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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Sup33.15

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2022
Supp 33:207-225

Date received:
02 January 2022

Date accepted:
04 February 2022

Date published:
20 June 2022

Published by the UFS
http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at

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OPEN ACCESS

Divine hiddenness, the melancholic self, and a pandemic spirituality

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted societies worldwide and occasioned intense intellectual reflection to make sense of the phenomenon. The state of insecurity has become a new horizon for doing Christian theology, and the new experience makes it inevitable that the spiritual implications be explored. The article attempts to undertake constructive spirituality for a specific historic moment, and to enquire about the contours of a pandemic spirituality. The disciplinary contribution is to be found in the threefold effort to propose a specific naming of God, discern a unique self-understanding, and intimate corresponding practices. Central notions such as hiddenness of God, melancholic self, and practices of everyday life, of lament and of othering are employed coherently to delineate a contextual pandemic spirituality. A multidisciplinary approach is used to interpret these constituent elements.

1. INTRODUCTION

Crises routinely have ambiguous effects; they may not only bring suffering and pain, but also unleash creative thinking. This has been witnessed with the COVID-19 pandemic. Virology and immunology have been thrust into focus. Simultaneously, academic fields in the humanities suddenly experienced new challenges: legally, what are the limits of governments and human rights, and ethically, should vaccination be mandated? The COVID condition confronted intellectual disciplines with their public responsibility and the occasion to re-envision their very nature. How should one

think about spirituality under these conditions? This is the interest of this article. What could be the *contours of spirituality* as academic construal in this time? The reflection attempts to identify structural elements such as understandings of God, the self, and practices in a new context in a coherent manner.

2. DISCERNING A NEW HORIZON FOR DOING THEOLOGY

Doing theology cannot take place under conditions of sanitation; thinking about the Christian faith in its many dimensions is always contaminated by historical dynamics of, for example, politics, culture, or wider intellectual sensibilities. One also becomes increasingly aware that historical accounts of theological periods in present scholarship have expanded beyond the mere study of ideas, and that material and spatial realities have acquired increasing attention. A history can most likely be written about the shifting and ever-expanding conversation partners of theology – a history of Greek philosophy, of awakening humanism, of Enlightenment optimism, of sobering post-modernism, of voices of the other crying for justice, but also, more recently, of migration, of climate change and of emerging technologies. Abstract notions have markedly been replaced by pronounced realities of bodies, animals, water, and the cyberworld.

The shift has not only been from the abstract to the more concrete, but also one of *mood*. This subtle change has rarely been thematised, a move from idealism, an optimism to change the world through liberation, to anxiety, a cynicism about the possibility of reversing globalisation and averting ecological disaster. The hope for "flourishing" has made way for a quest for security. It is interesting to note that a 2017 issue (56/4) of the well-known journal *Dialog* includes articles by prominent and well-known scholars on "endangered selves", "theologies of tragedy and disaster", "divine disaster management", "vulnerable creation", as well as "mourning and melancholy". The World Health Organization (WHO) declared a COVID-19 pandemic on 11 March 2020! One instance of the many predictions, for most people pure science fiction, about cyberattacks, economic meltdown, nuclear doom, and ecological calamity became a reality.

Hardly any academic work captures this change in mood, or better, the horizon for thinking, better than the recently published book by the eminent historian Niall Fergusson – *Doom: The politics of catastrophe* (2021). This book includes impressive multidisciplinary research not only on the history of, but also a general theory of disasters. Theology has

extensively theorised Greek metaphysics, modernist, and post-modernist rationalities, decolonial oppression and liberation, and, recently, the newer Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies, but not pandemics, disasters, catastrophes. This has unexpectedly positioned itself on the table of reflection as the primary conversation partner.

The condition of disruption unleashed amazing intellectual powers of imagination among theologians. Among a burgeoning state of reflection, one finds attempts to make sense of the pandemic from both the Old and the New Testament, to construct theodicies of evolution and virocentric notions of evil, to suggest therapies for trauma, and to design an ethics for nature. The astounding ability of human beings to resist threats, to make sense and to adapt has been crystallising. The pertinent question for theologians is how the pandemic condition has transformed the very texture of theology. Obviously, the temptation exists to continue, in a compartmentalised and even schizophrenic manner, employing a dated grammar in one room and speaking a different one in another. The more responsible option is obviously to scrutinise one's academic discipline and enquire about responsible re-imagining. This article attempts this in a preliminary and modest way for spirituality.

3. ARGUING FOR A PANDEMIC SPIRITUALITY

The question about spirituality and the COVID-19 pandemic can obviously be framed in different ways, and the methodology of approach can vary. For example, Sheldrake (2021), in a reflection *Spirituality in time of pandemic*, opted for a personal narrative with some reference to resources to sustain spirituality. He writes movingly about the impact on his routine, how his life has shrunk, and how he has been confronted with a test for meaning, purpose, and hope. He then discusses three resources that helped him, namely visiting sacred spaces, listening to music, and reading classical texts. He emphasises that, in a time of uncertainty, one should not be tempted to seek a well-defined God, but rather embrace "unknowing", that is, God's profound mysterious nature (Sheldrake 2021:54). He also repeatedly stresses the notion of God's love – "God is on fire with love for us" (Sheldrake 2021:54, 57). Such an approach is significant and the beauty of the presentation is striking and comforting.

My own approach is somewhat different. I write as a scholar of Systematic Theology with an interest in spirituality. My point of departure is the well-known understanding and descriptions of spirituality as found in the work of Waaijman and Schneiders. From Waaijman (2006a:13) I have learned that spirituality is a "relational process" that results in

"transformation". His brief but profound formulation of the material and formal object of spirituality as "het godmenslijk betrekkingsgebeuren als omvorming" (Waaijman 2000:310) continues to give a clear direction to any reflection in this regard. Schneiders (2005:16) employs somewhat different language with her more universal description of the "conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence towards the ultimate value". The critical elements, in this instance, are God or ultimate value, transcendence or relationship, transformation or self-integration. But these should be, and this is the challenge, configured in the horizon of a pandemic with its myriad associated experiences. How is God conceptualised, what transformation takes place, and how does transcending occur?

To argue for a pandemic spirituality, one should obviously address a host of fundamental questions, one of which being the basic one of the contextuality of this discipline. In an important article, Waaijman (2006b) addresses this exact problematic. He identifies the two extremes of continuity and of difference. The one reads spirituality in terms of its sociocultural context, and the other how it differs from its context. The last one is usually linked with mysticism. Waaijman (2006b:58) opts for a dialectical relationship. Spirituality should both speak the "language of culture" and leave space for the "inexpressible", that is, the incapability of a culture to express spiritual experiences. This is arguably good and sane advice. The difficult task would be to construe a spirituality for pandemic conditions.

The attempt to relate spirituality to a quite unique historical condition, a pandemic, is obviously to be understood as a hermeneutical and constructive venture. It is neither empirically descriptive nor normatively prescriptive; it is an instance of what the late Dutch theologian Kuitert (1977:115) labelled as a "zoekontwerp", crudely translated as a "quest-design". It is an imaginative construal. Three fundamental elements in spirituality will be distinguished – God, self, and practice. These are formally aligned with the understanding of spirituality given, but with a contextually appropriate specification. A pandemic such as COVID-19 births a host of negative experiences, namely suffering, death, disruption, isolation, and injustice. Inevitably, the cardinal questions to be addressed are: How is God experienced? What is the impact on the human self? What practices are to be followed for survival? Minimally, a proposal to interpret these three would, it is hoped, map the contours of a systematic and constructive pandemic spirituality. An attempt has been made to place the interpretation within the current states of multidisciplinary scholarship and to attempt some form of coherence among the three. Ultimately, a certain

"politics" of interpretation is at stake, in this instance. Sheldrake (2016:16, 31) also refers to this. Constructions of spirituality are not scientifically objective observations; they embody values and assumptions; in his words, "not simple fixed artefacts but fluid processes". The interpretations of God, the self, and practice under pandemic conditions are expressions of this.

4. INTERPRETING STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

4.1 Naming God as hidden

The naming of God has assumed a myriad forms, especially since the last half of the previous century. God acquired new names in light of poverty, gender, race, disability, and sexual orientation. We learned about the God of the Poor, God the Mother, the God without Colour, the Disabled God, and the Queer God, to mention only a few. The task in the crisis of a pandemic crystalises easily and inevitably: How do we name God to make sense of the Ultimate Mystery?

The urgency to this assignment is to be found in the eclipse of the religious dimension in the public discourse on the pandemic. The triumph of scientific disciplines such as epidemiology and virology is being witnessed on a daily basis. Rarely, if at all, does one come across meaningful references to the Divine. Embarrassingly, one hears fundamentalistic voices about judgement, the will and plan of God. Duquoc (1992), in a seminal article, captured and theorised the deeper dilemma. According to him, a shift has taken place from the question "Who is God?" to "Where is God?" – "It is useless to ask who he is, but a matter of urgency to establish where he is" (Duquoc 1992:6).

In this instance, a complex and multifaceted theological development has been taking place, and one could only mention a few trajectories. For Holocaust Jewish scholars such as Jonas (1987:3), Auschwitz has called into question the whole traditional concept of God. He no longer thinks in terms of omnipotence, but in terms of God's self-limitation and self-restriction (Jonas 1987:9). Prominent Christian theologians such as Moltmann rejected the impassibility of God and started to speak unflinchingly about a God who suffers. For secular philosophers of religion such as Kearney (2009:167), the "old God of metaphysical causality and theodicy" should be left behind; he opts for an ana-theistic position to return to belief after atheism, which connotes "God" with "enabling" and the assigning of power and responsibility to human beings (Kearney 2009:182).

The COVID-19 naming of God should be placed in this broad direction of thinking about the Sacred. The specific proposal, in this instance, is to use the category of "hiddenness" to name God. This middle way avoids the banality of certainty found in classical theism and the excesses of atheism. Peterson (2005:208, 223), in an excellent treatment, refers to a "middle way between arrogance and unbelief". Hiddenness avoids embracing the silence of God,[1] and maintains the presence and agency of the Divine, albeit in a much-qualified register. In addition to this, it has a long tradition of reflection in Old Testament scholarship, philosophy of religion,[2] and systematic theology. This limited purview will present the interpretation of only three representative treatments by one Old Testament scholar and two systematic theologians.

Brueggemann (1997:333-358) submits a particularly rich interpretation of the notion of the hiddenness from an Old Testament perspective. The precise location of the discussion in the overall architecture of his theology is crucial. He understands "hiddenness" primarily in terms of the "providence" of Yahweh, but, and this is critical, as part of Israel's counter-testimony (Brueggemann 1997:352). When Israel experienced increasingly the absence of Yahweh's great interventions, the claims of the core testimony became unpersuasive. Textually, this prompted Brueggemann to attend to the wisdom traditions in the Old Testament, where Yahweh is viewed as the hidden guarantor of the cosmic order (Brueggemann 1997:336), a mystery that makes the world possible. The hiddenness of the divine rule renders the world reasonable, a God that is fully in control, but also "scarcely accessible and not at all reliable" (Brueggemann 1997:350). From the wisdom tradition, one may derive a sense of human freedom and responsibility, as well as "a great depth of anxiety, which ends in melancholy pointed towards despair" (Brueggemann 1997:350).

Barth's (1957:179-204) discussion of the hiddenness of God is an intellectual labour of profound depth. The hiddenness of God is the *terminus a quo* of our real knowledge of God: "The moment we have unreservedly to confess God's hiddenness, we have begun really and certainly to know God" (Barth 1957:192). It is not a statement of human incapacity; it is first and foremost a statement of God's revelation of Godself; it is "one of his properties" (Barth 1957:184). God's nature can never move into the sphere of human power; between God and man "there consists an irrevocable otherness" (Barth 1957:189). The hiddenness of God is inextricably tied to the revelation of God: this is a statement about God Godself. And, on the basis of this revelation, we can know God. In God's revelation in Jesus Christ, God made Godself apprehensible; this is not the dissolution

1 See the outstanding work by Korpel & De Moor (2011).

2 See the good overview of these two fields by Gericke (2015).

of God's hiddenness (Barth 1957:199). For Barth (1957:202), this should not lead to a "fundamental resignation" on the part of human beings; the task of theology remains, but he concedes that the nature of this knowing consists only in "approximations" (Barth 1957:202).

An encounter with Tracy's (2011) thought may be potentially fruitful for theological thinking in a pandemic situation. Throughout his academic career, Tracy displayed a sensitive antenna for "naming the present", for trends in the wider intellectual sphere, for multiple forms of suffering in the world, and for the relevance of spirituality. Above all, he has established himself as one of the seminal God-thinkers in our time. He acknowledges the achievement of modern theologies of God and the category of relationality, but he is afraid that it may become yet another system (Tracy 2011:123). For a postmodern era, he proposes that the naming of God should employ the category of the "impossible" (Tracy 2011:124). He understands this as the return of the notions of hiddenness and incomprehensibility – "the reality of God as the incomprehensible, hidden, excessively loving one has returned to the center of theology" (Tracy 2011:127). In a unique approach, Tracy associates incomprehensibility and hiddenness with the biblical "forms" of the prophetic and apocalyptic. In line with his reading of the contemporary horizon and his view that "radical suffering" is the principal issue to be faced by philosophy and theology (Tracy 2016:27), this understanding of God opens the avenue to employ language of "abyss, chasm, chaos and horror" with the naming of God (Tracy 2000:82). At the same time, this allows for speaking anthropologically about tragedy and lament (Tracy 2000:76). This allows Tracy to combine the notion of hiddenness with biblical traditions and with contemporary social conditions. The particular "twist" in his thought is his insistence that the hiddenness should not be understood in personal terms, but should be rendered "into historical-political" ones (Tracy 1996:9). This gives hiddenness a particular ethical dimension: one cannot think about God apart from the "face of the other"; God comes

> as an ever deeper Hiddenness – the awesome power, the terror, the hope beyond hopelessness often experienced in the struggle for liberation itself (Tracy 1996:8).

These three examples of interpretation convey the complexity of interpreting "hiddenness". Minimally, at least *three fundamental insights* have transpired: hiddenness refers to the very otherness of God, the very nature of the divine (Barth 1957); it could denote the strange providential power of God (Brueggemann 1986), and the presence of God is to be found *sub contrario* in conditions of extreme suffering and calls for ethical action (Tracy 1996).

4.2 Constructing a melancholic self

A constructive spirituality for a time of pandemic cannot be delineated without attention and explication of a fitting understanding of the human self. The extreme social conditions, experiences of disruption, suffering, isolation, uncertainty and exhaustion, and the problematic presence and agency of the divine, with corresponding experiences of hiddenness, absence, and silence, have not left the human self untouched. One may justifiably speak of a pandemic self.

Referring to the human "self" has a fairly short history of usage. The well-known sociologist Joas (2013:146, 151) refers to a shift from soul to self, which took place in anthropological thinking, and locates the decisive historical stimulus for this in the work of William James. This was part of the larger project of secularisation, with self-reflexivity valued as a central human capacity. No discussion of the contemporary self can take place without reference to Taylor's (1989) magisterial study on the modern self and the three features he identified: inwardness, the affirmation of ordinary life, and nature as a moral source. This remains relevant in times of crisis, especially the focus on ordinary life. With the dawn of a post-modern era, a "new self" emerged. The grammar of unity, identity, and sameness has given way to an appreciation of heterogeneity, multiplicity, difference, and endless becoming (see Schrag 1997:7). Schrag (1997:9) himself speaks of a "praxis-oriented self", and his discussion of the self in transcendence could be employed for thinking about spirituality in a new historical moment. There is a farewell to metaphysical transcendence associated with classical theism; transcendence is linked with radical alterity, with paradox, and with giving without expectation of any return (Schrag 1997:110-148). The article will return to these in greater depth.

Against the backdrop of these introductory remarks about the self, the critical question can no longer be postponed: What notion of self correlates appropriately with a pandemic and an experience of God as hidden? Several options come into view. One obvious reflex could be to speak about *vulnerability*. It may logically "fit" with the concrete characteristics of the COVID-19 impact, and it may find justification in recent philosophy and theological discourse with a fairly voluminous scholarship. In an excellent discussion, as only one expression of this, Springhart (2017:384, 387) differentiates between ontological and situated vulnerability, emphasises its embodied nature, and explores the contemporary resonances with the cross of Jesus Christ. Her insights could make sense in a pandemic situation. Henriksen and Sandnes (2018:163) argue for the correlation between a specific experience of God and a particular anthropology. They integrate an experience of God as absent explicitly with an understanding of the

human being in terms of vulnerability. Their treatment of the Gethsemane event, with the registers of absence and vulnerability, is exceptionally striking, and could be fruitfully applied to the present moment.

It can be debated whether "vulnerability" can convey the darkness and the terror inherent in the present moment. This article proposes that a category with starker negative connotations be used – melancholy. The pandemic self is a *melancholic self.* This might capture the social and religious experiences of the COVID-19 devastation, giving expression to the depth of the impact. This is a new self that is emerging; different from the "postmodern", or "algorithmic", or "mobile self" which one encounters in one's time (see Elliott 2020:136, 154, 190). Excellent academic reflection is available by scholars who probed the phenomenon of melancholy with impressive depth. Radden (2000) compiled an annotated anthology of views covering the historical period from the ancient Greeks to post-modernity. The four themes Radden (2000:5-18) distilled from her overview are fairly helpful: Melancholia takes a variety of forms; fear and sadness are most central to this form of subjectivity; there are often associations between melancholia and creative energy, and finally there is also a link between melancholy and idleness. What is noteworthy of her research, and she is recognised as an authority in the field, is that Radden (2003:38) is not willing to equate melancholy with contemporary notions of depression.

The second scholar to be mentioned, in this instance, is Feld and her seminal *Melancholy and the otherness of God* (2011). Her work is crucial for the development of the argument in this article and the construction of a pandemic spirituality. What she achieved in this study is to retrieve "mood" as a metaphysical and ontological relevant theme and reality. Melancholy, which she also distinguishes from acedia and depression, is as dark mood a privileged locus for existential and anthropological unveiling; it is a "perduring condition of the human spirit, and not only a contingent illness" (Feld 2011:xvii); it cannot be reduced to sociocultural or psychological factors. The genealogical section of the work is important for grasping the countless metamorphoses melancholia could assume. Her work, which a scholar such as Altizer (2012:32) situates in the "exposition of darkness" typical of modern theology, approaches melancholy genealogically, hermeneutically, and therapeutically. The uniqueness of interpretation is to be found in her theological perspective. She accepts Schelling's understanding of melancholy,[3] namely that it is a trace of God's otherness, the abysmal nature of God: "melancholic suffering is a trace of … God's otherness as the ground of God's darkness" (Altizer 2011:xxii). Melancholy reflects the otherness in God. The darkness of God should be

3 For a discussion of his views, see Feld (2011:115-120).

understood as pure darkness, the ultimate source of horror itself. Altizer (2011:32) understands the import of her insight as follows: "it is only in deep melancholy that we can actually know God's Other". The value of melancholy is to be understood in terms of the constitution of self-consciousness. As an ontological condition, it is fraught with theological meaning in its origin and implications. Feld (2011:194) emphasises that it has significance for a true understanding of what it means to be human: "A melancholy-less world is no longer a human world". The theological import is critical: it is "the indelible trace of God's abysmal otherness, God's dark nature" (Feld 2011:194). Feld also considers ambitions to eliminate it as "naively pseudo-scientific". Arguing for the significance of melancholia does not amount to a romanticising; it should be addressed. Feld (2011:xxvi) identifies "as fundamental therapeutic … the labor of the self in confrontation with the other – with otherness itself – through self-transcendence".

The pandemic moment with all its destructive consequences may be a generative event, even a revelatory one, as one might gain a clearer understanding of God's reality and the nature of the human condition. The arguments in the preceding sections may be sufficient ground to warrant a proposal for the constituent elements for a spirituality of our time – God as hidden and the self as melancholic. In no way are these suggestions intended to be exhaustive of possible interpretations. At least, they may have an experiential component as well as some justification in scholarly discourse. For a relative comprehensive proposal, one task remains – to intimate some practices for self-transcendence, for "transformation", or "integration".

4.3 Intimating practices of transcendence

As a uniquely human phenomenon, spirituality entails, minimally, some form of intentional act, unless one broadens the category to include human behaviour as such. It refers to acts directed beyond immediate sensory concerns. It is understandable that the notion of transcending comes into play. In this concluding section, an attempt will be made to suggest aspects of spiritual acting in a time of pandemic. Brief attention will be paid to transcending, to the *space* of such a spirituality – the daily life, to the *place* of such transcending – the body, to a unique and neglected *religious expression* – the lament, to the *direction* of a practice – the Other, and finally, to the traditional *virtue* triad – faith, hope and love. To try to delineate some facets or trajectories a pandemic spirituality might take, is to engage in what the philosopher Sloterdijk (2013:1) labels the "anthropotechnic turn", the "formation of human beings in the practicing

life". This entails a form of responsible self-care, but more: simultaneously, an ethical choice for an exo-centric engagement with the suffering world. This brief proposal is, however, the exact opposite of Sloterdijk's who contests the religious heritage; this one is pronouncedly religious, and specifically Christian.

To employ the category of "transcendence" is to step into a complex world of contemporary philosophical discourse. I will briefly refer to the scholarship of two South Africans, in order to convey the complexity of the debate and to problematise the quest for a spirituality of our historic moment. Du Toit (2011) connects transcendence to the "crossing of frontiers", and considers this a hallmark of human nature, but immediately stresses that frontiers have shifted. In every great historical era, this is perceived in a characteristic way; in a post-metaphysical one, novel approaches are required. Du Toit (2011:9) argues for a *horizontal transcendence,* a transcendence at the historical, immanent level – "the epiphany of the Totally Other in the ordinary, known world". This would also entail to think of the Divine in non-interventionist ways. Arguing from the perspective of a philosophy of religion, and exploring the same shift to a horizontal inclination, Verhoef (2016) describes three possible scenarios that relocate transcendence in the future, in liberation, and in plasticity. These attempts in no way amount to a retrieval of transcendence in a conventional, that is vertical, sense; they are explorations in radicalising immanence. Verhoef (2016:362) is sceptical as to whether one could announce the end of transcendence; he anticipates rather more creative and fruitful interpretations. This will be suggested later in this section. Resources in the Christian tradition could be used for reconstructions of religious transcendence along horizontal lines. The critical issue, in this instance, is that a spirituality for a pandemic situation would require that.

Lockdown regulations by governments worldwide impinged on daily routines. Arguably, the most prevalent experience has been one of disruption. Daily movement, interaction with colleagues and friends, and congregating for ritual purposes have been upset. Disturbance of *everyday life* has been the immediate impact. This should be theorised: the routine of hygiene, clothing, eating, travelling, walking, conversing, and touching. The convenient divorcing of the sacred and the secular, and the handy compartmentalisation of life and religious rituals have been disarranged. The quest for a new space for transcending has emerged. The construal of a spirituality for a pandemic time should start with the everyday life. The idea of "everyday life" has become the focus of study in several academic disciplines. Only a few examples can be given, in this instance, and the intentional selection of insights includes what could be relevant for the present article.

Historiography has seen a drastic shift away from fascination with royals, leaders, and aristocrats to an interest in the landless, marginal, and powerless persons (see Amato 2016). At the same time, the focus sharpened on fields of study previously forgotten, such as the "home"; in this way, the ordinary has become the "extraordinary" (Amato 2016:9; 206).

Philosophy has also joined this subject field. Janning (2015:3) identifies the following as a guiding question: "What is the potential that is yet to be actualized in each moment?". He points to the importance of "mindfulness" or awareness (Janning 2015:6). There should be an openness to allow oneself "to be formed by whatever approaches us" (Janning 2015:16).

The *philosopher of religion*, Stoker (2015), sharpens the investigation to address the issue in a fundamental religious manner. The question about "God in het dagelijkse" could move into two extreme positions (Stoker 2015:1); an onto-theological one that underestimates the difference between God and world, and basically banalises it; the other, emphasising radical alterity, removes God from the world. In his attempt to find "een spoor" (a trace) of the divine in the everyday, Stoker aligns himself with aspects of thinking by philosophers such as Kearney, who points in the direction of eschatology and sacramentality (Stoker 2015:4). Crucially, Stoker (2015:6) highlights the role of "verbeelding" (imagination).

A final brief reference may be given – that in *spirituality*. In this instance, De Certeau's work should be mentioned and Sheldrake's (2012) study is used. Spirituality is viewed as everyday "practice"; everyday life becomes spiritual exercise. For De Certeau, all human relationships are shaped by space and time, and identities are constructed by everyday practices, especially when encountering otherness (Sheldrake 2012:213). In his interpretation, Sheldrake points to the Ignatian tradition which informs De Certeau's work, especially the emphasis that God is to "found in all things". The perspective found in the various disciplines is relevant for considering the theme of a spirituality for pandemic times. The notions of home, openness and awareness, eschatology, sacramentality and imagination, and finding "God in all things" can be helpful.

Daily experiences are registered as *embodied* experiences. One cannot identify everyday life as the location of a pandemic spirituality, without deepening it with a consideration of the *human body*. A COVID-19 spirituality is a carnal spirituality. In an excellent discussion of a "history of the body", the late historian Porter (1991) captures trends in the contemporary rehabilitation of the body. The subordinate place of body to mind is a fairly well-known fact. Increasingly, however, one has started to realise that body is the crossroad between self and society; "body" is not

a timeless biological object, but is represented by cultural sign systems; it is a symbolic construct (Porter 1991:208). Prominently in the history of the body, one encounters the "politics of the body", how it has been controlled, restricted and disciplined (Porter 1991:217). One cannot talk about the self, without considering how people have made sense of their bodies. Kearney (2015) philosophically deepens these insights and argues for a "carnal hermeneutics". There is an inextricable relationship between sensation and interpretation. With the formulation of phenomenology, one meets increasingly an appreciation of the body in thinkers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur. It is interesting to note that, with Kearney (2015:106), one finds, prior to the pandemic, a prominent emphasis on *touch:* "Touch is the heart and soul of the senses". In a prophetic manner, he anticipated that touch is the place where human beings have the most primordial experience of the other; the "flesh" allows "ownness" and "otherness" (Kearney 2015:113, 118). Impressively, he finds the basis for a hermeneutic of action in the spatial materiality of the body, in the ownness/otherness (Kearney 2015:119). Considering these introductory and background insights by thinkers such as Porter and Kearney, a "reclaiming of the body for faith" (Reagan 2013:42ff.) is understandable and not difficult. In light of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the body is where human beings encounter the sacred (Reagan 2013:43). The metaphoric and ritual worlds of Christianity are thoroughly pervaded with bodiliness – the church is the body of Christ; in the eucharist, Christians partake in the body of the crucified Lord. Barton (2018) has taken up the challenges of a body theology for a concrete and practical spirituality. It is interesting to note that she discusses "practices for honoring bodies" (Barton 2018:33-39) and refers to attentiveness, fundamental experiences, caring, sensual living, listening, and "praying in the body". At stake with a pandemic spirituality is the fundamental appreciation of embodied existence, as *locus* for encountering Divine hiddenness, and as space for transcendence with mundane practices.

A pandemic spirituality is a spirituality for bleak times. Situating it in everyday life and emphasising the embodiedness do not address this sufficiently. Further features should be mapped. It is an open question whether any practice can resonate with "hiddenness" and "melancholia" as adequately as *lament*. This is the "language for our times" (Klopper 2008:124). Lament is the language of suffering; it is "an existential wail as primal as a child's need to cry" (Klopper 2008:125). It is a way to cope with the unbearable. One profound and astonishing element of the faith of Ancient Israel is to be found in the lament psalms (for example, 13, 22, 44, 88, 74). In this instance, one finds "insights into the experience of God's hiddenness", "frustration with hiddenness" (Waltman 2018:216).

In a seminal article, Brueggemann (1986), having summarised the Old Testament scholarship on lament, raises the question as to the theological significance of the lament psalms; this, he contends, "shifts the calculus and redresses the redistribution of power" (Brueggemann 1986:59). If laments were neglected, the results are a loss of genuine covenant interaction between God and God's people, and a stifling of the question of theodicy. In a significant move, he interprets lamenting in a socio-critical key; by using the lament form, "Israel kept the justice question visible and legitimate", this "mobilizes God in the public area" (Brueggemann 1986:63). With the loss of lament from faith-practice, the passion and vulnerability of God are removed from speech. The lament conveys that God is "available in assault" and this corresponds with "the emergence of genuine self and the development of serious justice" (Brueggemann 1986:65). These insights have obviously wide-ranging implications for a spirituality in pandemic times. In an interesting study, Pembroke (2010) contrasts two "spiritualities in suffering", describing lament versus consent, which he finds in the Old Testament and in Simone Weil, respectively. For Weil, God has departed from the world, and affliction should be embraced as blessing, and an unwavering attitude towards God should be maintained. The poets of lament are not prepared to live with divine inaction; they pursue a relational spirituality with a conviction that prayer actually impacts God (Pembroke 2010:3); underlying this "is a daring theology and risky practice" (Pembroke 2010:6); God is reprimanded for being unfaithful and accused of being unjust. Pembroke (2010:15) acknowledges the validity of both, but also points out the Stoic influence on Weil. A Christian spirituality for pandemic times, I suggest, should rather retrieve the biblical trajectory. It may produce a greater sense of "coping", and it harbours a much greater social justice potential.

The perennial danger for a pandemic spirituality is one of self-absorption, succumbing to the forces of a culture of narcissism. It could become privatised, concerned about personal security, survival, and healing. A pandemic is a global, public, and communal occurrence, requiring a different mode of orientation. *Alterity* could be that key, that optic. If hiddenness conveys something of the otherness of the divine, and carries overtones of justice, as has been suggested, and if melancholia may share some of these connotations, a pandemic spirituality could be conceived as a spirituality of *otherness.* This would not only express an internal coherence to the argument, but also an antenna for contemporary philosophical and theological discourse. Since the work of Levinas, especially French thinking has exhibited a fundamental ethical turn (see, for example, Gutting 2011:117-148) – the face of the other as ethical imperative. The turn to, and recovery of Trinitarian resources have resulted

in reconstructing theological anthropology along exocentric lines; it has become, according to the title of Kelsey's (2009) magnum opus, "eccentric existence". In pandemic times, this movement towards the other could assume grossly concrete application: the choices made for wearing masks, for having oneself vaccinated. The COVID-19 condition starkly disclosed massive economic fissures which call for acts of justice. A pandemic spirituality easily fits into a prophetic-critical form of spirituality. But something should be added to the argument, in order to distinguish it from a mere social and activistic ethic. The encounter with the divine is *mediated* by an encounter with the neighbour, which is most persuasively described in Matthew 25:31-45. This has been programmatically interpreted by Gutiérrez (1973:194-208): "we meet God in our encounter with men". This axiom forms the heart of a pandemic spirituality. In everyday life, amidst our crying to the Lord in lament, we meet God in the face of the other. This is the *locus* for transcendence.

The transformative impact of the spirituality proposed in this article is modest; it intends allowing persons to persist amidst bewilderment and disorientation. Discursively, it contracts a number of motifs found in existential thinkers such as Camus and Tillich. The absurdity of the condition should be accepted; life should be embraced with a *courage to be.* The typical grammar of a ladder, of a journey towards greater perfection would not do. A pandemic spirituality operates with a different logic and language. God is hidden, the mood is melancholic, transcendence should take place in the banality of everyday routine, fully embodied, with a gaze towards the other. In this condition of anxiety and even despair, one should continue with *faith, hope and love,* but these should be radically reinterpreted for a new material and disruptive moment. Typical a-historical interpretations should be dismissed. The challenge is to continue keeping the space for Ultimacy open, despite its silence and seemingly inaction; to expect some return to normality with the achievement of science, and to seek something more in the face of those who might infect one. A new theology of faith, hope and love is required, one that considers the hiddenness of God, the darkness of melancholia, and embraces alterity in all its manifestations. This is the courage this spirituality might engender.

5. CONCLUSION

The pandemic might pass, and there might be a return to a new normality. The insights generated by the intensity of the historical moment might, it is hoped, persevere. "Pandemic" might ultimately become a metaphor for extreme insecurity and instability. The angle of interpreting God, the

human self, and the practices of self-care suggested in this article may have an enduring significance. The hiddenness of God, melancholy as part of the human condition, the meaning of everyday bodily life, and the face of the other will continue to claim one's attention in one's spiritual quest.

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Keywords	*Trefwoorde*
Hiddenness of God	Verborgenheid van God
Melancholic self	Melancholiese self
Pandemic	Pandemie
Spirituality	Spiritualiteit