

Rituals and the decay of the word

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ABSTRACT

Rituelen en het verval van het woord

In onze tijd hebben rituelen de plaats van het woord ingenomen. Het gaat daarbij niet om tegenstelling in vormen (woord tegenover gebaar of vorm), maar om een tegenstelling op het niveau van de waarheid. Het woord is verdacht geworden en de beleving is belangrijker geworden dan een objectieve waarheid van buiten. Voor het protestantse denken is dat een problematische verschuiving, omdat het woord symbool staat voor het besef dat wij allereerst aangesproken zijn, dat onze beleving hooguit een antwoord is op wat op ons toekomt. Kernvraag is hoe we in woord en ritueel omgaan met transcendentie. We moeten opnieuw doordenken wat het 'horen' van het woord betekent.

Protestantism has long been known to be a tradition of the word. This might become problematic in the time to come, where language has lost its self-evident priority. In our society and to a similar degree in our protestant churches, images and rituals are the substitutes for the word. I am not referring to secularization in a narrow sense, as if it were just the Word of God that is rendered obsolete. It is the word as such that is in trouble, especially the word as a reference to reality. Language still functions, but it has lost its referential power. Are rituals the future of our religious vocabulary? Or do we need a revival of the word? To clarify these questions, I take my starting point in two sharp defenders of the word, George Steiner and Jacques Ellul. Departing from their analyses of the problem of language in our time, I will develop an approach that recognizes the difference between word and image without succumbing to the old Protestant enmity to images (this is where I part company with Ellul). I will distinguish two types of transcendence: active (from the inside outward) and 'pathic' (from the outside inward). Finally, I will plead for a theology of hearing the word.

THE END OF LANGUAGE?

Cambridge University literary critic George Steiner describes the dire circumstances of outmoded (religious) language: ‘Vacant metaphors, eroded figures of speech, inhabit our vocabulary and grammar. They are caught, tenaciously, in the scaffolding and recesses of our common parlance. (...) This is why the postulate of the existence of God persists... Where God clings to our culture, to our routines of discourse, He is a phantom of grammar, a fossil embedded in the childhood of rational speech.’ Steiner argues vehemently against this view in his *Real presences*.¹ He claims that there is a ‘necessary possibility’ of this real presence inherent to meaning, especially to the aesthetic meaning. My point is, however, that in this debate Steiner is fully aware of the vulnerable position language is in. The title of my essay is a direct reference to the Dutch title of Steiner’s 1966 collection of essays *Language and Silence*.² The preface reads: ‘What are the relations of language to the murderous falsehoods it has been made to articulate and hallow in certain totalitarian regimes? Or to the great load of vulgarity, imprecision, and greed it is charged with in a mass-consumer democracy? How will language, in the traditional sense of a general idiom of effective relations, react to the increasingly urgent, comprehensive claims of more exact speech such as mathematics and symbolic notation? Are we passing out of an historical era of verbal primacy – out of the classic period of literary expression – into a phase of decayed language, of “post-linguistic” forms, and perhaps of partial silence?’

Several decades have passed since Steiner posed these weighty questions, decades in which evil and vulgarity have become all the more visible both in the horrific facts of history and in the equally horrific fiction of popular culture. Have we indeed reached the era of decay of the word? If so, how does that interfere with the protestant passion for the Word? Surely Steiner did not mean to imply that words would no longer be available. There is still a plenitude of words and the digital revolution for example seems to enhance the number of published words rather than to diminish it. The point Steiner makes is that language clearly can be corrupted by lies and vulgarity, totalitarianism and consumerism. The resultant of these hazards is the decay of language as a comprehensible and reliable whole. We therefore encounter a radical questioning of the connection between word and truth.

Steiner’s intuition that language might be substituted by mathematics seems correct in several spheres of life, like economics, politics, and technology. Undoubtedly, these are the prevailing discourses of our western societies. There is, however, also another threat to verbal language: the symbolic, aesthetic, and ritual world of the visual. It is that threat that is central in this essay. These two threats are interrelated given the many connections between the mathematic and

¹ G. Steiner, *Real presences* Is there anything in what we say? London, Faber & Faber, 1989, 3

² G. Steiner, *Verval van het woord*. Amsterdam: Athenaeum, 1990 / selected translations from: G. Steiner, *Language and Silence*. London, Faber & Faber, 1966.

the aesthetic. Most pertinent to my argument is the domain of modern cinema, where digital technology and creative imagination are combined for commercial reasons.³ I will focus on the field of rituals because in the realm of the church, especially the protestant church, the impact of the visual or ritual is probably more challenging than the impact of the mathematic.

To be clear, in this essay on word against ritual (or image), I am not referring to the actual shapes of phenomena. Words and images, verbal and non-verbal languages are related in many ways. Words or stories can be extremely imaginative or pictorial and several rituals are performed primarily in and through language. Although there may be a continuum between the two poles of the image and the word, the actual phenomena are always a little bit of both, and both poles are properly understood as language systems.

The juxtaposition of word and ritual in this paper refers to two modes of religious disclosure, the mode of experience versus the mode of 'revealed truth'. This juxtaposition is spelled out by Jacques Ellul in his 1985 book *The humiliation of the Word*.⁴ According to Ellul, ours is the time of the images, a victory of the visual over the auditory. Again, Ellul does not oppose the images as such, but he refutes the loss of meaning occurring from the decay of the word: 'I do not mean that sight is evil, sinful, etc., or that images are bad. The falsehood lies in reducing what belongs to the order of truth in order to make it enter through visualization into the order of reality.'⁵ Ellul claims that this is a perennial struggle within Christianity. To make this point, he alludes to the medieval church with its imagery and physical experiences, in which the sole use of Latin made for a language incomprehensible and thus⁵ meaningless for ordinary believers. Protestant throughout, Ellul is a sharp critic, almost a cynic concerning the liturgical and ritual revival in contemporary Protestantism.

WORD AND RITUAL

This revival of rituals has become the major feature of present-day religion, overwhelmingly manifest even in mainstream Calvinism. Preachers have evolved from Verbi Divini Minister into liturgists and priests. The sermon is less proclamation and more experience or event. More and more rituals have entered the congregation, both on the collective level of worship and on the individual level of pastoral care and counseling. Some of these rituals lean heavily on the reformed tradition, others scrounge unabashed from a variety of Christian and non-Christian religious sources as well as from the realm of therapy. All that seems to count is the question how we can aid people in experiencing God, the

³ See the movie *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir 1998) for a wonderful Hollywood-critique of Hollywood.

⁴ J. Ellul, *The humiliation of the Word*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985, 186.

⁵ At this point one can wonder whether incomprehensibility equals meaninglessness. It may well be argued that obscure language conveys 'mysteries' and 'holiness' and that it is the performance rather than the content that counts.

divine, the supernatural, meaning, or whatever. It is precisely this ambiguity and open-endedness that proves Ellul at least partly right in his claim that without the words humans turn into image-consumers in an experiential culture that no longer structures meanings through language. It is the experience itself that matters and not the possible interpretations or evaluations thereof.

In our experience-focused culture ⁶, rituals are by no means restricted to the realm of the church. A Dutch exploration of the ritual dimension shows that over the last ten years collective rituals have become standard procedure in case of major events.⁷ There is even a budding standardization of these rituals. In cases of street violence, the site of the violent events immediately elicits pilgrimages consisting of flowers and respectful silence. A striking example is the case of Anja Joos. As a person addicted to drugs, she was marginalized until the moment of her death in October 2003. Her very death depicts this marginalization, because she fell prey to the beating of shopkeepers in unjust suspicion of the theft of a few cans of beer. In the days following this incident, many people and officials felt the need to declare sympathy with the victim, even when they had been openly unfriendly toward drug addicts before. People that would not grant addicted persons a single look would now stop at the site of the killing to bring their flowers and pay respect.

Likewise, the silent marches that regularly follow incidents of street violence seem to have undergone a certain routinization. Parallel to the white marches in Belgium in response to the Dutroux case, Dutch marches tend to attract many people responding to these seemingly random outbursts of violence. We all seem to know instantly what is needed ritually. It is unclear, however, what exactly is expressed in these collective rituals. It seems to be a mixture of protest and procession, fear and resistance, direct or indirect grief and compassion, citizenship and solidarity, and probably much more.⁸

Rituals are embedded in myths, an old understanding states. Today it is questionable how much of a myth is found in and beneath present-day rituals. Or to be more precise: it is unclear to what degree the myths are shared. In many cases individual participants may have their mythical interpretation, but a communal story is less available. At the grassroots level of the religious congregation, many parents eager to have their children baptized are driven by stories deviating from the traditional Christian understanding or from the meanings attached to the ritual in the specific congregation or denomination. The honest minister faces the creative task of relating the personal meanings of the ritual to the collective stories of the Christian tradition.

⁶ M. Josuttis, *Die Einführung in das Leben*, Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1996.

⁷ P. Post, R.L. Grimes, A. Nugteren, P. Pettersson, H. Zondag, *Disaster Ritual. Explorations of an Emerging Ritual Repertoire*. Leuven: Peeters, 2003. The original Dutch version was published as P. Post, A. Nugteren & H. Zondag, *Rituelen na rampen. Verkenning van een opkomend repertoire*. [Rituals following disasters. Explorations of an emerging repertoire.] Kampen: Gooi & Sticht, 2002.

⁸ See the contributions in the 2001/3 issue of *Praktische Theologie* by C. Menken-Bekius, L. Bal & M. van Dijk-Groeneboer.

At this point, we need to distinguish three types of questions related to three levels of hermeneutics. The first, more obvious one regards the ministerial task of translating the old stories of the tradition into the present-day language world. This is the communicative level of hermeneutics, seeking to develop more person-focused rituals that are still connected to the central notions of the Christian tradition. More and more the understanding has grown that religion – including its ritual shapes – needs to be personally meaningful and relevant, or it will evaporate. If people are not involved in the story of God with all their lives, they will withdraw from this story. This implies that our Christian stories and our rituals cannot be performed in simple repetition. The task of reinterpreting and communicating anew is the first level of hermeneutics. The second, more fundamental one is the question whether there are myths beneath the rituals, whether we still have stories to share and truths to pursue in this culture of experience. And finally there is a third type of questions, one that regards theologians. It is this question that will be central to the remainder of my paper. Are the stories we connect to the rituals just that – stories we tell – or is there a story coming our way, telling us the meaning of the rites? This is the level of the word as opposite.

The notion of the word opposing us is not restricted to protestant theology of the Barthian kind. In Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, language has a pre-eminent place.⁹ Language and stories are pre-existent and supra-individual. They reside in a realm that Lacan identifies as *l'Autre* or *l'Ordre symbolique*. This symbolic order of the word, language, and stories has existed long before the human individual enters it and will exist long past our exiting. It is from this realm of the Other that fragments are made available for the story the individual tells about the world and about his or her place in the world. The individual story – that is, the personal identity – is not something the individual can create for her/himself. It always derives fragments from the symbolic order. Speaking therefore is always 'speaking after' and the person who is speaking has always been 'spoken to' and 'spoken about' first. According to Lacan this process through which we enter the symbolic order is facilitated by 'the law' or the word that 'in the name of the father' summons the child to break free from the oedipal symbiosis with the mother.¹⁰ If this doesn't happen or succeed, Lacan speaks of the 'rejection of the name of the father'. The foundation for participating in the symbolic order and the life-structure collapses and psychosis is nearby.

⁹ My understanding of Lacan is heavily influenced by A.W.M. Mooij, *Taal en verlangen. Lacans theorie van de psychoanalyse*. [Language and desire. Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis.] Meppel: Boom, 1975. An important parallel elaboration of Freudian theory is found in the work of sociologist and philosopher of culture Rieff, postulating a necessary 'sacral order' in the social structures. See A.A.W. Zondervan, *Ontvankelijk denken. Moderniteit en transcendentie in het werk van Philip Rieff*. [Receptive thinking. Modernity and transcendence in the work of Philip Rieff.] S.l.: s.n., 2001 (Enschede: PrintPartners: Ipskamp).

¹⁰ Another element of his theory is that language serves to reconstruct the desire for the mother, a desire that is based on the lost symbiosis. See K. Harvey & C. Shalom, 'Introduction', In: idem (eds.) *Language and Desire. Encoding sex, romance, and intimacy*. London: Routledge 1997.

It is not my intention to pursue this psychoanalytic discussion. I merely note the fundamental notion that the word comes from the outside before it comes from the inside of the human story-teller. Still another argument can be found in Berger & Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality*. Their theory describes how constructions of the world are externalized, objectified, and internalized. Externalization is the process of placing the perception and interpretation outside the subjective realm; internalization is the process of taking outside views and appropriating them in such a way that they function as the subjectively personal. My point would be that on a (macro-)social level externalization is the first step, but on an individual level, internalization comes first. We enter a world of meanings that already exists. It is this fundamental notion that is at stake in a culture of experience where rituals are developed and offered that are not any longer based in the symbolic order that is preserved in the religious tradition. The differentiation of 'self' and 'other', of inner desire and outer summons is at risk. What is jeopardized is the power of discernment and judgment that is expressed in words and the humility and receptivity toward the story that precedes us.

The decay of the word is evident in the loss of trust invested in language. Language proves to be susceptible to lies, greed, and irrelevance. The word as opposite loses its authority under the burden of these charges. Why should we accept the summons of a word from outside, especially when such words evidently have been used for oppression, evil, and falsehood instead of liberation, good, and truth? Religious language is not excluded from such accusations. If anything, it faces even harsher criticism. Until today, organized religion easily serves evil. Many large scale conflicts – even those based on ethnic differences – have religious overtones. If religion is not criticized for sustaining evil, it is marginalized for being irrelevant, as seems the case in the Netherlands. For Protestantism with its characteristic emphasis on the word, this decay demands fundamental discussion on the function of the word and of transcendence.

TRANSCENDENCE

In our common understanding, the term transcendence functions in a static manner to describe how different God is from us: beyond our knowledge, language, moral standards, and finally beyond our mode of existence. It denotes the quality of something or someone beyond our reality. Prominent theologians like the Dutch mainstream reformed Berkhof describe it as 'condescendence', thus offering a dynamic and more relational reading. Properly understood, transcendence not only points to some place, time, or quality beyond our reality, it first and foremost addresses the crossing of the boundaries of our existence.

In a practical theological perspective, these boundaries of existence are part of the dynamics of human life. Our life-world is bordered by the limited possibilities of our perception and of our movement. We cannot hear or see everything, nor can we travel everywhere. It is precisely these limitations that are challenged and partially overcome in the human history. But even with these conquests, we keep

reaching the limits of our life-world. We cannot move back into the past, nor can we extend our life endlessly into the future. As humans, we are limited, and this limitation is theologically articulated in our being created.

The fact of our being bordered immediately draws our attention to the moments that our boundaries are being crossed. Far from being insulated, our life is defined by the 'active' and the 'pathic' crossings. There are the active moments of our inner desires and ambitions, pushing us beyond the world we know into a new territory. Sometimes we visit this world beyond ours as tourists, enjoying the strangeness without surrendering to it. Sometimes we appropriate the world beyond, thereby moving the boundary to a new location.

We cross the boundaries of our material world by traveling to other places, even by trying to reach into the skies. Relationally, we try to overcome the borders between ourselves and others. More than anywhere else perhaps, we seek to cross the boundaries in the realm of religion. In magical behavior we reach beyond our grasp to make the divine speak or act. We sacralize places, times, and persons to vest them with symbolic meanings and become manifestations of something else.¹¹ In transcending ourselves as individuals and as communities, we direct ourselves to the other 'reality' of our fellow humans and of our gods. This other reality becomes present in our world.

The 'pathic' crossings are the moments that our boundaries are surpassed from the outside inward. This is what we usually call revelation, but again it is not limited to the realm of religion. Every time we are spoken to, our boundaries are crossed or transcended. Life-giving sometimes, devastating when the boundaries are crossed to do us harm.¹² Be it benign or destructive in effect, these intrusions shape our identity.

When it comes to revelation, we always encounter the subtle dialectics of disclosure and concealment. Although a dictionary may declare revelation and concealment to be antonyms, theologically speaking concealment is the background and part of the content of revelation. One of the objections Ellul raises against the visual world is precisely this, that the concealed cannot come to the fore. In contrast to the verbal world, the image seeks to ignore the invisible or overpower it by exposing it. By implication, the visual jeopardizes the characteristics of revelation. It distorts the dialectics of disclosure and concealment. This seems to be a fundamental critique regarding the suitability of the visual and ritual language for revelation and religion.

It mirrors the critique of the concept of revelation that has been used time and again to withdraw statements from solid reasoning or justification. In modern

¹¹ These ideas are based on (among others) Ellul. See R.R. Ganzevoort, 'The social construction of revelation'. Forthcoming.

¹² See the work on traumatic experiences like sexual abuse. The impact on relating to transcendence has not been the subject of sufficient research. For my own work on male victims of sexual abuse: R.R. Ganzevoort, *Reconstructies*. [Reconstructions. Practical Theological Inquiry into male stories on sexual abuse and religion]. Kampen: Kok, 2001.

cultures like ours, the governing discourse is defined by technical and logical rationality, which makes such an assertion problematic. Modern rationality seems to demand apologetics dressed in rational arguments. A word as opposite that eludes these conventions is at odds with this rationality. It was precisely prophetic resistance to the governing logics of his world that brought Barth to his radical theology of the word, in which revelation counted as the a priori of our thinking. In his world the word had been desecrated, just like Steiner described when he spoke of the decay of the word, and in that world Barth retracts revelation intentionally from its rational legitimization. It seems to me that such a theology of the word as opposite is a meaningful move in the battle on language.

To understand pathic transcendence properly, we should always relate revelation with experience. We can only speak of revelation when it is experienced in one way or another. The first reason for this is epistemic, in the sense that without experience we have no way of knowing about revelation. A second reason has to do with communication. If we speak of revelation without experience, we fall prey to the precise insulation described above. It is experience that makes it possible to communicate with others. There is, however, a third and more fundamental reason: if there is no experience, the boundaries of our existence have not been surpassed and thus revelation has not occurred at all. Only if we discover that something has crossed our boundaries from the outside inward, something is revealed to us. This discovery is experience, but Tracy¹³ aptly states: 'When religious persons speak the language of revelation, they mean that something has happened to them that they cannot count as their own achievement. Rather they find themselves compelled to honor that realized experience as an eruption of a power become self-manifestation from and by the whole in which, by which, and to which they live'. This approach to revelation is not intended to withdraw one's position from justification, but to acknowledge that we are sometimes affected, overwhelmed even. It is the recognition that our being and our knowing is not human-made.

Active and pathic transcendence merge in the category of desire. Desire is the movement inside out. It arises from the limitations of our human existence because it is based on need. It moves beyond the boundaries of time (hope), of individuality (eroticism), or of knowing (faith). Desire is also being attracted, responding to something or someone approaching us and becoming the object of our desire.¹⁴ Through desire, the object of our desires becomes present in our world. It cannot be desired if it is not granted some autonomy as if it is a subject and source in its own right. This autonomy has to be respected, venerated even, and we surrender in adoration to the desired.

¹³ D. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress 1981, 173.

¹⁴ This is a central element in recent contributions to practical theology. A.K. Ploeger & J.J. Ploeger-Grotegoed, *De gemeente en haar verlangen*, Kampen: Kok, 2001. In his recent proposal, F.G. Immink, *In God geloven*, Zoetermeer: Meinema 2003, stresses the combination of the subjective and objective side of religion. Working in a different theological framework (process theology), Dingemans takes 'the voice of the calling one' as the impetus for our religious desires. G.D.J. Dingemans, *De stem van de roepende*, Kampen: Kok, 2001.

RITUALS AND TRANSCENDENCE

These musings on transcendence may be helpful to further explore the tension between word and image, exemplified in rituals. One of the features of present day rituality, it seems to me, is that it has become more the expression of human desire, sacralization, and magic, and less the submissive response to what is coming toward us – the word as opposite. In other words: the rituals of our times are active crossings, transcendence inside out, and less pathic, transcendence outside in. There are certainly experiences of disclosure or revelation, but the opposite-character is less central. It is this word as opposite that was articulated in the rituals of our tradition, expressed in its myths, and systematized in confessions.

In an experiential culture, rituals emerge that are no longer based in a symbolic order or in the preexistent language of a tradition. What rests is egocentric desire, that is adequately assessed as sin. In his study on evil, Safranski notes Augustine's vision that evil is the betrayal of transcendence. That is: humans that close themselves toward God stop short of their possibilities of being human. According to Augustine, we should not center our lives around ourselves, because that would block the opening to transcendence and turn us into one-dimensional beings. This is the hardening of the hearts or the unpardonable sin against the holy spirit.

Is this a fitting judgment for the experiential rituality? We should hesitate at that, because contemporary rituality and spirituality seems to be an expression of the revival of religious desire and openness for transcendence. At this point the distinction between active and pathic transcendence is crucial. Our rituals are first and foremost shapes of active transcendence, attending to our spiritual experiences, longings, and attributions of meaning. If God (or the divine, or ...) is mentioned, it is god as the extrapolation of our wishes. Not a speaking God, let alone a responding or contradicting us.

'In those days the word of the LORD was rare'; the Samuel story commences.¹⁵ There were enough rituals, even if they were not administered by the book, and even if Eli's sons followed their own interpretations. What was missing was neither the rituals, nor the desires of humans and their sacrality. It was the word as opposite that was absent. This word is essential in the vocation of Samuel and in his entire career as a representative of God.

I like this story, because there may be a parallel to our times. The word of the Lord is rare today as well. We have lost the foundational stories. By consequence, the connection between the expression of desires and the response to the word as opposite has become problematic. As stated, both are instances of transcendence, but they move in a different direction. For a human-divine communication to occur, the two should be connected. If only the expression remains, there is no

¹⁵ 1 Samuel 3:1. The text goes on: 'there were not many visions'. Again, word and vision as phenomena are not juxtaposed.

relation. If there is no word from the opposite, we are imprisoned in our undifferentiated longings.

As I noted earlier, the hermeneutical questions here are located different levels. The solution to the loss of the word is likewise. On the level of communication, we need to find ways to re-story the world. New strategies are to be developed to share the stories beneath the rituals. This is the catechetical task before us in a time that knowledge of such stories is no longer self-evident. Instead of expecting people to join the church, we might search for ways to facilitate these stories and make them available anew. Still, this is only the first level.

RETURN OF THE WORD?

On a more fundamental level, it seems to me that we need a new theology of the word. It is no coincidence that in our experiential world the openness for the word as opposite is limited. This means that a repeated emphasis on the importance of the word will not suffice. More radical and more individualistic than in Barth's days we are confronted with a form of natural theology that leaves little room for a hard claim to revelation. What would a new theology of the word look like? At this point in time, I cannot provide an outline, but only hint at a direction.

There is a fundamental intention to the work of Barth that offers prospects for what I intend here. This fundamental intention is articulated in many ways. Barth for example states that revelation does not serve the human quest for meaning, but discloses an unfathomable secret. The answer of revelation does not bring the questions to peace. Karelse explores the possibilities of reinterpreting Barth from the postmodern a/theology of Mark C. Taylor.¹⁶ He stresses Barth's intention to respect the secret, the freedom, and the alterity of God by interpreting 'Barth's analogy of faith as a description of the impasse of human speech of God, an impasse that is not a logical shortcoming of theology, but that indicates that God is an unknowable difference.'¹⁷ Rather than trying to represent what cannot be represented, Taylor seeks to represent the impossibility of representation.

In one of his homiletical contributions, Barth poses the dilemma as follows: 'As theologians we have to speak of God. We are however humans and therefore cannot speak of God. We should know both, our have to and our cannot, and bring God glory with that'.¹⁷ This dilemma to me does not seem fruitful for a homiletical theory. It overburdens both the preacher and the congregation and

¹⁶ L.C. Karelse, *Dwalen*. Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1999. Books by Taylor include *Deconstructing Theology* (1982) *Erring. A Postmodern A/theology* (1984), *Altarity* (1986), *Notes* (1993), and *Hiding* (1997).

¹⁷ 'Wir sollen als Theologen von Gott reden. Wir sind aber Menschen und können als solche nicht von Gott reden. Wir sollen Beides, unser sollen und unser Nicht-Können, wissen und eben damit Gott die Ehre geben.' K. Barth, 'Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie.' Ouder meer gepubliceerd in: A. Beutel, V. Drehsen & H.M. Müller (Hrsg.) *Homiletisches Lesebuch. Texte zur heutigen Predigtlehre*. Tübingen: 1986, 42-58. (oorspr. 1922).

isolates us from the world around us. For a bi-directional understanding of revelation, however, it underlines the intangible hiddenness of God that needs to be respected. In the radical interpretation I propose, we cannot return to a self-evident speaking of the word of God. Barth's notion should be read as the understanding that we need the word as opposite, but that this word is never at our disposal. Therefore, it seems more adequate to abstain from speculations about the speaking of the word and about the preacher, and to focus on the hearing of the word. It is interesting to note that the process of hearing the word has not received much attention, not even in practical theology, at least not in the Netherlands. There are some important contributions to hearer oriented homiletics, building on the work of Ernst Lange, advocated by for example Van der Laan and elaborated by Dingemans.¹⁸ Even Dingemans, however, focuses on the preacher and not on the hearer. Research into the reception of sermons is truly in its infancy.¹⁹ A theology of hearing is perhaps even less developed. Promising efforts are made in the field of reception aesthetics ('Rezeptionsästhetik').

Instead of a *theologia speculativa* about God's acting and speaking, I propose a *theologia practica* about humans hearing and responding. If the word returns, it will be the word heard, not the word spoken. For religious communication, this understanding further attenuates the contrast between verbal and ritual phenomena. For both the challenge is to create a communicative realm that facilitates and evokes hearing. It is not our vocation to spell out the content of what God is saying, but to offer the possibility of experiencing and receiving. The sermon, like the ritual, is an 'open piece of art', counting on the listener to participate and to make sense out of it.²⁰

Such a theology of the hearer is a radical example of the subjective turn in practical theology. It fits in with social constructionist and postmodern approaches.²¹ Such approaches are easily critiqued for being subjectivistic and individualistic, but such a critique seems undeserved. Social constructionism parts radically from both objectivistic and subjectivistic perspectives. It takes its epistemological starting point neither in the outside world, nor in the perception of the subject, but in the performative conversation between people.²²

This implies that there is ample opportunity to describe theologically the conversations about God and the conversation between humans and God. We can and indeed should take into account the incoming word of God and the

¹⁸ J.H. Van der Laan, *Ernst Lange en de Prediking*, Kampen: Kok, 1989. G.D.J. Dingemans, *Als hoorder onder de hoorders*. Kampen: Kok, 1991.

¹⁹ The research project by J. Schaap-Jonker (THUK) is dedicated to this receptive dimension. Dutch and Belgian psychologists of religion (Alma, Hutsebaut, Neyrinck, Pieper, and Van Uden) explore receptivity as a factor in religion.

²⁰ B. Altena, *Wolven gaan voorbij...*, Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2003. Altena builds his approach on Henning Luther's homiletical theory.

²¹ See the volume edited by C.A.M. Hermans et al., *Social Constructionism and Theology*. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

²² See R.R. Ganzevoort, 'The social construction of revelation' (Forthcoming)

performative actions of religious persons. By focusing on the hearer we do not obscure the word of God, but instead create space for the articulation of it. In short, although the approach suggested here may seem subjectivistic at first glance, it actually is a powerful language to counter subjectivistic tendencies. This is what I have addressed in the realm of ritualization. I have tried to show that we do indeed need a new attention for the word coming toward us. A theology of hearing in my view provides the language for this word in a constructionist age. To develop such a theology of the word seems an important challenge for protestant theologians in the time ahead.