



## **In service of *language*? Dirk Smit on the human senses**

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### **Abstract**

This contribution in honour of Professor Dirk Smit engages critically and constructively with his inaugural lecture at Stellenbosch University published in 2002 as “In diens van die tale Kanaäns? Oor sistematiese teologie vandag” (“In service of the language of Canaan? On systematic theology today”). It raises the question whether Smit, like his own Reformed supervisors, would agree that “the ear is more spiritual than they eye”. This may seem apparent given the emphasis on language in the title of his inaugural lecture. However, following four observations on the human senses, it is argued that a closer examination suggests that Smit seeks to do justice to all the human senses without reducing the significance of the ear, the word, language, and theological reflection. Smit affirms the emphasis on the Word of his Reformed teachers and clearly recognises the role of Spirit (not as subsidiary to Word), but the catholic (i.e. ecumenical) vision that has characterised his work allows him to recognise the other senses more so than his teachers.

### **Keywords**

*Canaan; human senses; language; liturgy and life; Reformed theology; Dirk Smit; Flip Theron*

## Reformed supervisors on the ear

Flip Theron, my doctoral supervisor, was very fond of saying in class that the ear is more spiritual than the eye.<sup>1</sup> Faith is only possible *ex auditu Verbi*.<sup>2</sup> Behind his observation was, I presume, a forensic notion of justification: We are not forgiven because we experience such forgiveness, because we feel forgiven or because we have become just, or by seeking justice. It has no experiential basis but is offered to perpetrators despite all the evidence pointing to their complicity. Hope, precisely hope for the most wretched, for the victims, is then only possible if such perpetrators (the cause of their suffering) are forgiven.<sup>3</sup> It is not based on remorse or good intentions and does not follow upon a change of heart, attitude, or behaviour. We are forgiven through God's grace alone. It comes to us as a declaration from the outside. It must be heard; it cannot be seen, touched, or felt.

Dirkie Smit's postgraduate supervisors would surely agree with Theron in this regard. In his own doctoral dissertation Hennie Rossouw describes salvation as a word-event and the correlation between revelation and faith as a verbal relationship.<sup>4</sup> Willie Jonker, also influenced by G. C. Berkouwer

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- 1 I could not find a specific reference to this saying in Theron's publications and hence have to rely on oral memory. In one essay Theron (1987:37) cites Jan Veenhof to explain the role of the Word: "Maar dat de primaire functie van de Woord deze is, dat God in Christus door de Geest daarin de vergeving van zonde, de eeuwige leven, ja zichzelf schenkt; dat het woord na sy spesifieke aard het heil 'bevat'; dat het heil in dat woord voor de mensen concrete gestalte krijgt; daarin aan hen wordt geschonken en daarin door hen, in de weg des geloofs, ook wordt ontvangen en 'bezeten.'" For an engagement with Theron's position in this regard, see Conradie (2004).
  - 2 See also Theron (1987:40). The voice that Theron heard the clearest in this regard is probably that of Kohlbrugge (also cited by Smit as a source of the image of "the language of Canaan") and behind him Luther and the Apostle Paul.
  - 3 The allusion here is to Smit's farewell lecture (2018). However, note the emphasis here that hope for the most wretched is dependent upon addressing the root cause of their suffering as those who are sinned against. Theron would not make such a clear distinction between victims and perpetrators while Smit emphasizes the predicament of the most wretched (only).
  - 4 Smit also refers to this remarkable Doctoral thesis. See footnote 54. Rossouw (1963:158) suggests that Scripture as the living Word of God is the source from which faith springs. He adds that the event of salvation is a "... woordrelasie waarin God in sy reddende Spreke naby die mens kom en die mens in die 'hoor' van daardie Spreke sy bestemming as mens vind in die vervulling van die heil coram Deo." In the media salutis Scripture is directly associated with the personal presence of the Speaking God (*Dei loquentis persona*) (see Rossouw 1963:157). The danger of a verbalising reduction is thus countered by the *viva vox evangelii* understood as personal presence of God.

(their common doctoral supervisor<sup>5</sup>) would concur that the word is the instrument of the Spirit par excellence. Faith comes through listening to the Word of God on the basis of biblical exegesis.<sup>6</sup> The verbal form of salvation corresponds with the hearing character of faith.<sup>7</sup>

Is this theological assumption then to be taken for granted, at least in the Reformed tradition? I suspect each of these eminent scholars would ask for clarification on what “more spiritual” (“geestiger”) actually means, not least because several of them contributed to the weekly column “Geestelike Waardes” in *Die Burger*. It would amount to spiritual hubris to distinguish between those who are more and those who are less “spiritual”. I will take it here in the sense of assigning some theological priority to the role of hearing. I will also assume that “more spiritual” is used by Theron and others with the connotation of being “deeper” than what is “more material”. For Theron at least, God’s work of creation is a verbal event too, following Noordmans, best understood as a critical verdict (going against any *form* of natural theology), a lit spot around the cross.<sup>8</sup>

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The word is confirmed in the hearts of believers through the *testimonium Spiriti Sancti internum*. The fullness of salvation is then understood as *communio* between God and humans, albeit that the cosmic scope of salvation can easily be reduced given such an anthropocentric focus.

- 5 An early Festschrift for Berkouwer was appropriately entitled *Ex Auditū Verbi* (see Bakhuizen van den Brink et al. 1965).
- 6 See especially the essay by Jonker (1973) in a second Festschrift for Berkouwer. In an article by Koornhof and Jonker (1987:21) they state: “die geloof is uit die gehoor en die gehoor is uit die prediking van die Woord van God.”
- 7 Jonker (1981:54) expresses this in the following way: “Volgens die Reformasie word die heil die mens se deel deur die vryspraak wat in die Woord van God tot hom kom. Die mens het niks anders nodig nie as die heilswaard van God, want die Woord self red die mens en maak hom ’n deelgenoot van die geregtigheid wat in die Woord aan hom toegesê word. Die ‘Woord’ is vir die Reformasie nie gelyk te stel met ’n leersisteen of ’n aantal godsdienstige waarhede nie. Dit is die lewende Woord van God self waardeur Hy tot die mens spreek ... Wanneer dié Woord gepreek word, is dit as instrument van die Gees ‘heilsmiddel’ by uitnemendheid.” With this emphasis on the Word Jonker resists both an institutionalisation (in the church) and a spiritualisation and mystification (in religious experience) of the work of the Holy Spirit (Jonker 1981:52–53).
- 8 See Noordmans (1934:65), Theron (1978).

In this contribution I will raise the question whether Dirk Smit follows this trend, at least in the two texts<sup>9</sup> that are focused upon in this session of the colloquium hosted in his honour.<sup>10</sup> I will focus on his inaugural lecture entitled “Serving the language of Canaan” and refer to his article “Notions of the Public and Doing Theology” only in a few footnotes.<sup>11</sup> While Smit’s emphasis was on the language of *Canaan*, and then as a metaphor for serving God (certainly not Canaan, or language or even the church), it is the emphasis on *language* in the title that intrigued me since I first heard the inaugural lecture. The title of my contribution may therefore be regarded as a deliberate misunderstanding requiring qualifications throughout. It is born from a concern in Christian ecotheology to root language in life and more specifically in being embodied, certainly in terms of categories such as gender, race, and sexual orientation where such rootedness is precisely what is at stake, but also in terms of evolutionary history and thus the category of species. For myself it is embodied, one may say, in the at times unbearable tension between living in Stellenbosch and working in Belhar (if nowadays only digitally).

Allow me to preface my inquiry with four brief and rather general observations:

## Four observations

The first is that modernity can be characterised in terms of a privileging of the eye above the ear.<sup>12</sup> The rule of the eye is evident from the role of

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9 See Smit (2002). Where possible I will make use here of the English translation of the inaugural lecture produced by Smit himself for the occasion. Quotations from this English text are indicated by quotation marks but necessarily without page references. The translation does not cover any of the footnotes and is also a slight abbreviation of the original Afrikaans version (subsequently published in 2002). I will offer my own translation of some bits of text from the footnotes and also from of the omitted portions of text in the translation. Remarkably, the human senses other than the ear are often hinted at in such omissions.

10 This colloquium was hosted by the three institutions where Professor Smit has been based, namely the University of the Western Cape, Stellenbosch University and Princeton Theological Seminary in October 2021 to celebrate his 70th birthday.

11 See Smit (2007).

12 Tim Ingold describes but also challenges the Western privileging of sight over the other senses as a source of objective knowledge. He says: “In the terms of this dichotomy,

the printing press already in the time of the Protestant reformations, the emphasis on empirical investigation with Roger Bacon and Galileo, the need for empirical evidence in the natural sciences and the social sciences ever since, the role of audio-visual media since the advent of television, the role of logo's in commercial branding and ubiquitous icons on computer and cell phone screens. Indeed “screens” may serve as a metaphor for our times. Some may suggest that postmodernity is characterised by “feelings” (being in *touch* with one's emotions) more so than “listening” or “viewing” but that may be debatable, not least because of the linguistic turn (as recognised by Smit).<sup>13</sup>

The second is that the human senses extend well beyond the five “basic” senses of hearing, seeing (both colour and brightness), smelling (which could be highly differentiated), tasting (which itself involves five receptors, namely sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami) and touching (here in alphabetical order!). I will leave aside debates on intuition or instinct as a sixth sense or the possibility of paranormal senses. In popular literature one also find references to kinetic senses such as acceleration, balance with receptors in the inner ear), magnetoreception (less developed than in birds), muscle tension, proprioception (sensing the relation between body parts), and a sense of gravity; somatic senses detecting blood borne hormones and drugs (e.g. leading to vomiting), a sense of hunger and thirst, perceptions of pain (nociception) (through the skin, muscles, bones, joints and internal organs), stretch receptors in the bladder, brain (sensing the dilation of blood vessels in the form of headaches), lungs, stomach and

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vision is distancing, objectifying, analytic and atomising; hearing is unifying, subjective, synthetic and holistic. Vision represents an external world of being; hearing participates in the inwardness of the world's becoming: the former is inherently static, the latter suspended in movement. Whereas one hears sound, one does not see light, but only the things off whose surfaces light is reflected. This is why hearing is supposed to penetrate the inner subjective domain of thought and feeling in a way that vision cannot” (Ingold 2000:155). Accordingly, hearing binds people together in community while seeing isolates the individual from the world. With the ascendancy of vision in the West, religion gave way to science (Ingold 2000:248). He adds that for people in non-Western societies seeing and hearing are not radically opposed since seeing is also caught in the flow of time and movement. He speaks of the “hearing eye” and the “seeing ear”. I am drawing here on an earlier essay that also explored the relationship between the ear and the eye (Conradie 2015).

13 With reference to John Milbank, Smit affirms the notion that the linguistic turn is pre-empted by Christian theology, in fact, is a theological turn. See the end of footnote 16.

the gastrointestinal tract; and a few others related to but not reducible to touch such as itching, sensing pressure, and thermoception (heat or cold, outside and inside the body). Another important if little understood sense is that of time passing by, already well developed in children.<sup>14</sup>

A third observation is that the tendency to place the human senses in a hierarchical order cannot be disentangled from claims for not only human distinctiveness but also human uniqueness.<sup>15</sup> This claim forms a presupposition for any emphasis on human dignity, human rights, and human responsibility<sup>16</sup> but is also subject to critiques of anthropocentrism.<sup>17</sup> Humans cannot claim superiority for any of these senses if compared with other species. However, the ear is obviously privileged in suggestions that human exceptionalism is related to human language,<sup>18</sup> while the dialectic

- 14 There are ample sources in this regard. For the purposes of this contribution I relied on a popular web-based text by Daven Hiskey entitled “Humans have a lot more than five senses — here are 18”, posted 12 September 2019. Hiskey defines a sense as “any system that consists of a group of sensory cell types that respond to a specific physical phenomenon and that corresponds to a particular group of regions within the brain, where the signals are received and interpreted.” See <https://www.considerable.com/health/healthy-living/humans-five-senses/> (Accessed: 30 August 2021). I was alerted to the other than “basic” human senses through a session hosted by Naomi Schreuder that I attended with family members at Optima hospital.
- 15 The most significant theological contribution in this regard is the Gifford lectures by Wentzel van Huyssteen (2006). See also the volume *Are We Special? Science and Theology Questioning Human Uniqueness* edited by Michael Fuller & Dirk Evers (2017). See also my contribution entitled “Do only humans sin” (2017) and my recent engagement with Van Huyssteen in an essay in his honour (Conradie 2021).
- 16 The obvious need to be stated here, namely that Smit has written extensively on human dignity, human rights, and human responsibility – too many to list here. Indeed, he has led South African theological discourse in this regard.
- 17 This has been a core concern in Christian ecotheology. The intuition behind this critique is that to regard human beings as the centre around which everything else turns, as the final goal of history, or as the exclusive focus of God’s love, has become spiritually barren in an age of ecological sensitivities. In the words of James Nash (1996:8), “The traditional idea that the earth, or even the universe, was created solely for humans is, in our scientific age, sinfully arrogant, biologically naïve, cosmologically silly and therefore theologically indefensible.” However, it is also widely recognised that addressing such anthropocentrism requires conceptual clarification on ontological, epistemological, ethical dimensions and on the differences between the adjectives anthropogenic and anthropocentric. See my discussions in *An Ecological Christian Anthropology* (2005) and in *Redeeming Sin?* (2017).
- 18 That humans are the only linguistic species is affirmed, somewhat reluctantly, by Frans de Waal: “We honestly have no evidence for symbolic communication, equally rich and multifunctional as ours, outside of our species. ... Other species are very capable of communicating inner processes, such as emotions and intentions, or coordinating

between the ear and the eye comes into play in claims that humans are a symbol-carrying species.<sup>19</sup> Of course, communication cannot be reduced to language and language is possible without the ear (e.g. in reading and sign language), but that is exactly what is at stake here, namely how the ear is related to the other senses. How the interplay between the senses is understood is therefore crucial for human rootedness amongst other forms of life (avoiding anthropocentrism) but also in avoiding forms of reductionism<sup>20</sup> (e.g. the notion of “selfish genes”<sup>21</sup>).

A fourth observation concerns theological reflection more specifically. It may be taken for granted by some that theology has to do with God-talk and thus with language and the ear. But how are such words rooted in bodies of flesh and blood? The danger here is of course that “blood and soil” can lead to ideological distortion (the distortion of ideas). The opposite danger is that theology may be reduced to words about the Word that became flesh, understanding that Logos as gnosis, as noetic ideas that have to be practically applied. If so, salvation can only come to us through the ear while sin could intrude via the ear (as ideology or hubris, infecting the deadly tongue) but more probably through the other senses (as concupiscence, interests, passions, at worst “blood and soil”). But can flesh and blood then only be saved by better ideas? Moreover, the danger is that a modernist logic will come to dominate Theos<sup>22</sup> so that God is reduced to an object,

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actions and plans by means of nonverbal signals, but their communication is neither symbolized nor endlessly flexible like language. For one thing, it is almost entirely restricted to the here and now.” See De Waal (2016:106). He regards the ability to convey information beyond the here and now (talking about things that are absent, past, or future) as a major advantage in human survival.

- 19 Terence Deacon (1997) suggests the notion of a symbolic threshold. He contrasts the use of icons (assuming some similarity between the sign and what it signifies), indices (assuming a direct correlation between a sign and what it signifies, e.g. the name of a person) and symbols that assume the ability to refer to categories that are precisely not present, are often abstract or fictitious (e.g. stories, ideals, contracts) and where the meaning of one symbol is dependent on associations with other symbols in a set of symbols. This threshold is required in order to invest words with meaning and referential capacity.
- 20 This danger is recognised by Wentzel van Huyssteen in *Alone in the World?* (2006) and also by his compatriot George Ellis in many of his writings on science and theology.
- 21 The reference is of course to Richard Dawkins (see 2006).
- 22 David Tracy argues that under conditions of modernity God becomes a conceptual prisoner of a new intellectual system of totality with no recognition of the infinite. Tracy eloquently captures the theological significance of the postmodern challenge in

to human experiences of God, to words about God rather than the Word of God, that God's Word will be reduced to its noetic content. Then the Protestant principle dominates the catholic substance, the prophet prevails over the mystic, proclamation trumps manifestation<sup>23</sup> – leading to a far-reaching intellectualism common to Gnosticism, Scholasticism, Reformed Orthodoxy, liberal theologies, philosophical theology, fundamentalism, and most forms of discourse on science and theology.

### Serving the language of Canaan?

At the surface level the ear is clearly dominant in “Serving the language of Canaan?”. The Christian faith is likened to a language, a way of speaking based on a way of hearing. Theological reflection then entails words about that very particular way of speaking. Systematic theology concerns reflection on the underlying *grammar* of that way of speaking. This impression is reinforced by the emphasis on language competence and especially also on *rhetoric*. Following the medieval structure, studying

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this regard: “But this much is clear: amid all the shouting of the present, the reality of God has returned to the centre of theology. This is not the time to rush out new propositions on the reality of God. This is rather the time to allow wonder again at the overwhelming mystery of God – as some physicists and cosmologists seem so much more skilled at doing than many theologians are. This is the time for theologians to disallow the logos of modernity to control their thoughts on God as we learn anew to be attentive to God. We must learn somehow, in God's absent presence, to be still and know that God is God” (see Tracy 1994:45).

- 23 See David Tracy's discussion in *The Analogical Imagination* of (the Catholic emphasis on) manifestation and (the Protestant emphasis on) proclamation as two forms of religious expression (alongside emancipatory praxis). Tracy captures the need for a dialectic in this regard: “The prelinguistic always precedes and envelops even as it is transformed by the linguistic power of proclamation. Kerygma ultimately joins logos. Word becomes sacrament. Manifestation envelopes every word from beginning to end, even as it allows itself to be transformed by the shattering paradigmatic power of the proclaimed word” (Tracy 1981:215). And: “Where the kerygmatic power of the word in sacrament is lost, the distinctively Christian paradigmatic power of proclamation is soon spent and sacrament becomes magic, aesthetics or even mechanics. Yet the opposite danger is equally debilitating to Christianity. If the cosmic and symbolic reality is disallowed, if the paradigmatic power of real manifestation is allowed to slip away quietly under the defamiliarizing blows of the paradigmatic power of the proclaimed word, then the deepest needs of our heart and imagination are themselves discarded and Christianity eventually retreats into a righteous rigorism of duty and obligation. We are embodied. However ethical our consciences, however committed to time and history our spirits, we rob ourselves and history of their roots when we dare to strip away the power of religious manifestation” (Tracy 1981:217).



theology entails the classic trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Rhetoric is of course a matter of public speaking although it cannot be reduced to its noetic content (logos) as it also requires pathos and ethos to be effective. Smit is clearly concerned about the subject matter, though, and fears that homiletics can be reduced to communication theory instead of biblical exegesis, to “mere rhetoric”, thus also undermining theological competency. Theology, then, implies an “interest in language, in the word and words”.<sup>24</sup> Adding to this impression is Smit’s legendary ability to grasp vast corpuses of literature, the always amazing role that footnotes play in his writing, his own language competence, his professed love of teaching and supervision, his embodying of a life of scholarship and of course his voluminous writings. Each of these would tend to privilege the ear.

Case closed then? Not quite, I would suggest. One would at least need to take his ubiquitous question marks into account, here coming after “serving the language of Canaan?”. One also needs to acknowledge the role of silence and hence mystery, God’s incomprehensibility, the anxiety in confrontation with the cross, the recognition that we “are looking in a glass darkly”. Smit recognises, with reference to Bonhoeffer’s Christology, a “tension between silence, because of the lack of knowledge, and speech, because of the urge to praise and confess,” leading to “almost unbearable inner conflict, for many.” Whenever Smit speaks of speaking, especially speaking of God, it is with the recognition that this is faltering, stuttering speech, that we do not possess Christ, “that we only have one another and that together, stuttering, we speak about Christ”, that at best (with David Tracy), we do not have a sense of the whole and are only able to collect some

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24 Smit regards this interest in the word as highly significant and not merely of recent origin. In footnote 6 he refers to creation through the Word, to the role of the prophets, the wisdom literature, John’s prologue, Paul’s preaching, Augustine’s theory of language and more, including the Reformation’s emphasis on the close connection between Word and Spirit. By contrast, David Tracy in a typically Catholic way would say: “We theologians, after all, are a largely word-orientated bunch. We need constantly to remind ourselves of both the power and the limits of the word” (1981:330). A friend at university put that differently: “You theologians are verbalising non-producers; us engineers are non-verbalising producers!” I find a famous quotation from Alexander Solzhenitsyn (in his reception speech for the Noble prize in Literature (!) remarkable: “Not everything has a name. Some things lead us into the realm beyond words It ... is like a small mirror in the fairy tales – you glance in it and what you see is not yourself; for an instant you glimpse the Inaccessible, where no horse or magic carpet can take you. And the soul cries out for it.”

fragments.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, “serving” (the language of Canaan) surely cannot be reduced to more talking. It requires bending one’s knees and getting one’s hands dirty.

## Hearing or seeing?

One also needs to consider the actual metaphor (which already suggests an *image*) as one amongst others. In the language of Canaan, following Kohlbrugge, “an alternative, strange reality, a surprising new world, is *depicted*.” One may say that the language of Canaan is not in the first place (or at least not only) a language; it is (following Wittgenstein<sup>26</sup>) a

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25 In an essay published in 2000 Tracy discussed classic “fragmenting forms” such as the theology of the cross (which acknowledges God’s horrifying hiddenness in the cross) and apophatic theology (which acknowledges God’s incomprehensibility and fragments any intellectual totality system). He recognises the postmodern retrieval of such fragmenting forms in order to resist modernist attempts at totalising systems or closure, reducing reality to “more of the same”. He contrasts the category of “fragment” with that of “symbol” where either the Enlightenment or the Romantic hope is maintained to grasp something of the whole, of a lost unity. He argues that fragments fragment, shatter all totalities and oppressive closed systems, opening them for difference and otherness, to “liminal Infinity”, to being bearers of infinity (Tracy 2000:68). Tracy also discusses the need for “Gathering the Fragments” (see also Smit 2009a:48). He identifies three forms of such gathering namely the Orthodox liturgy (which is “both radically negative-apophatic-and-mystical and at the same time Trinitarian”, narratives (the gospels) and the emergence of creeds (Tracy 2000:64). Such gathering, Tracy hopes, can be expressed in non-totalizing forms in attempts to name God in Trinitarian terms. Such naming of God can best take place not in predication but (following the apophatic in Dionysius) in the language of prayer and praise (2000:87). Thus Christian systematic theology does not need to end with fragments but “should end with the gathering of fragments” (2000:78). Tracy discusses this notion of fragments, now with the neologism of “frag-events”, in far more detail in his recent volume entitled *Fragments* (2000). See also my engagement with Tracy’s views in this regard (Conradie 2021), on which I draw here.

26 See Smit’s appreciation for Lindbeck and his *cultural-linguistic* approach. Language is embedded in culture, within a way of life. Even so, in footnote 57 Smit explains, still following Lindbeck, why the metaphor of doctrine as grammar is attractive to him, namely that it enables ecumenical conversation. The cultural-linguistic approach is thus compared to the propositional and experiential-expressivist approaches to doctrine: “If faith convictions are timeless and a-contextual propositions, then ecumenical overtures is by definition impossible because churches are then held captive by their historical decisions and formulations – which are then regarded – in that very form – as eternally true and not subject to change. If faith convictions are regarded as the contingent subsequent attempts to express prior wordless experiences, then ecumenical overtures are by definition also impossible and even unnecessary. To the wordless experiences of others no-one has any access; one can only believe that what others experience is the

way of life. In fact, it is arguably a way of *seeing*: “Most characteristic of this description is the way everything is seen differently through the *eyes* of faith and [*therefore*<sup>27</sup>] named differently in the language of faith, the language of Canaan.”<sup>28</sup> The gospel is likened to spectacles “through which one may *look* and learn to *see*.”<sup>29</sup> The language of Canaan is admittedly an “own” language with an own grammar but it not a “different” language, requiring translation into for example English. It could be, indeed *has to be* spoken in diverse languages.<sup>30</sup> It sounds strange only because it seems to see the world from a different *perspective*, following Bunyan, uprooting the dominant system of values in *Town Vanity* by searching for truth instead of merchandise. The language of Canaan first draws attention through the eye because of the strange clothes that the pilgrims wear. For Smit the language of Canaan is clearly not an esoteric language that is spoken only by a sectarian group of insiders in closed-off ghettos.<sup>31</sup> With Barth, Smit insists that “the language of Canaan is the language of dialogue, of conversation, about the catholic fullness of reality. It is heard, if not always understood,

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same as what one experiences oneself – but without being able to know or even discuss that in any meaningful way” (my translation). This again raises the question posed here, namely regarding the relationship between the (human) senses. It also raises the question of how human language is rooted in evolutionary history and hence in what is bodily, earthly, and material – which is of vital concern in contemporary Christian ecotheology.

- 27 Notably, this “therefore” is included in the Afrikaans text, but not in Smit’s English translation. The emphasis in the text above is added.
- 28 Without the dialectic between hearing and seeing, faith can easily become docetic. It would be inappropriate to focus only on texts such as John 20:29 or Hebrews 11:1–2 to suggest that faith is not a matter of seeing. In the Letter to the Hebrews 11 the vision of faith is praised repeatedly (vs 10, 13, 23, 26 & 27). Faith is a matter of seeing but not with the eyes only, seeing that the visible and the invisible form part of God’s creation. Faith enables one to see in the dark (Smit 1998). There is no conflict between hearing and seeing; it may be better understood as a contrast between tunnel vision and a broader vision. A lack of faith does not result from a misdirected desire to see but from a lack of vision. The formulation in 1 John 1:1,3 is in this sense remarkable: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life. ... we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us” (NRSV).
- 29 This phrase is in a paragraph omitted from Smit’s English translation (emphasis added). The image is also employed by Calvin (see footnote 17).
- 30 See footnote 106, with reference to Karl Barth.
- 31 See footnote 5 where Smit explains that, technically speaking, there is no specific “language of Canaan”.

in the marketplace, in the public sphere where all the senses are at play, including visceral ridicule. The strangeness of this language is a function of its scandalous content, not its unique, untranslatable vocabulary.<sup>32</sup> It results from resistance to allow a domestication of the otherness of the perspective of faith, by “merely repeating public opinion”.

## Liturgy and life – and the eye

The role of the eye is also evident from Smit’s appreciation for the liturgy<sup>33</sup> – which cannot be reduced to verbal communication. All the senses may be present, including those involving bodily movements, but the liturgy as such may be understood as a way of learning to *see* the world in a new *light*,<sup>34</sup> as I would suggest, in the light of the Light of the World.<sup>35</sup> The liturgy is the place where the language of Canaan is best learnt, “spoken, [seen<sup>36</sup>] and practised.” By coming before God’s face (*coram Deo*) we learn to *see* the world not in terms of the *perspectives* dominant in society (where power, money, intelligence, skills, agility, speed and beauty counts) but through God’s *eyes*, with mercy and compassion – and therefore with a sense of justice. The “whole of reality”, Smit observes, is seen “from this perspective of eternity” and then “in the light of the hope called forth by God’s promises.” This yields a dissatisfaction with what is. The liturgy after the liturgy then follows from this way of seeing. It does not sidestep seeing the harsh realities of society, but confronts them for what they are, doing so in

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32 It would be interesting to compare Smit’s understanding of such strangeness with that of Theron who emphasised that in many of his writings, for example with Jonker on justification, justice and especially the church (Jonker & Theron 1981, 1983, 1989).

33 Smit emphasises the interplay between liturgy and theology in many of his writings. Here the word “liturgy” is used 17 times in various forms, while praise and worship are used 4 and 11 times respectively. On liturgy and life, see also Smit (1997).

34 See also Smit’s essay, “On learning to see? A Reformed perspective on the church and the poor” (2003).

35 This is the core argument in my *The Earth in God’s Economy* (2015).

36 This “seen” is included in the Afrikaans text, but not in Smit’s English translation.

the public sphere,<sup>37</sup> suggesting a different *perspective*, a normative *vision*.<sup>38</sup> This requires seeing but also seeing as, seeing the invisible, seeing what things could be and should be like. In language reminiscent of Desmond Tutu, it means seeing that beggar as one's own brother, that prostitute as one's sister and that rapist as one's uncle. *Serving* the "language of Canaan", one may add, follows the logic of such divine service, involving not only the eye and the ear but also one's hands, knees and feet and pockets.

### And the other senses?

What about the other (human) senses then? When one combs through the text from this perspective, this yields surprising results.

First, Canaan is idiomatic for "a state of salvation and fulfilment, a land of milk and honey, happiness and abundance". It is a language but then one with which faith describes what God has promised but not yet fulfilled. It is a humble language because it speaks of what we have not yet seen but still hope for. It is as if one can already *taste* the honey, but this is still only a *foretaste*. The promise received through the ear enables the human eye to see the not yet. For Smit, the language of Canaan may be understood as a symbolic construction of reality, a house in which we are invited to inhabit and make our home. It is a particular house but also a "broad place" (Moltmann<sup>39</sup>), one for the whole ecumenical household of God (*oikoumene*),

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37 The "in" in "in the public sphere does not mean that such realities are actually present in the public sphere, at least not if this is understood as a place for "open" conversation. The harsh realities may be articulated and discussed in the public sphere (in a verbal way) but if they are directly present where such discussions take place, they may silence the possibility of such conversation. See Smit's discussion of the critique against Habermas' notion of communication as being too idealistic and not feasible, "with too much logocentrism, communication and agreement, and too little conflict and contestation; that is, too little of the real contradictions and struggles of life" (2007:436). In short, even where visual images are brought into the public sphere (understood as *discourse*), the senses of touch and smell are typically *not* welcomed! If, on the other hand the public sphere is merely understood as public spaces (like the market, shopping malls, museums, sports arenas), then all the senses are again at play. Indeed, shopping malls connect people as buyers, workers and beggars in a way churches find it hard to do.

38 Such a normative vision is one of three ways in which Smit (2007) understand the public sphere and, accordingly, doing public theology.

39 See the title of Moltmann's autobiography (2008).

including the dimensions of economy and ecology.<sup>40</sup> What he could have added is that “Canaan” of course also stirs up connotations of conquest, occupation, and exploitation, of the destruction of stone buildings, wood, crops, the violation of human bodies and a policy of zero tolerance for Canaanite religions. Such connotations may be heard; but they are best seen, smelled, touched, endured, suffered.

Second, the *media salutis* include not only Word but also Spirit. If so, the Spirit can precisely not be reduced to what is verbal. The biblical images of comforter, breath, dove, fire, fountain, temple (the inhabitation of the Spirit) and wind each involves tactile and other senses. Indeed there is no dualism of spirit and matter here.<sup>41</sup> What is spiritual involves what is material, bodily and earthly, more specifically the direction in which matter moves.<sup>42</sup> Which has the priority for Smit? Does the Spirit work through the Word or is the Word enabled by the Spirit?<sup>43</sup> Smit draws on Luther to state the Spirit has its own grammar. But is this a *grammar*?<sup>44</sup> Smit affirms that it is “the Spirit that enlivens” but the way in which the Spirit does so is by “speaking through the prophets and witnessing about Christ.”<sup>45</sup> The Spirit works, one may say, primarily through the reading, exposition and understanding of the Scripture.<sup>46</sup> Here the ear does have a certain priority.

40 See footnote 12 where the term *oikoumene* is used in this encompassing sense, beyond the narrower ecclesial sense of “ecumenical”.

41 It would be interesting to study Smit’s use of the term “spiritual” (geestelik) throughout his writings. A topic for a postgraduate thesis! In this text there is mention of both our spiritual and our material needs with reference to Noordmans’ famous meditation on the sinner and the beggar. This is picked up again in Smit’s farewell lecture (2018).

42 See my contribution on an ecological Pneumatology in this regard (Conradie 2012).

43 In footnote 6 of the Afrikaans text Smit recognises the Reformed emphasis on the Word (also in God’s work of creation) and hence stress the “intrinsic relations between God, the Word and our words”. See, however, also footnote 33. What is at stake here is the *filioque* controversy (see also footnote 57), namely regarding the relationship between Christ and the Spirit. Does the Spirit work only through Christ or also independently, i.e. where Christ (through the Bible, preaching, the church and its offices) is not immediately present? As I have often suggested, this question is of crucial significance in the (South) African context (see Conradie 2013).

44 See footnote 8. In footnote 33 Smit refers to Van Ruler’s affirmation of the grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and etymology of the Spirit (especially in preaching) but does so in order to recognize Van Ruler’s own emphasis on orthopraxy which the Spirit works in us.

45 These phrases come from a sentence omitted from Smit’s English translation.

46 See footnote 56, with reference to a thesis by Jan Woest.

Third, the format of the liturgy may focus on verbal utterings and hymns of praise and lament<sup>47</sup> (which yields salty tears), but these are supplemented by the tactile sense of water, the taste of bread and the aroma of wine. The liturgy recollects the narrative of cross and resurrection but if this is nothing but a made-up story then it would have crude entertainment value only. If cross and resurrection do not include the tactile senses, they are reduced to mere rumours that cannot touch the lives of people (or other forms of life). The disciple Thomas was convinced by touching even though those who do not see and touch and still believe are called blessed (Jn 20:29)! The pilgrims to Town Vanity are physically captured and tortured – as the story goes.

Although Smit does not refer explicitly to such tactile senses, he uses the term “life” in various forms at least 46 times in the text to indicate that word and life has to be intimately connected or else becomes meaningless. *Lex orandi* and *lex credenda* need to be held together with *lex convivendi*.<sup>48</sup> In footnote 33 in the Afrikaans original he states emphatically that “It would be a fatal misunderstanding to use the metaphor of the language of Canaan to place language against life, as if the Christian faith has to do with words and not with deeds.” Indeed, following the Letter of James, Smit would insist that orthodoxy without orthopraxy is dead. What applies to Christian life also applies to the presence of the church in the world. As Smit notes, “The church exists always in the world and as part of the world, whether or not it wants to, and thereby impacts public life in varied and complex ways, regardless of whether it is aware of this.”<sup>49</sup> It is crystal clear that Smit thus resists a Reformed preoccupation with words, an intellectualist privileging of the ear.

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47 See footnote 66 in this regard.

48 See also footnote 19.

49 See Smit (2007:439). He notes three themes in this regard, namely the place of the church in public life, the social form of the church and the role of the church in society. In each case the sociological presence of the church (for better or for worse), involving all the senses, stands in need of theological judgement (where the ear may dominate). Smit (2007:441) adds that, “the church exists always as an integral part of human life in the world; it is interwoven always with public life in society and community; it should be aware of and interested in the resulting impact in both directions – the impact of public life on the church, its place, social form and self-understanding and also the impact of the church on public life and the many spheres that together constitute life in the world.”

Fourth, his understanding of theology as second-order re-flection (*nadenke*) on the language of Canaan is born from self-critical inquiry amongst those who speak this language to establish whether they believe, speak, and live correctly.<sup>50</sup> Notably, the category of “experience” as source for theological reflection is acknowledged but in second-order reflection (involving the ear) there is a need to engage critically with that. The role that context (i.e. social location, involving all the senses) necessarily plays, is appreciated while the pretence of some (Western) theologies to be “universal” is unmasked as illusionary.<sup>51</sup> Smit is critical of imaginative theological construction and of the dominance of writing especially if not embedded in a way of life.<sup>52</sup> Faith itself cannot be separated from obedience; confession and life are one. We confess with our actions (the visceral and the visible) and our omissions (seeing deeper), but then *also* with our thoughts and words (the ear and the mouth).

Fifth, the role played by the other senses is also clear from theology as rhetoric. It does require *logos* but *pathos* (empathy, the heart, a sense of touch) in rhetoric requires, “knowledge of the specific audience, with their convictions and insights, questions, [emotions<sup>53</sup>] and needs, their life contexts”. Likewise, *ethos* in rhetoric has to do with the character, intensions, and motives of speakers themselves (thus their body language) since the trustworthiness of their words depend upon that. This applies even more so to the role of *tentatio* (“affliction, doubt and fear”), recognised by Smit (following Luther) as a fourth element of theological reflection alongside, grammar, logic, and rhetoric.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, the three outcomes of theological education include subject knowledge (through the ear!) but cannot be reduced to that as there is also a need for practical ministerial training (arguably the hands) and for spiritual formation (*touching* the heart, involving all the tactile senses).

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50 See also one of five descriptions of theology in an article on “Quo vadis, sistematiese teologie” (Smit 2009a).

51 See footnote 38. Despite such an emphasis on experience as source of doing theology, on context and social location, my impression is that the undeniable role of the other senses only serves to make the need for the word (the ear) even more critical.

52 See e. g. footnote 15.

53 The word “emotions” is notably omitted in Smit’s English translation.

54 See footnote 34. The reference to *tentatio* is again omitted from Smit’s own translation.



Smit emphasises the need for the interplay between these, but he clearly believes that without the formation of character and the role of spirituality the head leads one astray with idle speculation, with brain gymnastics, with the demands of academic life, while the hands lead us astray with expediency, with the demand for immediate impact, one may say with a corporatisation of university life and a commercialisation of church life. Then the catechism of the heart does not match the catechism of the book. If so, the priority may lie with the heart (the word “heart” is used five times), with the tactile senses, with being touched by the Spirit, by a Jesus who came within touching distance of us (Immanuel).<sup>55</sup>

Given these observations one may conclude that Smit affirms the emphasis on the Word of his Reformed teachers, that (with Calvin) he clearly recognises the role of Spirit (and then not as subsidiary to Word), but that the catholic (i.e. ecumenical) vision that has characterised his work allows him to recognise the other senses more so than his (and my) teachers.

### **A hierarchy of the senses?**

Acknowledging the role of the senses other than hearing does not yet offer an indication of any hierarchical relationship between them. From the above two related dangers should be obvious: The one is to allow one of the senses to rule over the others, as may be the case with the claim that the ear is more spiritual than the eye, the rule of the eye instead, or to allow feelings (including a sense of touch) to rule over reason. The other is to allow the senses to become disconnected from each another.

I trust that Smit would agree with me in suggesting that the ear is *perhaps* the “highest”, the most refined, the clearest, the most differentiated of the senses, sometimes enabling us to understand the impulses derived from the other senses. This is not related to any hearing ability (dogs and bats are better at that). It has to do with the differentiation enabled by words. However, it is by no means the only one of the senses that matters

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<sup>55</sup> This again suggests structural differences between Christological and Pneumatological perspectives. The Spirit’s inhabitation requires touching, at times wrestling, while Christ’s incarnation allows for substitution and hence difference, even distance. While the Logos speaks to us, the Spirit touches us. See the famous essay by Van Ruler (1989) on the structural differences between Christology and Pneumatology.

theologically and is possibly not the most important. If anything, the sense of touch may be more basic to all living beings than the other “basic” senses. The Christian confession is that the Word became mammalian *flesh*<sup>56</sup> and that the *inhabiting* Spirit speaks, while the Father creates through both Word and Spirit and reigns by *embracing*. The danger is that the interplay between God’s words of salvation, God’s acts of salvation and God’s comforting presence (with which the ecclesial *kerygma*, *diakonia* and *koinonia/leitourgia* may be correlated) can become sublimated in the verbal sphere. Heeding this danger may help us to understand the Word that became flesh as deep incarnation<sup>57</sup> and the inhabitation of the Spirit in our bodies, even if there is then a need to articulate that Word and to discern that Spirit.

In my view the gospel itself may be a message that we receive through our ears, but the content of the gospel is about an encounter, not merely with a good idea but with the Triune, living God.<sup>58</sup> Salvation transcends the *kerygma* on such salvation. The Word that became flesh cannot be reduced to words about the incarnate Logos.<sup>59</sup> The pouring out of the Spirit is more than the comforting words of Christ (Jn 16). Salvation in Christ and the salvific work of the Spirit entails more than words about the words and deeds of Christ. Being in Christ, the communion of the saints is not captured by the words that emerge in such communion. Salvation therefore cannot be associated with the word as if it is the word that has to save the flesh by elevating it to the level of the verbal. Grace cannot be reduced to medicine (*gratia infusa*), but it cannot be sublimated to ideas elevating nature either. That is the typical Reformed intuition of our common teachers.

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56 David Tracy (1981:215) comments: “Is not the whole symbol system grounded in the radical Christian faith that Jesus Christ is both the decisive word and the decisive manifestation of God and ourselves.”

57 See especially the volume edited by Gregersen (2013); also Edwards (2019).

58 Smit adopts a thoroughly Trinitarian approach in all his writings. In the essay on public theology Smit (2007) notes how it makes a difference whether one approaches the public sphere from the perspective of God as Father, from the perspective of the public person of the Holy Spirit, or from a Christological perspective. He therefore welcomes ways of relating these three approaches. See also Smit (2009a, 2009b).

59 See, by contrast, the following statement by Noordmans (1980:467): “... het Woord als middel van de Geest is geen verschijnsel en heeft geen wezen. Het is een oordeel. En als oordeel is het klaar en scherp en gaat door tot verdeling en scheiding.”

Actually one may argue that the five so-called “basic” senses are not all that basic, that the other, more visceral senses are more fundamental and better connect us as (human) creatures to all other forms of life and to the earth as our God-given home.

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