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Spiritual space: Hearing and experiencing the voice of God

Author:
Walter Firth[1,2]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

[2]Department of Practical Theology and Missiology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Walter Firth,
walter.firth@gmail.com

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Many countries around the world are shifting into post-secular societies. As this process continues to take shape, it enables many and competing voices and expectations to bombard their citizens. This raises questions around the use of space, sacred texts and stories, and how communities of faith use them as a source to access and hear the voice of God. Acknowledging the valuable position that sacred space and text holds within faith communities, how should we seek to hear the voice of God speak in a post-secular context and into the current competing societal setting in which multiple voices vie and struggle, and power and societal structures shift as Christians aim to find meaning, purpose and establish ways of living?

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: In the context of the secular and/or non-religious public reflex in society, there is debate around sacred space and sacred text, including how it is used and how it is interpreted. As scrutiny increases of what and how, such material is shared, used and taught, creating a space where the voice of God can speak into our current settings becomes increasingly vital. In a fast-paced world, full of busyness and tiredness, how does one hear and experience the voice of God? This study provides such a basis for Practical Theology in post-secular societies, utilising Biblical text and historical understanding, to do so.

Keywords: Bible; post-secular; spirituality; human condition; religious education; sacred site.

Introduction

As human beings, we exist in a world constructed by a library of narratives in which all meaning and understanding are subjective truths (Wendel 2016:105). Even the so-called objective truth: supposedly confirmed by science and universally accepted, is only relative; it is only realistic based on time, place, internal logic and the circumstances that people find themselves in within a given moment (Firth 2021:1). As explained by Lehaney et al. (2004), if there is an objective reality, it remains beyond our epistemological capabilities to recognise it, in a nutshell:

> [*W*]e do not have access to 'objective reality' only to that which our senses are able to show us (for Kant this formed the basis of his theory of 'Transcendental Idealism', giving rise to 'objects for us' which differ from what objects might be 'in themselves'. (p. 90)

Such a statement is not made as an attempt to undermine the validity of known and provable facts but rather to speak into the awareness of what it means to be human.

Kant's (1922:21) 'objects for us' may be readily illustrated. Yet, even the idea itself of an objective truth that cannot fail to be identified can restrict the development and growth of knowledge, ideas, truths and discoveries. Even within the scientific practice, the concrete models of scientific researchers defy attempts at comparison because not only is there no neutral measure at hand for comparing one paradigm with another but also there is also no location or space that is paradigm free from which to work when deliberating on competing paradigms (Garber 2012:504). Once one truth and/or paradigm is seen as absolute and oft-times determined from the perspective of a Eurocentric normative framework (McLean-Farrell & Clarke 2021:346), it takes significant time to deconstruct the dominant paradigm regardless of the validity and veracity of the empirical data that challenge the view of the day (González 1996:16). Indeed, many significant scientific discoveries and innovations have been advanced by those who are standing outside the normative paradigm of their time (Polanyi 1962:151). Yet even the recognition, or acceptance of a thing, is made by the observer rather than purely within the purview that is under investigation: the interpretive parameters are not universal or fixed. Take, for example, an item in the colour teal. Two different

observers may take this item and describe and categorise its colour very differently: one may say it is 'blue' and another 'green'. The ethnocultural background of these observers will also play a part in how to interpret the truth of this item's colour. The *Māori* of New Zealand and Vietnamese do not distinguish between blue and green. The *Māori* use the word *namu* for both (Dodgson, Chen & Zahido 2024:8), and the Vietnamese use the word *xanh* for both, adding a reference word like 'the sky' or 'the leaves' to describe a specific colour. The *Pirahã*, a language from Amazonia in Brazil, do not even have words for individual colours, instead describing colours as *light* or *dark* (Hidaka 2024:35). And yet, this very discussion has come from an assumed normative truth that one believes 'teal' to be a basic colour. Yet, in a further truth it is a word to talk about a species of duck; the Eurasian teal (*Anas crecca*) and things coloured like it.

To take on and explore new possibilities and new truths, one must be ready to engage with new ways of thinking; accepting one is never truly detached. This also includes the need to surrender remnant vestiges of the objective, scientific 'view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986:3). This supposed state of detached viewing has been deconstructed by Nagel (1986) but summed up beautifully in a precis by Ian McGilchrist (2010):

> A mountain that is a landmark to a navigator, a source of wealth to the prospector, a many-textured form to a painter, or to another a dwelling place of the gods, is changed by the attention given to it. There is no 'real' mountain which can be distinguished from these, no one way of thinking which reveals the true mountain. Science however purports to be uncovering such a reality. Its apparently value-free descriptions are assumed to deliver the truth about the object, onto which our feelings and desires are later painted. Yet this highly objective stance, this 'view from nowhere', to use Nagel's phrase, is itself value-laden. It is just one particular way of looking at things, a way which privileges detachment, a lack of commitment of the viewer to the object viewed. For some purposes this can be undeniably useful. But its use in such causes does not make it truer or more real, closer to the nature of things. (p. 28)

If that is one's perceived reality, then that is how its needs must be addressed. One can only engage, deconstruct and reconstruct out of shared realities and/or truths. Even the words used have an impact on what another may believe. Words sit within a context, they are a concept and part of a something bigger; the speaking of language is part of an activity, usually shared, or as forms of life (Wittgenstein 1967:11). On one level, all words uttered are a way of saying *this*, poetically also the first word spoken by Adam in the Bible (Gn 3:23). Therefore, we may use the same words, and this is ever more true in theological discourse, in addition to the *same words* being utilised with *different meanings*; nevertheless, it is equally true that *different words* may be utilised that also express the *same concept* (Strijdom 2007:43). Comparing laws of physics with theological statements misses the point. Thinking of these as truth claims is also problematic because: (1) as already covered, scientific claims may not be as objective as they are sometimes claimed (Polanyi Personal Knowledge); and (2) because they are different in types. To compare one using the criterion of the other is to make a category mistake. To put crudely, theology defies an empirical verification of the nature of God. As Mary Douglas (1999) says:

> [*I*]t is actually no more 'logical' to believe in a divinely created moral universe than to believe in an amoral self-generating universe. Foundational beliefs stand beyond the operations of logic. (p. v)

As such, the truths of the world an individual and community have been built into their lived schemas by the stories they hold to be true. Because meaning is not inherent in objects and awaits discovery, it is therefore constructed socially 'out of interaction between human beings and their world' (Crotty 1998:42). Shared knowledge, understanding and meaning flow from the relationship between a human agent and the objects of their attention. People use the information they already possess to acquire more knowledge through their own discoveries, in order to understand the world around them (Alessandrini & Larson 2002:119). As such, our realities are constructed and formed out of one's experiences and how they perceive the world (Galbin 2014:82). A consequence of this is that people make constructive connections, including with spiritual processes, which are most noticeable for them at that point in their lives.

As a post-secular society has so many competing voices demanding attention and trying to claim one's allegiance, and to be fair, none of these voices in and of themselves are necessarily bad; it can be difficult to mesh sacred text into the interactions with the wider cultures in society and find a place, particularly of sacredness, where one can speak with God and hear the answer. Without comprehensive links between how sacred text, and within Christian communities, this is predominantly the scriptures, is used and what one experiences as important issues for life, there will be no, or limited, points of cohesion between religious engagement and their lives. A concern here is that the Bible should be a source from which one can find answers to the deep and probing questions of human existence, and if one, particularly a Christian, cannot, then that raises the question of where are people and communities of faith finding these answers and what voices are they listening to.

Searching for answers

The human condition embodies the distinctive features of being human, principally the ultimate concerns of human existence. It can be described as the unchangeable component of humanity that is inherent and innate to all human beings and is not dependent on issues such as gender, race, class or culture. Four areas have been identified as the definitive concerns of human existence: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom 1980:25). These concerns encompass the human search for the meaning of life, the search for gratification, the sense of curiosity, the inevitability of isolation and the awareness of the inescapability of death. At

its core, the human condition is our self-awareness and reflexive nature that enables the examination of existential ideas. Religion is one natural tool people utilise as they seek to make meaning and define themselves. Even if in and of itself, it is not essential; after all, there are other ways to explore and answer the human condition; the clear indication that religion is intrinsically natural to humans is made evident in the fact it is extremely resilient even in the face of the most determined attempts, which have all failed, to repress and extinguish it (Smith 2012:27). Religion still persists and is not fading away. By acknowledging such, and that people's religious beliefs and understandings impact on how they engage within communities and their nation, is a recognition that one has moved into a post-secular society (Firth 2022:108).

Scientific analysis may disclose *how* our physical environment and the universe work, such as how rain clouds form, though this does not tell us *why* they do so. This question *why* is tremendously testing to answer, especially when asked by children, and pausing on *why* reveals to us essential divergences in our modern understanding of the universe (Taylor 2000:ix). In early childhood, human beings begin to develop the language and concepts to explain events and experiences to comprehend and relate to them. Current theory argues that the human attempt to explain events and experiences may have caused the emergence of language; developed language skills gave the ability for humans to communicate and share such language skills with others not of their own collectivity in order to express and share spiritual ponderings. This search for answers to *why* questions that explore meaning offers a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves and helps answer questions of: where do I personally find meaning, connection and value, which have usually been found within the domain of religion.

Spirituality

Human society has always given the impression; that on some level, it is spiritual. From humanity's early existence in the Old Stone Age, the earliest clear evidence of humankind's ancestors' religious practices is preserved (Clark & Piggott 1965:61). Evidence of this can be seen in the dead being regularly adorned in the finery worn in life, such as hair circlets and shell bracelets; they were sprinkled or painted with red ochre (a symbol of blood and life) either on the body at the burial or on the bones at a later date, and the bodies were occasionally protected by heavy bones, such as those of the woolly mammoth or stones (Clark & Piggott 1965:77). Such detail to burial custom shows, at a minimum, early humans were concerned with spiritual matters (Leakey & Lewin 1979:139). This human spirituality, present in all people, is, as described by Waaijman (2002), 'latently present as a quiet force in the background, an inspiration and an orientation' (Waaijman 2002:1) that touches 'the core of our human existence: our relation to the Absolute' (Waaijman 2002:1). This *quiet force* occasionally breaks through into our consciousness as a presence requiring careful reflection and shaping. This spirituality is an ontological reality that belongs to every human being, and it is this spiritual element that helps define the personality of an individual from birth to death (Kurjak & Chervenak 2006:167). Spirituality usually involves a cognitive framework and perspective, enabling people to make sense of 'a broad range of experiences, and to find meaning and significance in them' (Watts 2011:172). Yet, always central to the discipline of spirituality is the experience of faith.

Christian spirituality

Christian spirituality does not exist in a vacuum: it flows out of its Judaic roots and heritage and grows into a new interpretive religious community and faith groups. Judaism, and its spirituality, does not exist in isolation: it develops within community and in relation to wider societal interactions. As such, these paths of spirituality are some of the many that human beings have and do, walk, as they journey to find meaning, purpose and answers to, and in, life and how to search for and encounter the Divine.

As early Christians developed their own identity, they did so within the religious environment of Judaism and also the multi-religious and secular context of the Greco-Roman Empire and culture. It was the church's missiological imagination that not only gave it identity but also went on to inspire its theology as its early adherents, particularly those who had access to physical and personal encounters with God in Jesus, tried to share their experience and understanding with others and reframe how they lived their own and communal lives, in light of such an encounter. Mission was not marginal but central, to such a theological enterprise (Bosch 1991:16), and done by weaving elements and narrative of the Jewish scriptures, into a new story and way of being that expressed a new encounter and extension of how to find God and make meaning from this. Taylor (1996) opines that following their example, it should be the task of Christian leaders to enable their members to weave their stories into and around the great story of the Christian faith in their context:

> We are shaped by stories from the first moments of life, and even before. Stories tell us who we are, why we are here, and what will become of us. Whenever humans try to make sense of their experience, they create a story, and we use those stories to answer all the big questions of life. The stories come from everywhere–from family, church, school, and the culture at large. They so surround and inhabit us that we often don't recognise that they are stories at all, breathing them in and out as a fish breathes water. (p. 113)

Christians view the primary revelation of God in Jesus: after all, our deep spiritual truth is that of the revelation of God in Christ, which is the primary window on the Divine. The scriptures, though holding a prime place, are treated as a secondary source of God's revelation but are an authoritative witness to God's revelation in the created order (International Commission for Anglican–Orthodox Theological Dialogue 1976):

> The scriptures constitute a coherent whole. They are at once divinely inspired and humanly expressed. They bear authoritative witness to God's revelation of himself in creation, in the Incarnation of the Word and in the whole history of salvation, and as such express the Word of God in human language. (p. 1)

In many ways, the scriptures contain the greatest story ever told: that of God's unfolding story. Through the great story of the Scriptures, God has created a space in which people: individually and corporately, can and have been added as characters and who are then called to go out and share the good news of God's redemptive actions. The scriptures offer a lens through which Christians perceive reality and help to build opinions and points of view as people are invited to engage as characters within the pages of the greatest story ever told.

The ability to listen to God is thus shaped by how each responds to the stories underpinning their understanding of God. God has given the precious gift of the scriptures, a beautiful story into which humanity has been written (Firth 2022:128). Positive and engaging teaching affirms people as valued characters in God's narrative and individually and corporately nurtures faith and trust. At the same time, an engaging teaching of Scripture will also nurture love: 'do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is of God' (Jn 3 1:11). This nurturing of love should lead to a love of God, self and others. This is because we are welcomed into the story God is telling the world at the same time as we come to understand and identify with Jesus, leading us in desiring to share the story with others as we live it out. The scriptures become a true story about God's love and His justice towards human beings through the ministry and teaching of Jesus.

Just as in biblical times, there is the expectation that the experiences of God recorded in the sacred text would be studied and transmitted to following generations in order to answer how people live, interact, engage and treat one another and, importantly, how to seek out and encounter God in their own time and place. Such seeking should naturally revolve around Scripture as the Bible shares many past stories of how to hear the voice of God.

Using the Bible

Christian usage of scripture does not happen in a vacuum: it is read and interpreted from within the culture and lived experience of the reader. But like most sacred text, it has been written in a language, time and place that is only touched and evoked when one engages with the text. However, in Western cultures so far removed, when the text is read, how is this done? Is it to find or add a scriptural or theological validity and rightfulness to a cause, action or argument (Lombaard 2020:216), or is it to hear about how God has engaged and spoken in the past: keeping to what the sacred text could have credibly said in its time, and by extension get a sense of what God is doing in the present, and by methods of analogies and parables allow the text to speak into the here and now? If it is the former, then the truth of the text is rapidly deviated from to advance self-legitimisation (Rogers 2009:17): if it is the latter, then how does one read it so? In answering this question, one must realise the scriptures contain numerous forms of literature (Zahn 2020:238): some of which describe an entire book. These forms of literature include letters; ethics, regulations and laws; proverbs, songs and poetry; wisdom sayings and apocalyptic writings. Additional forms of literature are found within sections of a particular book, such as genealogies; prose narratives, prophecies; parables and prayers. Though the scriptures do contain historical information, they were never intended to be a historical document. Even the accuracy of such historical information may not be as correct as a casual observer assumes, after all the narratives of Abraham and Jacob are redacted and combined to create a linked genealogy of the two and combine the Northern and Southern Hebrew kingdoms (Finkelstein & Römer 2014:8); the events of the plagues and Moses recounted in Exodus did not occur (Hawkins 2021:23) though a small group of proto-Israelites are likely to have originated from Egypt (Faust 2015:476), and Ezekiel's prophecy regarding the city of Tyre being completely destroyed, leaving no stone standing upon the other, and none would inhabit till the end of time: though Nebuchadnezzar did ultimately lay siege to the city for 13 years, this was lifted with a negotiated surrender, no final destruction and no slaying of its inhabitants (Ulrich 2000:121). The city has since been continuously occupied, even existing today, with a lively and continuously growing population.

When God spoke

The start of the Gospel, according to John, opens with Jesus being described as an active aspect of God: the Word (λόγος) (Jn 1:1) spoken into the world and speaking to create the world. Words are essentially components of cognition: existing as placeholders that a people may use to convey, transfer and interpret concepts from one to another: in this case, a God who creates and a God who enters into the creation. On one level, the Bible becomes a mechanism regarding our search for God, how to find God, to transmit the voice of God through people, time and space. It offers a framework to answer *Sehnsucht* and a yearning desire within for God's self-communication. It is this resonance of the past in our present that stirs current widespread and active engagement in spirituality and discussion thereof: a sign of cultural shift into the post-secular age (Lombaard 2020:224). Within the Scriptures, God 'speaks' in different ways. Across the experience of the Christian faith, God 'speaking' has been understood to be both literal and figurative: including at times both in the same moment; as this communication is concurrently audible, intuitive and/or experiential (Mullins 2022:233). Any language used is an attempt to express, interpret and describe interaction and/or relationship of a God who transcends the temporal world with beings from

and within this temporal reality (Jaba 2023:151). As such, statements about God speaking may be controversial because of linguistic understanding. The construct 'God speaks' is a thread, with fibres twisted together to create yarn, which is then spun into a single strand. It is thread because of this inseparable process (Tausif, Cassidy & Butcher 2018:33). Some of the fibres may be literal, some symbolic, but it is very difficult to separate the two, and thread rejects, by its very essence of being thread, as does the human belief of God speaking, attempts at full separation of these two strands (Avis 1999:3).

Within the majority of religious and faith traditions, and for many people in the world today, supernatural beliefs and ascriptions, including hearing the voice of God, are a part of everyday life (Joubert & Maartens 2018:38). It is relatively easy to locate scriptural accounts of God speaking. These scriptural texts are commonly ambiguous in terms of historical origins, and scientifically speaking, one cannot know exactly what the experience of biblical figures was assuming such individuals to be historical characters (Lothspeich 2023:92). Regardless of the authenticity of the ontogenetical reality of biblical figures, which is not part of this paper, the textual tradition of the scriptures themselves is significant in its own right: sharing the experience of people as they engaged with God – and God with them, and is held to be authoritative (Vanhoozer 2021:218). Within these scriptures, in one way or another, God is said to 'speak' to God's people, and they are, in return, said to both hear God's voice and be capable of responding to it (Cook 2019:1). When there is a deficiency of a visible speaker and an audible voice is heard, there is an assumption of this voice being God's' voice or, at any rate, that of some form of spiritual being (Luhrmann et al. 2023:s3). When people report hearing an audible voice (Dein & Littlewood 2007:214), such claims are very often experienced by people who demonstrate no evidence of mental disorder (Cook 2019:2). Such audible assertions are not viewed as psychotic episodes (see Cook et al. 2022:273; Porcher 2024:223) and a *separaten* that demarcates such perceptual aberrations from psychosis is their affective–cognitive interpretation (Schuurmans-Stekhoven 2013:146): a significant and fundamental component of spirituality (Emmons 2000:3; Jasiński 2022:45). A significant contributing factor at play here is that God's voice permits and consigns choice to the individual regarding the accepting or rejection thereof of the advice and/or admonishments; psychotic voices, on the other hand, are habitually and frequently intrusive, and they supersede the individual's volition (Dein & Littlewood 2007:213). Although both Divine and psychotic voices may be experienced as words or sentences: either internally or externally, and can occur at any time or any situation (Randal et al. 2019:427), the divine voice appears to assist immediate problem-solving and psychosocial implementation: but not so psychotic voices (Greyson 2014:126). It is more common though, for people to express that they 'hear' God's voice through sacred texts and spontaneous thoughts (Dein & Cook 2015:97; Luhrmann 2012) and for God's voice to be manifest through other people and their actions: with the most common way that people reported hearing from God was through the love or kindness of another person (Underwood 2011:38).

Many Christians believe that God, at times, is physically near to them (Exline & Wilt 2023:465), guides or leads them and that God speaks to them: actually engaging with the mundane world as if God is a real person and/or identity in their lives (Luhrmann 2012:3). For many, such beliefs have significant real world and existential implications for the mundane, and 'nothing from empirical study of human psychology can refute religious belief' (Bloom 2009:125). Research has shown that even atheists are unable to cease and persist in the intuition of a transcendental intentionality or impetus and intrinsic fundamental to human life (Bering 2003:101). Indeed, unlike the assumption of the secular age that religion was a product of ignorance or the *Opium des Volkes* [Opium of the people] (Marx 1970:131), evolutionary biologists now acknowledge that religion is a consequential derivative of qualities of the human brain that initially assisted other purposes (Diamond 2013:336), for example: the human brain's progressively sophisticated capacity to infer and construe agency, cause and intent; to foresee and predict dangers and thereby formulate casual explanations of predictive value that enabled humans to survive and thrive. Evolutionary modernisation theory implies that something that turned out to be as pervasive and that has survived as long as religion is probably conducive to individual or societal survival (Inglehart 2021:17).

God's voice is also seen as manifest through impressive signs and wonders (Dt 6:22). This aspect of human interpretative understanding whereby explanations of both supernatural and natural coexist are manifest throughout the scriptures. John records a conversation as the time approached to which Jesus would be glorified. In John 12 Jesus speaks aloud to confirm his resolve to the trials to come:

> I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name. (vv. 27–28)

At this point, there is a moment of divine revelation: 'Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it and will glorify it again"'. Here we are told by John that this was a voice, and that it delivered a clear and understandable sentence. Yet, John, in chapter 12, describes the reaction of the crowd, and this moment embodies the reception of God's 'speech': how it is rarely certain and may well be ambiguous:

> The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder; but others said, 'An angel has spoken to him'. Jesus answered and said, 'This voice did not come for my sake but for yours'. (vv. 29–30)

What one person hears and interprets as the voice of God or the voice of God in action: (divine revelation); another person may simply hear as peals of thunder. Even today significant

numbers of people perceive mutually, the supernatural alongside natural explanations and justifications for occurrences and events (White & Norenzayan 2019:1), with there being a variety of ways whereby explanations of both supernatural and natural coexist within the mind of the individual (Legare et al. 2012:779). People may candidly support beliefs that supernatural entities may act through natural phenomenon, which may, in turn, facilitate perceiving supernatural influences on numerous aspects of life including relationships, health and finances (Exline et al. 2023:505). And at its 'quietest', God's voice is also heard in a small quiet voice (1 Ki 19:11–13).

Hearing God through others transmits a lived relationship of encounter between people. It is a sign of a communal communication. While it implies a direct line of communication between certain people and the divine, it imparts an intimacy into others by direct interpersonal engagement. This can be seen through the use of prophets being sent to speak to both communities and individuals: such as Jonah to Ninivah (Jnh 1), Ezekiel to the Israelites (Ezk 2) and Nathan to David (2 Sm 12). On another level, God speaking through others can be seen in the kind actions of those who are God's people, regardless of whether they are aware of this. This can be seen in the surprised response of the righteous when they ask 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?' (Mt 25:37–40), or in the love showed to others (1Jn 4:12) or in the works people accomplish, such as building the temple (Zch 4:9–10).

Living the encounter

How we then use that experience and/or encounter (either by marking the site as holy and returning to it or by taking it away and our worldviews being altered in such a way that our lives change) determines whether that moment or space of encounter becomes a space of life questioning and meaning making. Such space is vital as our basic human condition is one of 'questioning beings' (Heidegger 1962:24). That experience and/or encounter can then be lived and shared by others: be it in the Feast of Purim, in sharing of a Seder Meal or participating in ritualised worship that attempts to express the Divine encounter. At issue though, and frequently overlooked within post-secular societies, is that the events recorded in the sacred text are now treated as set in stone, without new levels of reductionism, review and re-editing to continue God's evolving story in the life of their communities. Herein lies the danger that the events recorded in the scriptures belong to a people who were not us and to a period significantly divorced in time to our own, and our spaces of worship that are meant to mark sacred sites and share sacred stories and instructions are not linked to the land, stories or culture they are trying to impart meaning from. Not only this, but most churches have also been built up in highly urbanised areas of suburbia and cityscapes far removed from the natural world that God utilises within the scriptures to manifest from. Furthermore, the religious leaders living in these human-constructed environments, knowingly or unknowingly, are competing with at least three gods of the secular age that are in competition for the lives and souls of the community: they being inflation targeting (Adam & Weber 2023:1), productivity (Adesina, Iyelolu & Paul 2024:1917) and work (Caruso 2006:536). In many places, churches or empty blocks of church-owned land, all viewed as assets rather than sacred space are being sold off at a rapid rate: particularly to finance the institution and stabilise its budget, rather than seeing the space as an opportunity to offer space to bring God's voice back to community.

Living beyond the encounter

Human beings need a location in space or set time outside of the mundane to awaken to their own openness to questions of the meaning of their own existence and being and from there begin to engage in the lifelong confrontation with the question of the meaning of their own absolute impossibility of existence. Without such space, there is limited capacity to cognitively integrate experience, belief, encounter, action and societal living and/or communal relations. Research by Firth (2022) showed that participants in such a space should be engaging in an unpredictable and changeable interplay of questioning and exploring meaning. Firth identified four areas as the definitive concerns of human existence: encompassing the human search for the meaning of life, the search for gratification, the sense of curiosity, the inevitability of isolation and the awareness of the inescapability of death, which are all able to be explored, questioned and revisited in such a space. This engagement assists in building the framework by which participants within it, especially younger age cohorts, will frame their world. When this space is open to engage and pass on spiritual encounter to children, it serves as a tool for encouraging a sense of wonder, awe, transcendence, healthy relationships, compassion and appreciation of and for others and a greater sense of self-knowledge and confidence, if that is made part of its focus.

Using such space to locally connect to people, and in particular future generations (oft-times represented in our children), develops and increases a sense of self-identity by providing them with biblical stories and language as tools for expressing and exploring their innate spiritual awareness within their own story. For this to occur, the space has to be treated with some form of reverence and sacredness.

Such space is something more than a simple tool, and when a leader and/or teacher (in the case of imparting, teaching and living faith and/or spirituality, elders, ministers and family members may fill such capacity) is aware of the importance of the space for questioning, they are able to engage in building the framework by which the participants will frame their world and how they engage in relationship with self, others, nature, our environment, the universe and the transcendent. As such, it is important that the space utilised for engagement is designed with this in mind and that leaders and/or teachers are taught how to give it substance so that participants can enter an effective pathway that leads to being open and wanting to explore religion and spirituality.

Sharing the space of the transcendent

The space for questioning is a communal space or wisdom that everyone can participate in, exploring questions about beliefs and perceptions of God and allowing participants to choose their own answers to questions. It is such answers that determine one's sense of ownership of their world and lives, how they include of exclude others and view and value different modalities of living and being. Such an open engaging environment also moves the sharing of spiritual and Godly encounter away from a simple didactic education in which the teacher transfers knowledge to the participant, to education with an emphasis on their learning and meaning-making capacity. Research (Thomas & Brown 2011:17) draws attention to the fact that learning for the 21st century is not happening in our current educational settings through traditional educational approaches: oft-times replicated within religious teaching and instruction settings (including sermonising). This division in approaches is clearly seen between traditional educational approaches that endeavour to tone down, limit, prohibit or deny controversy, contrasted with those being developed that aim to make such controversy more apparent in order to engage with it. This difference may be recognised as dealing with controversial matters, in contrast to teaching controversial matters. Such traditional approaches will simply be ineffective when nearly all collected knowledge, skills and capabilities, change quickly and regularly. Our society is currently grappling with deep ethical questions (Kunzman 2012:2), space for exploration and questioning provided by religious education can be a place, especially for children, to begin participating in such discourse: this could even further their interest in civics and citizenship more widely. Therefore, a new culture of learning must be embraced that comprises following two components:

- A substantial and immense information network delivering virtually unlimited access and resources to learn about anything.
- A regulated, structured and well-coordinated environment enabling infinitely unrestricted agency to construct (including deconstruction and reconstruction) and experiment inside of that space.

Indeed, the more entwined lived articulated belief is, and where there is a space to engage safely in such conversation, we move from a society of inactive religiousness to active religious participation: after all, people have and live with belief systems; the question is on imperativeness and connection of these to their lived world and how much of that is disordered and unevaluated as they have not necessarily wrestled with or cognised these. To fully implement, resource and support a space for the sacred should be at the forefront of religious change.

Developing transcendent space

Sacred space is created by building immersive experience around sacred encounters. Such a space moves one beyond the ordinary, the mundanity of everyday life (Tse, Kong & Woods 2024:1249). When we consider what *something* is, what it means; what is really at hand is not a question of whether this *something* is real or not, but rather it is an attempt for people to determine what kind of reality does *something* have and how possible it is for this *something* to from one existence to another. Take, for example, the unicorn. This mythological creature exists in stories; art further develops its beauty and then (theoretically speaking) a geneticist grows one in a lab in the future. Here one could argue at which point the unicorn, the *something*, became real, but at each point, in this process, the unicorn was always real: its existence just belonged to differing realities and may have even co-existed in different forms and with differing meanings. So too, does the sacred. There are two root foundational paths of engaging the sacred:

- **Κατάφασις [*kataphasis*]:** This is a path of contemplation and focus. Using this method, one seeks to disattend to the mundane world but to increase the internal sensory world (Bădrăgan 2016:296) by the use of words, images, ideas, concepts and the imagination (Streza 2024:2).
- **Ἀπόφασις [*apophasis*]:** This is a path of denial or negation. Using this method, one seeks to disattend to the mundane world and one's own thoughts, attempting to have no internal and no external sensations (Milbank 2024:228). This path involves clearing the mind, without a focus on an image or visualisation (Chapple 1981:34).

As humans engage in space, this touching of the sacred may occur or be created. In our post-secular societies people, even if people do not utilise churches within their communities, there is still reaction when denominations attempt to sell off 'their' local church; indeed one of my two churches was only rebuilt after significant bushfires in 2009 because of community protests (who quite promptly thereafter never graced the new building with their presence). Tourism to see particular churches and religious sites is a growing trend (Iliev 2020:131). Yet sacred space exists and is growing, outside of the Christian church building.

A function of art is that it permits a transformation of human experiences of reality. Traditionally, cultures have framed art partially in relationship to its aesthetic dimensions but additionally for its transcendental capacity. Digital and electronic media are advancing, constituting an emerging technological palette of multimodality and computational technology by which traditional art concepts may be modernised via a contemporary labelled 'technosacred art' (Ghahary 2012:iii). There is a greater understanding and intentionality in designing locations and installations in order that they become true, living, imaginative worlds of themed, immersive and consumer spaces in order that they are locations people actually desire to *be* (Lukas 2012:4). Such immersion builds on two key positions: a sense that the place creates a set of intricate feelings resulting in delight and a

disposition to remain and being engrossed in being in that place and internally creating connotations and feelings that cause more sensations. Importantly, in these places, people are not simply consuming products but also the *symbols and meaning fundament to them* (Morais & Brito 2025: ahead of print). This contemporary advancement in the intentional creation of sacred space builds up a polyvalent aesthetical environment forming immersive architecture and non-religious structures utilising this concept: becoming sacred space, which includes art galleries, museums, shopping centres and theme parks.

Art galleries enable art to create a separation that breaks and/or penetrates the boundaries of mundane, conditioned modes of perception, in order to experience alternative, new and/or unexpected feelings (O'Sullivan 2006:1). Art galleries are now turning spaces into worlds in which one can immerse themselves into the art. This can be seen in places like THE LUME Melbourne (GRANDE Experiences 2025) and teamLab Tokyo (Mori Building Co., Ltd, teamLab 2025). Museums are doing this utilising their resources and collections to facilitate enhanced learning and understanding through immersive and distance-based experiences (Todino & Campitiello 2025:3). Frye (2015) states that this can be seen and/or experienced in theme parks such as *Disney's Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge* created intentionally to evoke the sensation of having entered into the Star Wars movies:

> [*R*]inging *Star Wars* to life in the physical world gives us the opportunity to play with a whole bunch of things we've never done before... to really engage all of the senses. What does that street feel like? What does that animal smell like? What does blue milk taste like? (p. 23)

When reviewing sacred space in post-secular societies, one must keep in mind that it is still emerging or re-emerging and is never truly set in stone. Leaving the confines of buildings, many have found the sense of sacred space engaging with nature walks or attending nature retreats (Lea 2008:90). Part of the noticeable difference between secular and post-secular in this domain is the shift in language and terms, such as the Japanese *shinrin-yoku* [forest bathing], a practice involving spending time in a forest to improve physical, mental and spiritual well-being that involve religious and/or spiritual language (Hansen, Jones & Tocchini 2017:851). Tourism, travelling and going on holiday take people to experience sacred space in another place, country, culture or community. At this moment, the mundane for the *autochthon* of the city becomes exotic and otherworldly experience(s) for the tourist, allowing them a sacred encounter (Lv et al. 2025:1). This experience can then lead to greater protections of significant sites previously ravaged by secularism through the fostering of ethical relationships (Olivadese & Dindo 2025:109). Just the dream of these locations or objects can give people a sense of the sacred and when travelling to experience first-hand such sacred space and/or objects, there is the possibility of psychological reactions such as Stendhal syndrome (Airault 2015:509). A result of this growing recognition of sacred space and/or sites has also led to a re-emergence of respecting and seeking to restore and protect local indigenous sacred sites, practices and spirituality within post-secular countries (Chamberlain, Donnelly & Jones 2024:101802).

Religious groups are also continuing to experiment with sacred space with online churches. Such 'churches' are virtual communities aiming to practise traditional religious goals, including worship, teaching, discussion and fellowship via computer-mediated interaction (Hutchings & Roger 2010:2). And while attempting (online) to communicate with God and worship with people from around the world, while remaining alone is an eccentric and innovative experience, there is a difference between such engagement and entering into sacred space, and the actual experience of the online environment can be an obstacle to virtual sacred space. Some of the attempts made to offset aspects of the online environment that possibly lessen the effectiveness of spiritual experience are done by intentionally framing online religious activity using the traditional structure and the physical church experience (Kluver & Chen 2008:135). The greatest current obstacle to virtual sacred space for online churches is that participants are continuously cognisant and attentive to the fact they are participating in a synthetic environment (O'Leary 2004:56): a significant obstacle to any sense of immersion. How this develops is not yet determined. As technology moves to create more immersive home digital experiences, such online religious communities may also be able to deepen the constructed sacred environment. Conversely, it may be that, with increasing time in front of screens, the sacred space will develop further outdoors with the communal sense of belonging being a part of the online engagement.

When God speaks, are we listening?

People are more religious than ever (Juergensmeyer 1993:1), yet they are not engaging in our religious or sacred spaces (Yaden et al. 2023:272). This means that current Christian methods of teaching and imparting the faith are not connecting. If we believe that God still speaks, then where is God speaking? Who is God speaking to? What space are people having spiritual encounters? What do they do there? Just like the early Christians as they developed and redeveloped their own identity within the religious environment of Judaism and also the multi-religious and secular context of the Greco-Roman Empire and culture, this calls us to go out into their worlds: engaging with people where they are at; giving language to their encounters with the transcendent; affirming and protecting their sacred, and emerging sacred places (Jennings 2020:4). Ultimately, we need to give them space to share their experiences and encounters of the Divine, the transcendent, and use this engagement to tie their stories into the great love story of the scriptures.

Conclusion

Once upon a time, it was the church's missiological ingenuity and creativity that gave it identity while also inspiring its theology as its adherents attempted to share their experience and understanding with others and reframe how they lived their own (and communal) lives in light of physical and personal encounters with God in Jesus. A missional questioning and exploration were crucial to such a theological enterprise and done by weaving elements and narrative of the Jewish scriptures, into a new story and way of being that expressed a new encounter and extension of how to find God and make meaning from their experiences. Such reframing and reimagining are needed now for Christians to re-engage in our post-secular societies in order for our faith to find new life and meaning in and with new generations of people as they seek answers to the human condition.

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