broadly analytical article, expressions of Old Testament spirituality are thus indicated as including living with an awareness of God's presence, within a covenant that elicits obedience to the Torah, yet involves dilemmas because of God also being *Deus absconditus*, with precisely such dilemmas inducing in the believer awe and a sense of mystery (Snyman 1997:385).

## 2.5 The Assembled 'Themes'

To summarise: Du Toit places the *Praesentia Dei* central to the spirituality we find in Scripture as a whole; for Louw, the concept of *εὐσβεβία* summarizes the (mostly) New Testament faith; Nolan combines Old Testament justice and New Testament love into a full biblical "Kingdom spirituality"; whereas Snyman finds *coram Deo* a useful concept with which to characterise (mostly) Old Testament faith.

Interestingly, all take the Bible extremely seriously, both in their own lives of faith and for their deliberations on what spirituality is, biblically speaking. All insist that the faith we find in the Bible has undeniable practical implications. All refer to both Testaments, though some offer us a more equivalent view than others. All show keen awareness of philosophical hermeneutics: The interaction between text-in-context and reader-in-context. All state that they offer in their respective publications only an initial view, and that much more remains to be said. All are aware that many spiritualities exist, and that these expressions of the Christian faith configure different aspects of their shared religion differently. It may respect, thus, what these authors say and how they say it overlap, despite their choosing four different "centrepieces".

Our four authors are however not identical. This shows up most clearly when each respective author's contribution is taken under review, and one finds at least some parallels, but at times very strongly shared traits, between the author's own faith and what he finds to be central to the Bible.

<sup>12</sup> For Nolan (1988:vi), though, the absence of God in Psalm 42 is the question with which the oppressor taunts the oppressed – cf. Steenkamp 1995:67.



These two observations – that different authors seem to find different (though, of course, not entirely unrelated) spiritual “centrepieces” to the Bible, despite so many similarities between them, and that what each finds to be the centrepiece so strongly reflects their own spiritual identities – brings to the fore two questions:

- is it even possible to identify a spiritual centre to the Bible that would show stability across different contexts?, or
- is it not perhaps impossible to extrapolate a spirituality from one context to another?

It is these two questions that will be touched upon very briefly in the two closing points below.

### 3. The Matter of a Spiritual ‘Mitte’ to Scripture

Identifying a spirituality central to the Bible is not without its problems, it seems. Most importantly, one might object, different researchers tend to find different results – admittedly, not entirely unrelated results; nevertheless results dissimilar enough to warrant some questioning.

A parallel to this problem is an issue that has beset Old Testament scholarship involved with the sub-discipline of Old Testament Theology for some time. Many suggestions have been made for a central theme, theology, centre, foundation (the list of synonyms goes on...) – the usual term is the German “Mitte” – to the Old Testament (see Preuß 1991:25-26 for a brief overview), around which all the rest of the Old Testament can be systematised. Some of the main problems with choosing such a “Mitte” (referring to Preuß 1991:25-27; Nürnberger 2002:3-4, 70-85; Brueggemann 1992:1-44; Welker 1998:1549-1553) are:

- choosing a “Mitte” is reductionist: Though great parts of the Old Testament could fit well into such a central theme, much of the Old Testament will have to be forced into a frock that fits it poorly. The Old Testament is simply too diverse a book for one neat cover;
- choosing a “Mitte” is exclusionist: Keeping one’s eyes on this one theme has the effect of blinding one to some parts of the Old Testament (the Wisdom literature has most often been neglected in such instances). The Old Testament is, again, simply too diverse a book to allow for “centralising”;
- to choose a “Mitte” that would be broad enough as to truly incorporate the whole of the Old Testament, would result in something so vague as to be practically meaningless. The contents of the Old Testament is simply too wide-ranging to be summed up at once;
- Western systematising is given to ontological statements (e.g. “God is...”), usually related to a concept, which is foreign to the Ancient Near Eastern thought world (where, e.g. “God does...” fits better);
- similarly, choosing a “Mitte” from outside the Old Testament (usually from Systematic Theology) with which to organise/simplify/systematise it, could never do justice to the nature of the Old Testament and the world from which it sprung;
- A “Mitte” would tend to be a static item, whereas the Old Testament has grown through serial rewriting and forth-writing.

Each of the references to the Old Testament here may be substituted with the term “spirituality”: The exact same problems apply. The same despair that Albertz (1992:17-38) has expressed about the viability of Old Testament Theology, *inter alia* because of the

problems listed above, may befall the discipline of Spirituality if such a “Mitte” for biblical spirituality is sought and not found.

However, another way may be found: If the search for a universal “Mitte” is given up, but the possibility is left open for individuals or groups to give expression to their contextually experienced Bible-based spiritualities, more may be gained than lost here.

#### **4. Context, Individuality and Extrapolation**

An individual's spirituality is always the outcome – though not in a deterministic manner! – of a range of factors (cf. Jonker 1989:289-290; Smit 1989:88; Lombaard 2001:86): Philosophical, historical, socio-economic, cultural, dogmatological, ecclesiological, practical, psychological... Nobody's spirituality is wholly individual; influences abound. Yet everybody's spirituality is their own. No two believers, despite a range of similarities, configure the different aspects of their faith identically. Any description of spirituality is always “subjective, perspectival, contextual” (Smit 1989:83, cf. 86). Is that not perhaps the most fruitful insight to be drawn from the analysis of the four proposals above?

I would suggest that a point of orientation to guide us through different proposals, such as the four discussed above, could be that faith knows no exact replicas or – in a modern idiom – clones. Within all the faith-related impulses exerting influence on me, *I* believe. *My* faith and *our* faith, though similar enough to constitute an “our”, are not one and the same. “We believe” and “I believe” always exist together – tangled (mutually influential), yet not indistinguishable, and with the measure of identification never wholly clear, never quite static...

Given the interaction/mutual influence of the individual with the context, though, such individualism is no licence for extreme pietistic tendencies. Taking the four authors discussed above seriously, this must be a giving individualism: My spirituality has something to contribute to the circles in which I move. Not only am I who I am by means of other people (the “ubuntu” ideology – cf. e.g. Shutte 2001); I also am who I am *for* other people. Every “I” influences us, contributing to constituting our faith.

In such a multitude of Christian spiritualities, all related to one another in different and ever-changing measures, one of the elements supporting the Christian nature of these spiritualities, would be the Bible. Not the Bible over-simplified, as it could so easily turn into whenever the Bible becomes a rallying point for some cause, but in adherence to the four points made under the first heading (“The Bible and Spirituality”) of this essay. On this point, then, it holds true that “(i)n the last instance it is not the subjective sincerity with which spirituality is practiced, but the basis thereof that is of decisive meaning” (Jonker 1989:290, translated).

The possibilities of “universalising” or “extrapolating” to other situations any contribution on biblical spirituality – be they expressions of personal piety or scholarly contributions (though, naturally, these dimensions are not unrelated) – should respect the *twin features* that each contribution is inescapably individualistic, yet thoroughly embedded contextually. It is precisely because of these two features *taken together*, that a contribution on spirituality remains pregnant with “universalising”/“extrapolation” possibilities, providing it is done *sensitively* and *dialogically*.

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