

# Nudged by *Nathan* Following a Lessing line in interfaith theology?



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Whereas a widespread malaise about the truth quality of much written and spoken communication had in our times apparently also infected the sensitive area of theological interfaith discourse, an injunction like the following of the apostle Paul receives renewed urgency: 'the 'kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power' – against the background of the apostle's own display of kingdom power 'as if in a theatre' (see 1 Cor 4:9, 20). The objective of this research study was to probe whether the recent leaning towards a more 'dramatic mode of theologizing' might be conducive to preventing the Christian interfaith discourse from descending into powerless talk about the kingdom of God. It, moreover, hypothesised that a 'doing of the truth' (in the Johannine sense of the phrase) – analogous to the faithful improvisation of an original theatrical script (in this instance: Holy Scripture) – could add value to the truth - claiming of Christianity in its encounter with Jews and Muslims. The method was followed for analysing the famous Enlightenment literary drama of Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, to find a possible cue for proceeding in such a direction, and if found – to heuristically build thereon for such a real-life, contemporary interfaith discourse. The result was that Lessing's 'Parable of the Three Rings' yielded some cue, which, however, was found to be deficient. Only filtered through Barth's razor-sharp evaluation of the beautiful Lessing drama and then fitted into a Barthian view of the 'Light and the lights', which was, for its part, adapted to Calvin's grand vision of the world as *theatrum Dei gloriae*, the cue could be moulded to be acceptable for our purpose. A notion of historical-dramatic interfaith encounter thus emerged, where truth is not precluded in undecided tolerance but precluded in expectation of its full eschatological uncovering. Employing this – reframed – 'Nathan nudge', a conclusionary sketch could be given of a theological interfaith contest, conducted as if biblical truth resounded through the Christian's whole body in an interactive 'inter-play' with Jews and Muslims. This conclusion was highlighted by some improvisatory, preludeal, hospitable and Christocentric accents inherent in such a rendering.

**Contribution:** This article showed one way out of the impasse that threatens a form of interfaith truth claiming constructed around 'mere words' – which, moreover, are deemed to be 'final'. By proposing a prelude – and yet not precluding – of Christian truth, it hopes to add value to interfaith kingdom theology that really matters.

**Keywords:** interfaith theology; dramatic improvisation; Lessing; *Nathan the Wise*; Barth; Calvin; pilgrims' prelude.

Wheresoever Truth may be, were it in a Turk or Tatar, it must be cherished...let us seek the honeycomb even within the lion's mouth. (Van den Brink 2020:32, approvingly quoting de Brune, a reformed author from the 17th century)

## Introduction

### Theme

This research article<sup>1</sup> explores the question whether *concrete theological interfaith discourse* – in this second decade of the 21st century – might be conducted in a mode, which resembles 'interactive theatre', understood as a 'company of "costumed interpreters" whose task is to draw the audience ("guests") into the action' (Vanhoozer 2019:178–179). This approach should encompass *and* transcend 'epic' (objectively descriptive) and 'lyric' (subjectively existential) theologising (cf. Wells 2004:46–53). Such a point of view seems to be very congenial to a reformed theology, which in its distinctive *covenantal emphasis* 'involves a strong focus on the *dramatic history* of the relationship between God and humanity' (Van den Brink 2020:32, in relation to the covenantal drama *vis-à-vis* creation and evolution; [author's own emphasis]). An interfaith theology like this

1. A first draft of this research article was a paper delivered at the *International Barth Congress* (Stellenbosch, 21–25 October 2018).

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could, indeed, fittingly be aligned to a 'dramatic code for twenty-first century theology', as sketched by Ford (2011:43–67, in an attempt, as Anglican theologian, to show a global way forward for theology). It can also feed into the rising reappraisal of *homo ludens* in this global civilisation of ours, with its widespread 'shortage of play', which Bregman (2020:280–295) sees as a symptom of an overly pessimistic anthropology (cf. also Armstrong 2019:9, on the urgent epistemic retrieval of an equilibrium between the two hemispheres of the brain). In our enterprise, we especially focus on invitations to and engagements with the other two 'Abrahamic' religions – Judaism and Islam – against the background of their tragic alienation from Christianity (cf. DeGruchy 2002:115–121 on the Abrahamic religions).

We investigate on how, if at all, Lessing's well-known interfaith drama, *Nathan der Weise* (1979),<sup>2</sup> might today present cues to theologically encounter the other religions 'as if in a crowded theatre' (cf. below). In this quest, we seek assistance from Barth's assessment of Lessing. Could we be prompted to give theologically motivated *real-life hand and feet* to what Calvin so eloquently expressed in the following utterance?:

If believers must not neglect to drive away the darkness of others by their own brightness, how much less do they have to be blind as to their own conduct in life? What darkness shall conceal those on whom Christ the Sun of righteousness has arisen? Placed as it were in a crowded theatre (in *celeberrimo teatro*) they ought to live under the eye of God and of angels. Let them stand in awe of these witnesses, though they be concealed from the view of all mortals. Dismissing the metaphor of darkness and light, he (Paul) enjoins them to regulate their life 'circumspectly as wise men', who have been educated by the Lord in the school of *true wisdom*. (Calvin 1863a:220, 1970:1989, commenting on Eph 5:15; [author's own emphasis])

Perhaps, a *kairos-moment* has now arrived to *concretise*, in terms of interfaith theology, such a vision of Christians' wise conduct and testimony amongst others. The great world religions today 'are all caught up in a transition to a new world era...It is almost impossible to predict their future in the third millennium' (Küng 2002:xiii). Our investigation is aimed at prompting contemporary interfaith conversation into a new openness for the theological 'perhaps' – a *perhaps* that 'galvanizes a new way of thinking... pointing like the arrow of a weathervane to the promise...a refusal to be taken in by an accident of birth' (Caputo 2013:6; the fatalism in speaking of 'accident of birth' is in our understanding – and in his own way, also in Caputo's – countered by the luring biblical 'promise'). After this century's second decade, we live in what can be called a 'burn-out society', having arrived in a 'viral desert' in which the coronavirus has 'triggered a vast epidemic of ideological viruses which were lying dormant in our societies: fake news, paranoid conspiracy theories, explosions of racism', as sharply analysed by Žižek (2020:19, 38–39) of our world situation. Once again, we stand 'terrified', like the brilliant

Christian apologist Pascal nearly four centuries ago (Pascal 1956:198; cf. also Durand 2015:72–107 on the specific quality of Pascal's 'Christ-oriented mysticism'). He found himself as it were waking up 'not knowing where he is' within 'this whole, silent universe, and man without light, left to himself, and as it were, lost in this corner of the universe'. Once again, humanity's search for the Ultimate – despite secularism – is, particularly in the West, returning with a vengeance amongst our widely uprooted world population (Armstrong 2019:427–430, in her more phenomenological survey). All deep-thinking people somehow yearn for unfading light, life and 'deep, deep eternity' (Nietzsche n.d.:289).<sup>3</sup> Serious seekers seem to be bewildered in this 'time of loss, grief and uncertainty' (Brueggemann 2020:1). With their 'restless hearts' aching for the true God who has created them with such longing (cf. Augustine 2004:5; *Confessions* 1.1.1.; cf. also the excellent chapter of Van Wyk 2018:51–87, on the African Church Father's search for the living God), these spiritual vagabonds frequently stand baffled before a 'swirling vortex' of religious choice possibilities (Guinness 2010:164).

Many church-going Christians are, however, still caught up in a paralysing *bourgeois* 'mediocrity' (cf. Van Onselen 2015:184–205, for a disturbing analysis of mediocrity; cf. further Scruton 2019:4, on a state-guaranteed, settled *bourgeois* lifestyle of 'freedom, security and wide culture'). They appear to be felicitously undisturbed in their modernistic 'fetishization of the literal, the unacknowledged presupposition that language refers to things that are pre-linguistic' (Ward 1998: xxi). A way must be found to 'jolt (*bourgeois*) thinking out of its habitual ruts'. The way we are proposing here is by getting it 'back into play through dramatization', as the famous philosopher, Hannah Arendt, in the previous century is said to have performed (cf. Knott 2015:112; [author's own emphasis]). Such a shock would require a resolute retrieval of *imagination* as a legitimate aspect of theological-systematic thinking (cf. Henderson 2017:262–271; Kuitert 2005:41–64; McGrath 2017:122). This surely does not have to be too difficult today, also in interfaith theology, because physicists of our times are actually 'out-imagining, out-wondering and out-wowing' philosophers and theologians; physicists simply 'have more imagination' (Caputo 2013:195; cf. also Küng 2007:40–42 cf. further Hawking & Mlodinow 2010:5–10, 172). However, lack of imagination unfortunately still seems to be rife amongst many reformed Christians (cf. McGrath 2004:207–212; cf. also Bailey 2018:22, who argues for a protestant openness to 'the surprising work of the Spirit' in wider cultural imaginations). In short, this investigation is aimed at applying to inter-religious discourse the recently 'tremendously promising' development of 'performance' studies across a variety of disciplines. Theologically employed, the performance concept becomes 'a paradigm to understand how Christians historically have put feet, as it were on their interpretations of the Bible' (Blowers 2012:367; Horton 2002:206–211; cf. also

2.All translations from non-English sources are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

3.In appropriating an appealing and illuminating statement like this, the intention is to widen the sounding board against which our investigation echoes; not to claim someone like Nietzsche – out of the Zarathustra-context – for our cause.

Thiselton 2007:405–420; Vander Lugt 2014:1–28). In interpreting the Gospel imaginatively today, ‘the *basic gestures* of which man is capable on his stage’ should be included (cf. Von Balthasar 1994:111). This ‘incarnated’, whole-person mode of faith performance might also inculcate the ‘dramatic reversal’ that *decolonisation* brings about – from our projected, mostly prejudiced understanding – of ‘the other’ (geographically, culturally and religiously) to a real, *embodied other* (cf. Ward 2017:575). Rightly, it was observed:

A specific ‘way of life’ is not just composed of a set of *abstract* (Christian, Muslim) ‘values’, it is *embodied* in a thick network of everyday practices: how we eat and drink, sing, make love, how we relate to authorities ... (Žižek 2017:174; [author’s own emphasis])

## Outline

*Firstly*, the focus falls on Lessing’s literary dramatic presentation of interfaith contest between members of the three Abrahamic faiths. *Secondly*, attention will be paid to certain insights gathered through Barth’s lens on *Nathan the Wise* as it can be fitted into a wider lens of dramatic perceptivity in his own theology. That widened lens is apparently tinted with a Calvin colouring. The question is as follows: does Barth’s thinking, in this regard, propel forward whilst also rectifying the impulses from Nathan? *Thirdly*, with a lens thus reset, we present theological pointers for a Christian participation in real-life, day-to-day interfaith encounter, conducted ‘as if in a theatre’. *Finally*, a brief conclusion is provided.

## Lessing’s interfaith dramatic

### Enlightenment background

The ‘diminished life of the modern world’, according to Moltmann (2015:8), can be epitomised in the ideal of a human person who has outgrown any ‘religion’ and is thus now satisfied that it is ‘enough to be a man’ (*es genügt ein Mensch zu sein*). He finds this expression in the famous drama of Lessing (1979:62;2.5), one of the 18th-century authors in whom the core of the ‘Enlightenment’ comes to fruition, namely, the courage to think for yourself (*sapere aude!*), and in this way to find *light* against the darkness of traditionalism and bigotry (cf. Küng 1985:85–86). For such a person, the universal standards of humanity suffice. ‘He or she has become, religiously speaking, a “sufficient” person’ (Moltmann 2015:8). Despite his ‘studious indifference’ (Mendes-Flohr 2013:2) to religious differences – linked to his appraisal of the sufficiency of humanness – Lessing, nevertheless, accomplished a ‘liberating deed’ for the Christian faith in which he had been raised. He refrained from finding ‘in faith statements *metaphysical truths*...which were revealed in history... (in this regard) he knew more of Christian faith than his orthodox opponents’ (Lohse 1974:28–229; [author’s own emphasis]). This ability of Lessing to grasp the essence of various faith positions, sometimes better than their adherents, and, yet, not committing to any of them, makes it understandable that Henriksen (2001:56) can describe how Lessing ‘usually hid behind a “mask”, an

adopted persona’.<sup>4</sup> He frequently employs different opinions in a debate or various actors in a play to ‘test’ certain contradictory aspects of ‘truth’. This constant searching and repositioning typify the freedom of the Enlightenment person ‘to wear a mask, hide his face and change his position’ (Henriksen 2001:58). Famously, Lessing preferred the *search* for truth to the *possession* thereof (cf. Yasukata 2002:24). If ever there was a harbinger of the ‘great crossroads’ in Kant, where ‘all the streets’ of the new Enlightenment age intersect (Von Balthasar 1963:24, 29), it was Lessing.

## Parable of the three rings

Lessing’s *Nathan* play confronts the gaping chasm between Christians, Jews and Muslims with the ‘Parable of the Rings’. Of course, it is not the first time in Christian history that the relation between these faith communities has evoked serious consideration. One of the earliest dialogues was the one conducted by the Samaritan Christian, Justin the Martyr, with the Jew, Trypho, in the mid-second century (cf. Van de Beek 2004:395–396). Much later, especially the great discourse by Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), *De pace fidei* (On the peace of faith) can be perceived as facet of a ‘*Türöffnen* (opening a door) to Modernity’ (Hopkins 2002:29). Nicholas pictures a Christ-convened ‘heavenly council’ where the Logos proclaims: ‘[y]ou will (all) find ...not a faith that is *other* but a faith that is one and the same’ (Nicholas of Cusa 2000:4; 4.10). Lessing’s vantage point is *different*: he is interested in the truth claims of the three Abrahamic religions, ‘not as contingent truths within a paradigm of epistemic relativism’ (Chambers 2013:25) but as ‘*Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft*’ (proof of the Spirit and the strength) (cf. Henriksen 2001:36). This is the point of the three rings (in the parable), which were given to the three sons by the father (of which only one ring is the true one and the other two exact replicas). Whereas no absolute truth claims are possible *within* history (only hereafter, through the judge’s revelation), each son (religion) should *act as if* his ring is the true one (Lessing 1979:91; 3.7).

In this way of dramatising how the true ring’s mysterious power, exuding love, tolerance and unique friendship,<sup>5</sup> might motivate all three religions, the play moves forward towards an overwhelming ‘endplay’ of universal peace, ‘symbolically mirrored in the great feast of embrace’ (Küng 1985:96), as celebrated by the actors of the different faiths in a remarkable unison. Yet, for practically the great majority of human beings it is still a question of faith in the historical truth *in which everyone is born*, as intimated by Nathan to Saladin (Lessing 1979):

*Nun, wessen Treu und Glauben zieht man den  
Am wenigsten in Zweifel? Doch der Seinen?  
Doch deren Blut wir sind? ...  
Wie kann ich meinen Vätern weniger  
Als du den deinen glauben? Oder umgekehrt.* (pp. 89–90; 3.7)

<sup>4</sup> ‘Masking’ can function as ‘framing’, helping the wearer to be present ‘incognito’ (cf. Scruton 2012:90).

<sup>5</sup> Apparently, there is a difference between Lessing’s concept of friendship and the compassion advocated by Rousseau (cf. Hoe 2018:12–14).

## Looking through a lens of Barth-with-a-Calvin-tint

### What Barth appreciates in Lessing

During the turbulent years of 1932–1933 (Hitler's rise), when Barth was revising and extending his lectures on the Protestant theology of the 19th century (cf. Busch 1976:221), he detected in Lessing's view of history a *dramatic element*, which he could – congenially – appreciate (Farlow 2011:6; [author's own emphasis]; cf. also Hunsinger 2003:57 who groups 'perhaps the two greatest theologians of the twentieth century', Barth and Von Balthasar together, into what he calls 'postliberal' theology). To be sure, Barth criticised Lessing's view of history seen *ipso facto* as *revelatory* history – and as such the phased way in which man is educated to realise what is *inherently* latent in his humanity. For this process to fulfil itself, a revelation *from beyond*, from God, 'is unnecessary'; that kind of revelation is in Lessing 'utterly precluded' (Barth 1959a:146–147; [author's own emphasis]; cf. also Moltmann 2000:70). Nevertheless, in Lessing's thinking about providential 'steps' or 'the course visible in the history of the religions' Barth (1959a) discerns something 'new' in Lessing compared with other Enlightenment innovators:

[T]he discovery of the *dramatic quality* active in history, which gave him the courage to utter the old word 'revelation' with a new solemnity as a description of this course (of history). (p. 148; [author's own emphasis])

Barth (1959a), however, cannot accept *any form of* a dramatic interfaith discourse in which:

God is given a *final* word concerning the dramas and drama of human history, after having in principle cut God off from every word *preceding the last* word spoken, or to be spoken, within this history? (p. 148; [author's own emphasis])

To summarize, firstly, Barth appreciated Lessing's move to extract the historical relativity of religious truth claims out of the Enlightenment fixation on indubitable truths of the *ratio*. Furthermore, he welcomed Lessing's initiative to employ a literary dramatic form wherein the contest for the various truth claims of Christians, Jews and Muslims could be played out. Thirdly, Barth goes along with Lessing's strong opposition to 'the tyranny of the *one ring*' (Lessing 1979:91). Finally, Barth rightly differs strongly from Lessing's 'solution', namely, that truth claims by any of the faiths during the course of historical progression are *precluded*, because the question, who *has* the truth, will be decided only *after* history's end. The question that we are investigating, however, is whether such truth claims cannot be *precluded* along the way.

### Barth on the Light and the lights in 'God's theatre'

Already in 1922, during a time when his form of 'dialectical theology was germinating (cf. Busch 1976:138, 152), Barth (1995) could speak of Calvin as not putting the Logos 'as it were on a lampstand' but from the outset seeing the other lights in Christ's light:

Calvin does not try to honor [*sic*] Christ by putting him on one side, by putting him, as it were on a higher lampstand, and then putting out all the other lights so as to let this light shine triumphantly; he sees all the other lights from the very first in the light of this one light. (p. 165)

At that time, however, he did not situate the relation of the lights to *the Light* in dramatic framework, namely, within the co-ordinates of Calvin's famous metaphor: creation as the *theatrum gloriae Dei* (the theatre of God's glory) (cf. Calvin 1962a:57). Later, during 1958–1959, in his *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Volume 4.3, Barth explicitly contextualises the prophetic dimension of his Christology into *this* dramatic framework (cf. Moltmann 2000:77, on this move of Barth). His testimony to Christ as the unique and *unsurpassable Light* of the world is not through isolating 'particular events' as such in Christ's life, being and word, nor through 'dark metaphysics'. 'In all its parts and under every thinkable aspect', this *history of the Light* rather constitutes:

[T]he unfolding of a *drama*. And otherwise than in unfolding of (ordinary) dramas, couldn't also that which pertains to the Holy Scripture, (and) ... those extraordinary self-testimonies of Jesus Christ be (dramatically) delineated or described'. (Barth 1959b:154)

The real-life drama of Christ, *the Light* which no other light could ever equal and who is also *not merely a ray* – albeit the main one – from an *overarching light*, which sends forth also other lights but who himself is the *Fountain of Light* is the *main thought* of Barth's thinking in this regard. However, he also stresses the *secondary* thought that other lights truly exist in as far as they are evoked by the Light (Barth 1959b:152; cf. Conradie 2013:157; cf. also Kunz 2013:366–371):

They are the lights and truths of the *theatrum* of the *gloria Dei*. That – and that alone – is the meaning of the being and the existence of the by God created world: to be the theatrical stage, the appropriate space for the great deeds of God ... (mirroring) ... the eternal Light who enters the world and gives it a new glow'. (Barth 1959b:173–174)

Barth acknowledges the possibility to discern God's 'speech and the witness to his speech outside the confinements' of the 'narrower, the smaller, the biblical-ecclesiastical' divine theatre and thus also in the sphere of a (wider) 'theatre of his lordship', Therefore, 'parables of the Kingdom' – in the real 'fullness of the biblical concept' – must also be expected outside the Christian-ecclesiastical 'theatre' (Barth 1959b:131):

In the very narrowness, in which they (Christians) have their place and their charge, they can do nothing else than also listen out into the wideness. Especially they have ears to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd also there, (and) to differentiate it from other voices that are obviously also to be received from there...in order to become better, more discerning, more truthful ministers of his (God's) word. (Barth 1995:131)

Concluding the present paragraph, one can agree with Moltmann (2000:77–78) that Barth's view on the Light and the lights 'offers nothing new over against a consciously Christian natural theology' – and we might add, especially as

it was presented by Calvin, in his perspectives on 'natural revelation' in creation and history (cf. Welker 1999:21–32). However, could exactly this extension in Barth of Calvin's perception of the Light and the lights not be legitimately combined with his extension of Lessing's rediscovery of the historical dramatic in interfaith discourse? In other words, could the dramatic unfolding of *the* Light in the Christian history of revelation *not be juxtaposed to and as such be engaged* with a dramatic unfolding of the smaller lights, particularly in the history of Judaism and Islam (cf. Küng 1992:57–216, 2007:143–429, for comprehensive surveys of these two religions' respective histories)?

## Real-life interfaith contest as if theatrical interaction

### From art to life

During the Enlightenment era, 'the myth of history as a redemptive drama was not abandoned but renewed in another guise', namely, a secularised 'attire' (Gray 2018:25). The irony is 'that we are living a drama in the West that has never repudiated Christendom' (Horton 2008:286, referring to the secularised Western meta-narrative).

The *mask* under which Lessing approached the dramatic rendering of 'redemptive' interfaith truth-seeking was that of the literary dramatic rendering, the detached, neutral observer (cf. above). As we have seen – also through the lens of Barth – Lessing's literary endeavour surely nudges us *to take up again* this never-abandoned redemptive drama (cf. Auerbach 2007:14–23, for a gripping account of the slow but sure penetration, during the first millennium, of the dramatical 'mimetic content' of the story of Christ) in a *living interplay* of differing faith perspectives. Thus, in the *public* body politic or *public* amphitheatre, or on the public marketplace (cf. Cupitt 2010:98, for these metaphors of the public domain), we participate daily in

[T]he greatest drama ever staged ... no longer merely as spectators ... but as a growing cast of pilgrims making their way together behind their royal Redeemer in a procession to the City of God. (Horton 2011:32)

### Preludial improvisation

Vaticanum II (1965:2, 21) articulated a widely retrieved insight of our times when it confesses Christ as *the Lumen gentium* (*the Light* of the nations). It also quotes Augustine's beautiful sentence about the church's *pilgrimage* (citing *De civitate Dei* 18.51: '*inter persecutiones mundi et consolationes Dei peregrinando procurrit*'). Over against Lessing's understanding of *history as progression* towards a Third Age of utopian rationalistic man (cf. Küng 1995:684, 768–769), we espouse a theology of *pilgrims on the way* (Horton 2011:13) – eschatologically moving forward in humility, across all the liminalities of history (cf. Van Wyk 2018:107–109, on Augustine and humility). *Preludes* of the divine kingdom play's *Grand Finale* are enacted on the public highways, whilst improvising on biblical promises in the canonical 'Script'

(cf. Horton 2014:57). '*Sola Scriptura sui ipsius interpret*' remains the primary hermeneutical guideline (notwithstanding tradition being *norma normata*).

Following this reformational guideline for our light-bearing in 'this most glorious *theatre*' (cf. Calvin above), we not only use our sight but our 'special duty is to give *ear to the Word* (*auris tamen praecipue arrigere convenit ad verbum*) that we may better profit' in this theatre (Calvin 1962a:66; 1.6.4, 1863b:54; [*author's own emphasis*]). If *giving ear* to the Word is like a performative *action* in a theatre, not less are the *dramatic* 'responses' (*oracula*) resounding through the Word. They sound in the ears turned to them, '*as if* (*ac si*) the living voices themselves of God (*vivae ipsae Dei voces*) penetrate their ears from there' [the Scriptures]. The 'hearers-becoming-performers' thus get convinced that the Scriptures 'have come from heaven, as directly *as if* (Latin: *sicut*) God had been heard giving utterance to them' (Calvin 1962a:68; 1.7.1, 1863b:56; [*author's own emphasis*]). Of course, 'there is no guarantee in the reader's hand that can be cashed in (for the '*as if*') at the end of reading' (Kort 1996:30). Yet, through '*the secret testimony of the Spirit*' (Calvin 1962a:71; 1.7.4, 1863b:59), a Christian who reads and re-reads Scripture in such a 'dramatic' expectancy *as if* he hears the real, living voice of God from heaven, can trust fully 'that this "theatre" will undermine, expose and subvert old truth held too long, that smells of denial, despair and death' (Brueggemann 2002:105). Thus, in our interfaith improvisatory 'performing' of Scriptures (cf. Blowers 1996:1), the secured 'givenness' of the Enlightenment paradigm can be unsettled. To be sure, this requires a *beggar's attitude* (cf. Luther's death-bed scribble containing this thought, in Metaxas 2018:432). It is through being soaked by such humble Spirit-led interiorising of the gospel, using all possible tools of exegesis and hermeneutics, one can become sensitive to the 'surprise' (Schindler 2004:605) of the dramatic '*as*' and '*counter-as*' embedded in faith (cf. Brueggemann 1993:13, 14, 65; Ford 2007:62, 2011:195). We mirror imaginatively as if in a drama how 'by faith...we enter into the light of God, but *only in part*...it is a "light unapproachable" by man' (Calvin 1970:2220, commenting on the First Timothy 6, verse 16; [*author's own emphasis*]). An eschatological residue remains. We do not possess the *final* truth here and now in a mathematical-certain *intellectual grasp*, only in faith, hope and love. This in no way means shirking an interfaith *contest* for the truth (Volf & Croasmun 2019:95–96). It only means to put into practice what the Dutch theologian Van Ruler so wisely verbalised:

The content of our faith-knowledge is a *riddle*...This is surely as God willed it. The whole reality thereby gets something of a play, an enigmatic play, the party game that God plays with us... *The riddle must be solved. This truly is the tension of a play.* (Van Ruler 1975:159, meditating on 1 Cor 13:12; author's italics)

### Showing hospitality

One can concur with the observation of Berkouwer (1970:200) – half a century ago – that a 'judgment expressed

with comprehensiveness in theoretically and closed statements are denied to us', as we negotiate *the borderlines* of who are in and who are out of Christ's fold. It is imperative for Christians who encounter non-Christian religions today to absorb again a discourse like the classical one of Rahner (1967:3–55) on 'a theological interpretation of the position of Christians in the modern world'. He rightly emphasises that it is 'not a truth but a heresy that there is no grace outside the Church'. We cannot longer think from that point of 'juristic exclusiveness' (Küng 1965:81) from which *Cyprian of Carthage* understood the old *adagium*, '*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*' (outside the church no salvation). Although a pastoral attitude permeated that great African church leader's work in an era of persecutions and backsliding (cf. Hamman 1971:71–82), the axiom in question, nevertheless, functioned, in his case, as a 'mere theory', which did not correspond to the actual expanse of those whom Christ's grace had touched decisively (cf. Von Harnack 1961:90). During long centuries after Cyprian, this formula apparently was a factor for inhibiting open 'exchange' between Christians (Roman Catholics and Protestants alike<sup>6</sup>) and adherents of other religions. Understandably, Küng (1974:90) could thus ask whether the Christian cause was not inadvertently undermined 'only to save an infallible formula'. Despite Christ's dire warning against an attitude of desiring *fire* from heaven to destroy Christ's enemies (Lk 9:54), 'in a generalizing censure' the church used *fire* to destroy 'many, many people'. 'Faces' of embodied people, together with their specific circumstances, histories and traditions, were made 'irrelevant' before this apodictic inviolable, anxiously defended and abstract axiom (cf. Berkouwer 1970:178–179). Fortunately – albeit 'some hundreds of years too late' – a turnabout 'of epochal extent' is registered in statements of the *Second Vatican Council* [1962–1965] (Küng 1974:82–83). In humility, but also in gratitude, we can agree with the reformed theologian Bavinck (1968:6) on the 'absolute (Dutch: *volstrekte*) universalism of Christianity ... it knows no borders other than what God in his good-will (Dutch: *welbehagen*) has set'. This '*absolute*' *Christian universality* is to be distinguished from a 'universalism', which teaches that *all* people, come what will, *shall* be saved – thus circumventing the *particularity* of faith in Christ. We are, indeed, today realising more and more the unfathomable depth of Christ's saying: 'in my Father's house are many rooms' (Jn 14:2). Compellingly, Welker (2012:53) valued this word as 'the expression of a wide-ranging invitation'. This 'invitation' exceeds the limits of Christ's salvation that some Christians want to set aside and defend in an arbitrarily ecclesiastical-monopolistic manner. We find, in the words of Volf and Croasmun (2019), an acceptable articulation of our approach in this enquiry:

6. A reformed version of this *adagium* is present, for example, in the *Belgic Confession*, art 28: '*extra eam (hic sanctus coetus) nulla...salus*' (cf. Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976:123). We accept these words in the confession as 'a linking to old words with a shifting of the meaning given to them'; this formula should not be interpreted in an institutionalistic-exclusivistic sense (Berkouwer (1970:186).

Jesus Christ is, as John's gospel famously puts it, 'the way and the truth and the life' 14:6). One way of life is true for all, even if each person walks it in his or her own way; the destination is one, even though there are many dwelling places in it (14:2). (p. 86)

Bavinck (1906:330), furthermore, pleaded for a new hospitality to be enacted towards non-Christian faiths. He criticised the former analyses that had held 'founders of religions, such as Mohammed, simply for charlatans, enemies of God, cohorts of the devil'. He corrected this despicable view by pointing out that other religions had in his time already become known 'more precisely... according to Holy Scripture there is also a revelation of God amongst the gentiles, an illumination of the Logos, a working of God's Spirit' (Bavinck 1906:330; cf. Mouw 2015:3–6).

He contends that 'Christianity does not stand exclusively antithetical' over against those other faiths, 'but it is also the highest fulfilment thereof' (Bavinck 1906:332). The Roman-Catholic theologian Houtepen (1997:318–319; [*author's own emphasis*]) beautifully captures our intention in this enquiry, when he argues that the founders and adherents of religions should be seen '*as dramatis personae*'. They play important roles 'in the drama of the human search for conquering the conundrums before which life itself places us'. He adds that although the enactments of this drama are 'culturally determined', they, nevertheless, are also 'culturally translatable'. They can thus be 'staged' cross-culturally *alongside* contending faith enactments. Jesus has made friendship 'an open concept of approachability...it means, to be sitting beside someone with whom I disagree' (Moltmann 2015:126) – not with a like-minded person. Finally, the perspectival depths in Paul's praising the 'depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God' (Rm 11:33) cannot be overestimated. Noticing correctly that these 'riches' defy strict identification of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' it was Ford (2011:137) who pointed out that an epic-like propositional, 'doctrinal' closure of questions should give way to a 'dramatical', open approach regarding God's future dealings with Israel and, indeed, with the '*all*' that God may have mercy on [*hina tois pantas eleēsēi*] (Rm 11:32). 'The *ta panta* is left undefined' (Käsemann 1980:321). The apostle keeps 'wrestling' with these mysteries in a '*theodramatic*' Christian faithfulness, which is simultaneously 'also open to the surprises of God' (cf. Ford 2011:137) The *Deus promittens* (*promissing God*) is, after all, *semper maior* (*always greater*).<sup>7</sup> Doubtless, our entry into interfaith encounter-as-if-dramatic may *take beautiful and exemplary wings*, when we petition the God of infinite mercy like this:

Let the Christian, then, so regulate his prayers as to make them common, and embrace all who are his brethren in Christ; not only those whom at present he sees and knows to be such, but all

7. The words 'my Father's house' in John 14:2 seem not primarily to indicate the divine heavenly living place – although this is included – but 'the temple that is the body of Jesus [Jn 2:16–22]. This is the "Father's house" in the sense that this is where the Father resides [Jn 14:10–11]' (Leithart 2006:83; Volf & Croasmun 2019:75–76; cf. also Versteeg 1987:44–47, on the *multitude* and *variation* expressed in the 'many rooms': a multitude out of Jews and gentiles...that nobody can count, each receiving his or her own place 'to experience "each in an own way the nearness of God") [Please provide closing quote for the open quote.]

men who are alive upon the earth (*sed omnes qui super terram agunt homines*). What God has determined with regard to them is beyond our knowledge, but to wish and hope the best concerning them is both pious and humane [*nisi quod illis optima optare et sperare non minus pium quam humanum est*]. (Calvin 1962b:186; 3.20.38, 1863b:664)<sup>8</sup>

## Putting on Christ

When we as contemporary Christians, not only in a doctrinal and poetic mode but also with our whole embodied *personae*, witness to the resurrected Crucified 'as if in a theatre', we can only do it truthfully whilst being *in Christ* through faith, that is, in the *mystical union with Christ* [*unio mystica cum Christo*] (cf. Bakker 1978:34–46, on being in Christ as *life-form* of atonement or 'at-onement' through a wonderful exchange (*mirifica commutatio*)).

Paul emphasises this oneness using *inter alia* sartorial and dramatic language: to *put on Christ* (Rm 13:14) as if dressing yourself up for a new way of performing your Christian life, a life that consists of: 'I live no more but Christ lives in me' (Gl 3:27<sup>9</sup>). As Vanhoozer (2019:179; [*author's own emphasis*]) says, those who 'clothe themselves with Christ – that is, the new Christlike self ... also stage *mini-parables* of the kingdom'. Already through baptism we have been *clothed with Christ* (Gl 3:27). Thus, having 'become one plant with him' (*sumphutoi*) through baptism, 'we will certainly also (by the same baptism) be united with him in his resurrection' (Rm 6:5). The church, indeed, is a theatrical pilgrims' company, 'in which the Spirit is casting and staging *dress rehearsals* of the age to come' (Horton 2011:869; [*author's own emphasis*]). Paradoxically, those *victorious* 'dress rehearsals', which are already filled by the Holy Spirit with end-time joy and peace through faith and in 'overflowing' hope (Rm 15:13), are still *penultimately* 'played out' as *cruciform* preludes. Paul is paradigmatic also in this instance. As if being a theatrical fool (2 Cor 11–12), this apostle articulates 'the most profound insights into the paradoxical nature of existence "in Christ"' (Welborn 1999:161). Emphatically, we must agree with the recent plea of the Stellenbosch scholar Delpont (2019:230) to the effect that *at least one* 'tragic' element should remain in any theology after the resurrection: 'Christ's wounds are not erased but raised with him (Jn 20:24–29)'. 'The cross was as it were engraved into' his resurrected flesh (cf. Malan 1992:6). The wounds were not intended to be hidden. They are meant to be eternal 'reminders' of Christ's abysmal suffering and

8.The dense and well-argued recent advocacy by Hart (2019:*passim*) of a *universalism*, in the sense that 'all shall be saved', is fascinating but at the same time highly controversial; it surely requires critical consideration from a vantage point such as that we take here. An even-handed discussion of Hart's view, however, would by far exceed the confines of this article. Suffice it to refer to the exemplary, balanced and Reformation-oriented treatment of Durand (2018:109–139), whose kind of *docta ignorantia* [learned ignorance] acknowledges the tension between universalistic and particularistic 'solutions' but eventually comes to rest in the mystery of God's counsel. In any case, we keep with Durand that the necessity of faith for salvation can in no way be circumvented (cf. Heidelberg Catechism 7:20).

9.There seems to be some connection between Paul's teaching style and the imaginative metaphorical: as if he is an actor in 'God's theatre' (cf. Gorman 2001:367). Christ was 'portrayed' (*proégraphie*) before the very eyes of the Galatians as crucified (Gl 3:1). According to Davis (1999:194), the 'visual aspect of *proégraphie* signifies Paul's display of the crucified Christ who was living in him according to the immediately preceding verses 2:19–21. Paul displayed the crucified Christ primarily in persecution suffered for his gospel'.

death. 'The wounds of Good Friday are still fresh' (Surrey 2014:73–74). The *dramatic scene* (cf. Ford 2014:87) of doubting Thomas falling down before the risen Christ, who revealed himself as if 'decorated with his badges of honour' (cf. Malan 1992:6), namely, the indelible marks of his wounds, should irradiate also every interfaith embodied testimony to Christ as '*my Lord and my God!*' (Jn 20:28). This would be, as it were, a continuation through the Spirit of God's kingdom – drama the *denouement* of which Calvin described in commenting on John 13, verse 31:

In the cross of Christ, as if in a magnificent theatre (*quasi in splendidissimo theatro*), the inestimable goodness of God is displayed before the whole world. In all the creatures, indeed, both high and low, the glory of God shines, but nowhere has it shone more brightly than in the cross in which there was a wonderful change of things (*admirabilis rerum conversio*), the condemnation of all men has been manifested, sin has been blotted out, salvation has been restored to men; and, in short, the whole world was renewed and all things restored to order. (Calvin 1863e:317; cf. Piper & Mathis 2010:30)

The theatrical turn of phrase in Calvin's statement seems in alignment with the surprising change (*metabolè*) of reversal (*peripeteia*) that Aristotle found in classical tragedy (see cf. Aristotle, 1974:10; cf. further Critchley 2019:103; cf. also Zeruneith 2007:338–347). Humankind, the reformer argues elsewhere (Calvin 1863d:388), is being placed, 'as if in a theatre' (*comme sur un Theatre*) wherein we are not only 'dumb spectators' of but also participating actors in God's drama 'from the creation of the world' (*depuis la la creation du monde*). Then unexpectedly – against the grain of all human expectations – after the divine plot of this world-play had been enfolded for ages, the 'reversal' suddenly happens: an enigmatic 'clown' steps on the stage, 'a fool who dies on a cross' (Lane 2011:73). Yet, this 'absurdity' (cf. Tertullian 2002:7, for the expression '*crucifixus est dei filius... credibile est, quia ineptum est*'<sup>10</sup>) forms the *denouement* of God's wonderful kingdom drama. If the 'embodied drama of the contested reign of God lies at the heart of the biblical record', this scene is, indeed, the 'heart of the heart' (see Gushee & Stassen 2016:1).

## Conclusion

Firstly, our investigation of Lessing's attempt to stage an interfaith discourse between Christians, Jews and Muslims in the form of a literary dramatic interaction, centred around the three-ring parable, proves to be a cue for conducting contemporary inter-religious encounters in real life as if they occur in an interactive theatre. This is performed against the background of our bewildered world situation.

10.This famous dictum from Tertullian was grossly misunderstood in church history – as if he were against any reasonable arguments to support Christianity. In fact, Žižek (2010:107) sees the 'paradoxical modern (post-Einsteinian) physics ... and "absurd" (sic) Christian theology end up at the same side against Aristotelian common-sense'. Perfectly *ad rem*, Van de Beek (1998:153–155) speaks of our scandalous, crucified, cursed God who is mocked (in a graffiti on a wall at the Palatine in Rome) as a man with a donkey-head fixed to a cross, with a rough scribble superimposed: 'Alexamenos worships his God'. We agree with Van de Beek (1998:4) when he confesses: 'These scratches without any artistic value for me is the symbol of God's presence in the world'. Somebody who attempts, without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, to understand God's paradoxical wisdom, as if it were played out in this open 'world of theatre' (*mundum theatri*) before his very eyes, is like 'a donkey out of place at a symphony' [*atque asinus ineptus est*] (Calvin 1863c:325, 326).

Secondly, our finding of this cue is facilitated and reinforced by reading Lessing through Barth's lens. We combine these insights with Barth's appreciation of Calvin's view on *the Light and the lights*, as they are metaphorically placed in the *theatrum Dei*.

Thirdly, we follow through on our appreciation of the uncovered cue by sketching Christian participation in a real-life interfaith contest as if interacting theatrically on the public marketplace, where different religious claims are at stake. This interaction's improvisatory, preludial, hospitable and Christocentric aspects are highlighted.

Finally, our research study of interfaith theologising 'as if done in a crowded theatre' (see Calvin-quote above) puts forward an invitation, especially to Jews and Muslims, to 'inter-act' with us around the cruciform 'centre of a cross of co-ordinates in world history, determined by the normative religious figures of humankind and the religions inspired by them' (Küng 1993:62). After all said and done, the cross of our Lord 'outside the city-gate' is the '*bet netiboot*' [*house of the roads*] 'where all the roads dwell together in one house', as a reformed poet-theologian so profoundly characterised it (Buys 1987:61).

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