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DJS as “populist” theologian – On Dirkie Smit’s newspaper column

ABSTRACT

Dirkie Smit’s weekly newspaper column, written under the pseudonym DJS, is understood as constituting an important part of his academic theological literature. One of the characteristic theological perspectives found in these columns is the problematizing of any clear distinction between “church theology” and “public theology”. A further typical element of these columns is that forms of interpretation in which both “points of departure” as well as “hermeneutical horizons” appear, but these do not function in any contrasting way. Amazement and hope are themes often found in the columns. The column’s inherited title, “Geestelike Waardes” [Spiritual Values], can even be interpreted in those written by Smit as referring to the often-made distinction between “spiritual” and world in the ways he breaks through this distinction. Finally, the contrast of “public” and “popularistic” is analysed with reference to these columns.

INTRODUCTION

A study of Dirkie Smit’s theology that considers only his long list of scholarly publications will be incomplete. A characteristic of his theological work is also the commitment and energy with which he puts his academic knowledge and insight at the service of a broader circle than only that of fellow scholars in his field. Just how important and indispensable he finds this aspect of his work is attested to by the fact that – despite his very full programme as an internationally respected scholar and his duties as a teacher and supervisor – he almost never declines an invitation to lead a church service, offer courses to congregations, provide further education to pastors, get involved with ecumenical initiatives and serve on synodical committees and other church bodies. He is, moreover, the author or co-author of countless essays, sermons and sermon frameworks, analyses of biblical writings, accessible works on theological themes and official church documents like discussion papers, reports and public statements (cf. Vosloo 2007:398-399).

A special place in this more than merely academic oeuvre is occupied by Smit’s weekly column, Geestelike Waardes (Spiritual Values), in the Afrikaans daily Die Burger. Under the pseudonym DJS, Smit has been responsible for this column uninterruptedly for almost 15 years – since the death of his predecessor, the Old Testament scholar Ferdinand Deist.² What makes the

1 † 27 June 1970 - 05 March 2013

2 Deist’s predecessor was another Stellenbosch (systematic) theologian, Willie Jonker (Smit’s doctoral supervisor who also became his father-in-law), who was responsible for the column from 1974 to 1992. Before this, since the early 1950s, the Stellenbosch New Testament scholar Jac Müller was responsible for the column under the pseudonym Soeker (Searcher) (Van der Westhuizen 1996; Smit, personal communication).

column unique in comparison to his other writings is the extent to which it also addresses readers outside or on the margins of the church. During my stint as editor of *Die Burger's* book page, several authors, literary scholars and journalists without any church affiliation shared with me their appreciation for both the style and content of Smit's column. Given the quality, extent and multidimensional nature of this part of Smit's work, one hopes that it will, at some stage, become the subject of thorough scholarly research (for example, in a doctoral thesis) from a theological, literary and/or media studies perspective. In this article, however, I can only highlight briefly some striking characteristics of Smit's newspaper column as theology.

"ECCLESIAL" OR "PUBLIC" THEOLOGY?

What kind of theology does one find in Smit's column? In systematic theological circles a colleague's position within the discipline is sometimes roughly (and always unfairly) indicated in terms of two contemporary trends that might be called "ecclesial theology" and "public theology" respectively. The former recalls, on the one hand, Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics (Barth 2004), with which some "ecclesial" theologians consciously identify, but on the other hand, more negatively, also the Kairos Document's rejection of so-called "church theology" as a theology that, in attempting to remain politically neutral, actually helps maintain the status quo (Kairos Theologians 1986) – an interpretation that no "ecclesial" theologian will apply to him- or herself. Theologians often associated with "ecclesial" theology³ believe that theology should primarily serve the church – for instance by unravelling the internal coherence and implications of church doctrine, unlocking the "grammar" of the language of faith (cf. Lindbeck 1984) and continually reminding the church of its deepest origin and calling.

By contrast, "public" theologians⁴ consciously seek to address a broader audience; deal with issues that society as a whole, rather than Christians only, are concerned with; speak a language that is also comprehensible outside the church; and participate actively in public debates and processes in order to serve the common good. Whereas many "ecclesial" theologians lean strongly on Barth, the modern church father of many (but by no means all) "public" theologians is perhaps Paul Tillich with his search for "correlation" between faith and (a broad concept of) culture (cf. esp. Tillich 1951:59-65).

Smit's theology can hardly be mapped in terms of this opposition, partly because he tends to question the uncritical way in which concepts such as "church" and "public" are often employed in theological discussions. As far as ecclesiology is concerned he often reminds us, among other things, that the church exists not only as denominations, but in many forms, which include local congregations, worshipping communities, the ecumenical church, individual believers, and voluntary action groups, organisations and initiatives (cf. Smit 2002:243ff.). From this perspective one could argue that, in Smit's newspaper column, even when questions of faith are not explicitly raised, the church is nevertheless speaking. Furthermore, if Smit's understanding of the church is correct, then no clear boundary can be drawn between church and context, since these two realities, though distinguishable, are inextricably intertwined so that the Christian audience is part of the broader audience. That is to say, even as a "public" theologian addressing a "general" audience in a "secular" daily, Smit practises "ecclesial" theology.

3 Such as Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank and Bram van de Beek.

4 Such as William Storrar, Keith Clements, John de Gruchy or Heinrich Bedford-Strohm.

The question of what “public” means is also addressed by Smit in a fashion that raises questions about the instinctive use of this term in theological discourse and the uncritical way in which theologians sometimes take up the ideal of “public” relevance and involvement (cf. for example, Smit 2007). In connection to this he, *inter alia*, points to the fact that a distinguishable public sphere, linked to the romanticism (whether nostalgic or idealistic) of power free public discourse characterised by rationality, truth and truthfulness, is a late modern phenomenon, and that the assumptions and values on which the dominant discourse on the “public” rests are both historically-sociologically and theologically questionable. In other words, as an “ecclesial” theologian who highlights forgotten and suppressed implications of the language of faith, Smit also functions as a “public” theologian asking critical questions about widely accepted assumptions and expectations concerning public life.

Smit’s critical insights into the concepts “church” and “public” are not only useful for characterising his role as a columnist but are also addressed in the column itself. A constantly recurring theme in his column – sometimes in conversation with the Afrikaans author and poet N.P. van Wyk Louw – is precisely the various ways in which language and communication function in the interactions between people and the shared lives of communities. In the column *Oop Gesprek* (Open Discussion) (Smit 2005:270-271⁵), for instance, he sketches Louw’s seductive analysis of the ideal of an open discussion (cf. Louw 1987:415ff.), but also evokes the experience of frustration and disappointment in this regard:

Ironically, the truth of Van Wyk Louw’s words is also highlighted by our negative experiences, by our failure to communicate truthfully, by confusion in our talking and living with one another, and by our persistence in the ways of misunderstanding, mutual estrangement and violence ... Jürgen Habermas, the founder of discourse ethics, writes ... with much concern and disappointment about the future. If even dialogue does not help, he writes, if in fact it does not even occur, what then remains? ... Of course, family therapists know this even better ...⁶

Against this background, so accurately and movingly sketched in a few words, the reader suspects that the concluding sentence must be a double edged sword: “The mere willingness to talk and listen is itself already a form of love.”⁷

In the column *Oor Woorde en Dade en Feeste en Dinge* (On Words and Deeds and Feasts and Things), published during the annual *Woordfees* (Word Fest) in Stellenbosch, Smit also addresses the destructive potential of words, but now as one aspect of a variety of possible speech acts, and in the almost eschatological perspective – admittedly somewhat melancholically – of the longing for a true feast of words (“Our words ... which, thanks to our

5 A number of the columns have been published in book form (see Smit 2005 and Smit 2009). Where one of those columns is referred to in this article the source reference is to the book in question. The original dates of publication of the columns are unfortunately not mentioned in the books. Some columns that have not (yet) appeared in book form are available online (sometimes incomplete) on Die Burger’s website and/or on the discussion page of Stellenbosch University’s Faculty of Theology, *Sol Iustitiae*.

6 “Die waarheid van Van Wyk Louw se woorde word ironies genoeg ook bevestig deur ons negatiewe belewenisse, deur ons mislukking tot ware gesprek, deur ons by-mekaar-verby-praat-en-leef, en deur ons voortgang op paaie van misverstand, onderlinge vervreemding en geweld ... Jürgen Habermas, grondlegger van die diskoersetiek, skryf ... met groot besorgdheid en ontugtering oor die toekoms. As selfs gesprek nie help nie, wonder hy, as dit trouens nie eens plaasvind nie, wat bly dán nog oor? ... Gesinsberaders weet dit natuurlik nog beter ...” [all English translations are my own – GB].

7 “Bloot die bereidheid tot praat en luister is self al ’n vorm van liefde.”

gift of the word, could have been a feast of words ...”).⁸ His opening words on the prologue to John’s Gospel (“In the beginning was the Word ... What might that mean?”)⁹ serve more as background to his reflections than as basis for his argument. From the biblical text Smit moves to a general reflection on language and meaning:

That’s the problem with words. They have such complex meanings, evoke so many associations – even in a single language – that when they are further translated the semantic fields of the words we grope for simply never correspond sufficiently. The new words we employ do not say everything we wanted to say, and say things we did not mean to say – without us being able to prevent it ...¹⁰

When Smit then also ends with a reference to the Bible (James 3:1-12), it is done in such a manner that it need not necessarily be understood theologically, but does raise questions to which, who knows, the Bible might perhaps suggest answers:

Our words destroy relationships, put curses on others, label and humiliate the “thems” who are not like “us”. Our words are full of evil, they poison relationships. Our words render life – which, thanks to our gift of the word, could have been a feast of words – a hell on earth for many, says [James]. And asks how this can be?¹¹

In light of what has been argued and illustrated thus far, the use of the term “public theology” as a characterisation of Smit’s work as a columnist should not only be welcomed, but also qualified and approached with strong reservations. There is no question of an idealisation of the public sphere. Later in this article I suggest another characterisation that, by way of contrast, might bring about the necessary qualification.

“POINTS OF CONTACT” AND “HERMENEUTICAL HORIZONS”

As the examples just quoted illustrate, Smit often uses seemingly general, non- ecclesial and non-theological language in his columns to implicitly suggest certain theological insights in a manner which sometimes probably escapes his non-churchgoing (and perhaps also many church-going) readers. The purpose is not to mislead in the sense of “smuggling” faith convictions into seemingly “secular” analyses (cf. Smith 2010). Any such suspicion is ruled out by the fact that the column is entitled *Geestelike Waardes* and contains many contributions in which traditional faith language is indeed used. What Smit succeeds in – and probably also aims to achieve – with his “hidden” theological references is to bring to the fore aspects of present-day life – not only the cracks and dark corners, but also the magnificent light – that, to be sure, do not require a Christian faith perspective in order to be recognised, but nevertheless are placed in a new perspective for “those who have eyes to see”.

8 “Ons woorde ... wat danksy ons gawe-van-die-woord ’n woordfeés kon wees ...”

9 “In die begin was die Woord ... Wat sou dit kon beteken?”

10 “Dis ... die ding met woorde. Hulle het sulke komplekse betekenisse, roep sovele assosiasies op – alreeds in één taal – dat as hulle vérder ver-taal word die velde van betekenis van die woorde wat ons soek net nooit lekker ooreenstem nie. Die nuwe woorde wat ons inspan sê nie alles wat ons wóú sê nie, en hulle sê dinge wat ons nié wou sê nie – sonder dat ons dit kan verhelp ...”

11 “Ons woorde verwoes verhoudinge, bring vloek oor ander, etiketteer en verneder die ‘hulle’s’ wat nie soos ‘ons’ is nie. Ons woorde is vol kwaad, vergiftig verhoudinge. Ons woorde maak die lewe – wat danksy ons gawe-van-die-woord ’n woordfeés kon wees – vir vele tot hel op aarde, sê [Jakobus]. En vra hoe dit kan wees?”

It may be that many fellow theologians regard Smit as a Barthian to the quick, but of DJS one cannot but conclude that he occasionally (in a very un-Barthian way) tends more in the direction of Tillich's quest for points of contact with Christian faith in common human experiences and impressions! One might even suspect that in this way he takes on, cautiously and subtly, something of Friedrich Schleiermacher's quest to make Christian faith plausible, or at least comprehensible, to its "cultured despisers" (Schleiermacher 1996). DJS an apologist? A mediating theologian?

Another theological perspective from which this approach in his column can be considered is Anthony Thiselton's use of the horizon metaphor from Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical thought (Thiselton 2007). For Thiselton, systematic theology, or as he calls it: "the hermeneutics of doctrine", involves identifying the hermeneutical horizon(s) from which a specific Christian doctrine must be clarified (177ff.). My use of the word "must" has to do with Thiselton's somewhat prescriptive understanding of what counts as appropriate horizons. By contrast, in Smit's column (as in his theology in general), this prescriptive element appears to be absent. The column rather gives the impression of an exploratory yet expectant and receptive search for previously unexploited hermeneutical horizons – a special kind of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding).

In Smit's column yet another dimension, which is less evident in Thiselton's theological approach, can be discerned, namely, the fact that hermeneutical horizons work in two directions. When a common human experience or an experience typical of life in a particular context, is employed as a horizon from which to clarify an aspect of the Christian faith, it also has the opposite result, namely that the life context in which the horizon has its origin is seen in a new light. This characteristic of hermeneutical horizons emerges strongly in Gadamer's original use of the term "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer 2004:xxxi, 217, 305-06, 337, 341, 367, 390, 533, 578 – italics added), and is often strikingly illustrated in Smit's column. In many cases the question whether Smit uses a contemporary experience to elucidate the faith or rather faith perspectives to elucidate the context can only be answered with: "both at the same time."

One example is the column *Wie is nie Siek van al die Geweld nie?* (Who is not Sick of all the Violence?) (Smit 2010). Like a good poem it starts with an everyday, recognisable experience or way of speaking, but ends with estrangement from that everydayness, a reversal, which suggests something unexpected, even disturbing:

But who doesn't feel this way – sick, tired, exhausted with reports of crime, rape, murder? ... Indeed, we live in a culture full of violence. It is unnecessary even to tell these stories any longer. Direct violence. Physical violence. Horrific violence. Only politicians can still want to deny this ... Surely, in a normal society people need not live imprisoned like this – both in real prisons and in houses, neighbourhoods and streets that feel like prisons? There are simply too many of us in prisons today. It's enough to make one sick.

But it's even worse. For, hidden in our cultures of violence, says the conflict expert Johan Galtung, is a cultural violence ... Our convictions, ideas, opinions justify the inequalities – so that we cannot even see the systemic violence! We are never frightened by it, never wish to talk about it ... Even our gods help us justify this world ... No, our cultural traditions can themselves be violent, can be prisons ... We are always complaining about a culture full of violence, but hardly recognise the culture of violence. Why? Perhaps because cultural violence justifies it in our eyes? Yes we are sick of violence. Perhaps even

more sick than we may think.¹²

Are the experiences of violence and Smit's deepening illustration of how we are all intertwined with them used here to throw light (again, for those with eyes to see) on the nature of sin and the powers, or is it rather that these Christian motifs (only suggestively, to be sure) help us understand the violence in our society anew? Which aspect is being interpreted and which constitutes the hermeneutical horizon from which the interpretation is done?

WONDER AND HOPE

As mentioned earlier, not only the "darkness", but also the "marvellous light" is dealt with in Smit's columns. He writes, among other things, of the beauty of nature, the miracle of love and liberating words or deeds. As far as the latter is concerned many of the columns take the form of a celebration or remembrance of the extraordinary lives and work of certain individuals. While the dark sides of human existence are usually also mentioned in these personal eulogies, the dominant note is nevertheless mostly one of gratitude and hope, of a light that can be neither fathomed nor overcome by the darkness. In the New Year's column *In 'n Neutedop (In a Nutshell)* (Smit 2005:11-12), dedicated to theologian Denise Ackermann on the occasion of the publication of her book *After the Locusts* (Ackermann 2003), Smit writes:

A happy new year! This we wish one another. And often also: May it be a year of great things for you!

At the end of [Ackermann's] book follows an afterword to her grandson ... it is as if the heart of the book beats here. She reflects on ... Julian of Norwich's words: Everything that is, is contained in a hazelnut – small and insignificant as it may seem. Why? Because God created the nut and loves it. That is, after-all, why it exists. In the nut, as in all small and inconspicuous, all ordinary and unremarkable, things ... is hidden the mystery of life, since it shares in God's eternal love. That is life, as it were, in a nutshell. That is, therefore, her wish for her grandson: that he will always stand in awe before the seemingly insignificant; that he will always keep noticing the mystery of simple things; that he will keep discerning God's love in everyday things; that he will appreciate the greatness of small things. Now isn't that something to wish one another ...? A happy new year, and may it be a year of small things for us!¹³

12 "Maar wie voel nie óók so nie – siek, sat, móég vir berigte oor misdaad, aanranding, moord? ... / Vir seker, ons lewe in 'n kultuur vól geweld. Dis onnodig om dié stories nog te vertel. Direkte geweld. Fisieke geweld. Erge geweld. Dis net politici wat dit nog kan wil ontken ... Só hoef mense vir seker nie in tronke opgesluit te leef in 'n normale gemeenskap nie – sowel régte tronke, asook huise, buurte en strate wat vóél soos tronke? Daar is eenvoudig te veel van ons in tronke, vandag. Dis om van siek te wees. / Maar dis nóg erger. Want ónder ons kultuur vol geweld skuil 'n kultuur ván geweld, sê geleerdes. Onder die direkte skuil indirekte geweld – strukture, sisteme ... Sonder dat iemand 'n hand teen hulle oplig, het talke byna geen kans op geluk, toekoms, lewe nie ... Van die wieg af bestem vir swaarkry ... Vir vele is die lewe sêlf 'n tronk. / Maar dis nóg erger. Want onder ons kulture ván geweld, sê die konfliktkenner Johan Galtung, skuil kulturele geweld ... Ons oortuigings, idees, menings regverdíg die ongelykhede – sodat ons die sistemiese geweld nie eens kan sien nie! Nooit dáároroos skrik of (wil) praat nie ... Selfs ons gode help dié wêreld goedpraat ... Nee, ons kulturele tradisies sêlf kan gewelddadig wees, trónke ... / Ons kla aldag oor die kultuur vól geweld, maar herken beswaarlik die kultuur ván geweld. Hoekom? Dalk omdat kulturele geweld dit in ons oë regverdíg? Ja, ons is siek van geweld. Dalk selfs sieker as wat ons mag dink."

13 "Voorspoedige nuwe jaar! Hier ons mekaar toe. En dikwels ook: Mag dit vir julle 'n jaar van groot dinge

And listen to what DJS says in Die Wag van Advent (The Waiting of Advent) (Smit 2009:431-32):

The life of faith is a life of longing, of looking forward, dreaming, persevering – and waiting ... thinking of Advent. Every year these four weeks bring a time of longing, of looking forward, dreaming and waiting. Advent is exercise-in-longing ... It is exercise-for-the-church-in-the-posture-of-waiting. And how we need this exercise! Do we still even know what it is to long, look forward, dream – and wait? ... In our age of immediate fulfilment, of instant everything, of consumption and saturation and the immediate-satisfaction-of-remote-control? ... It is rather tragic. For not only faith, but also being human and happiness, yes even love, is kept alive by longing, looking forward – and waiting ...¹⁴

Consider also a column like Vreugde (Joy) (Smit 2009:97-98):

Is it not strange that we need to be, yes, are commanded to be, full of joy? Somewhat paradoxical that, in the Bible, we are ordered to be cheerful? One would think that this type of thing comes naturally? ...

It is indeed necessary, for many of us have a gift for resentment! We have a knack for grumbling, we cherish incessant complaints, we remain perpetually burdened and bitter. We delight in reproach, in torment and rancour. Many of us truly have difficulty with respect for life ...¹⁵

Texts like these make clear how wonder and hope in Smit's understanding of life and the gospel never take the form of "false consciousness" (Engels 1893), of a denial or forgetfulness of bewilderment and despair. The so-called "theology of hope" (see Moltmann 1993) arises precisely out of the experience of forsakenness, but also overcomes it. In Leonard Cohen's words (Cohen 1992): "There's a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." Hope never tries to soften or sidestep the reality of evil and suffering (Smit 2003):

wees! ... / Aan die einde van [Ackermann se] boek volg 'n naskrif vir haar kleinseun ... dis asof die hart van die boek hier klop. Sy peins oor ... Juliana van Norwich se woorde: Alles wat is, sit opgesluit in 'n haselneut – hoe klein en gering ook al. Waarom? Omdat God die neut gemaak het en liefhet. Daarom is dit immers dáár. / In die neut, soos in alle klein en onopvallende, alle gewone en vanselfsprekende dinge ... skuil die geheimenis van die lewe, omdat dit deel in die geheimenis van Gods ewige liefde. / Daarom is dit haar wens vir haar kleinseun: dat hy hom steeds sal bly verwonder aan die oënskylik onbeduidende; dat hy die geheimenis van die eenvoudige sal bly bespeur; dat hy Gods liefde in die alledaagse sal bly raaksien; dat hy waardering sal hê vir die grootsheid van die kleine. / Nou dis mos 'n wens vir iemand anders ...? Voorspoedige nuwe jaar, en mag dit vir ons 'n jaar wees van kleine dinge!" Dis die lewe, as 't ware in 'n neutedop. /

14 "Die lewe van geloof is 'n lewe van verlange, van uitsien, droom, volhou en wág ... Of dink aan Advent. Dié vier weke bring jaarliks 'n tyd van verlange, van uitsien en droom en wág. Advent is 'n oefeningssessie-in-die-verlange ... / En hoe nodig het ons tog nie dié oefening nie! Want wat wéét ons eintlik nog van verlang, uitsien, droom en wág? In ons tye van onmiddellike vervulling, van kits-alles, van konsumpsie en versadiging en oorvloed en die terstondse bevrediging-van-remote-control? / Wat alles maar tragies is. Mens nie net geloof nie, maar ook mens-wees en geluk, ja selfs liefde lééf van verlange, uitsien – en wág.

15 "Dit is darem tog vreemd dat dit nodig is dat ons, ja, selfs gebiéd word om vol vreugde te wees, nè? 'n Bietjie paradoksaal dat ons in die Bybel bevéeél moet word om vrolik te wees? 'n Mens sou immers dog dat so iets vanself sou kom? ... / Dit is nodig, want vele van ons is begaafd met gegriefdheid! Ons het 'n talent vir pruttel, ons koester ewige klagtes, ons bly blywend beswaard en bitter. Ons verlustig ons in verwyte, in wroeg en wrewel. Vele van ons sukkel omtrent met respek vir die lewe ..."

It remains remarkable how the gospels repeatedly portray women as Jesus' witnesses ... Now witness literally means martyr. The early witnesses were martyrs, who witnessed with their own suffering to their connection with Jesus. And – remarkably – also in this sense countless women through the ages remain true witnesses, sharers in his suffering, also in and thanks to the church. They continue to endure, they tolerate, like Him – remarkable bearers of his spirit and his compassion. And thus often also the real bearers of the church!¹⁶

What Gerhard von Rad says in his Old Testament theology (Von Rad 2001:ch. D5) with reference to the Book of Proverbs can also be applied to DJS: The search for and discovery of wisdom, of growing (yet fallible) insight into the paradoxical mystery of life, goes hand in hand with grateful wonder over God's creation of and providential care for the world. There is a proper type of curiosity for believers – even though it is not always clear what it consists in ... (Smit 2009: 49):

Over the years people have known that there is curiosity and curiosity. A conscious distinction was made between "idle curiosity" on the one hand, and a "thirst for knowledge" on the other, *curiositas* and *studiositas*. The one destroys life, the other serves it. ... In foolish self-destruction people want to try out everything for themselves, and do not believe those who warn them against hot stoves and against drugs. But out of equally foolish self-satisfaction others trust only in what they already know and already can, and do not long to discover, to learn, to grow, yes, even to fly.

So, is curiosity virtue or vice? Good or evil? Why would you like to know? Why do you ask?¹⁷

Christian thinkers need not add a sprinkling of Christianity to everything, but can express their faith by simply celebrating and enjoying the fragile magnificence of being human. A theologian like Barth is an inspiration in this regard (Smit 2009:97):

Respect for life – thus ponders Karl Barth, ... includes joy. Our calling to have respect for life, deference to God's wondrous gifts, surely also includes that we shall be cheerful. Be people who ... stand in wonder before the good, are easily joyful; people who each day notice anew the mysteries of creation, in gratitude and joy.¹⁸

16 "Dit bly net merkwaardig hoe die Evangelies vroue uitbeeld as getuies van Jesus ... Nou beteken getuie letterlik martelaar. Die vroeë getuies was martelare, wat met hul eie lyding getuig het van hul verbondenheid aan Jesus. En – merkwaardig – ook in dié sin bly tallose vroue deur die eeue ware getuies, deelgenote in sy lyding, ook in en danksy die kerk wat sy Naam dra. Hulle bly verduur, hulle verdra, soos Hy – merkwaardige draers van sy gees en sy deernis. En so, dikwels ook die eintlike draers van die kerk!"

17 "Deur die jare het mense geweet daar is nuuskierigheid én nuuskierigheid. Doelbewus is daar 'n onderskeid gemaak tussen 'ydele nuuskierigheid' aan die een kant en 'weetgierigheid' aan die ander, *curiositas* en *studiositas*. Die een verwoes die lewe, die ander dien dit ... In dwase selfvernietiging wil mense alles self beproef en glo hulle nie as ander hulle waarsku teen warm plate en teen dwelms nie. Maar uit ewe dwase selftevredenheid rus ander weer net in wat hulle reeds weet en reeds kan, en hunker hulle nie om te ontdek, te leer, te groei, ja, selfs te kan vlieg nie. / Dus: Is nuuskierigheid deug of ondeug? Goed of kwaad? Hoekom wil jy weet? Hoekom vra jy?"

18 "Respek vir die lewe – só peins Karl Barth, ... sluit blydskap in. Ons roeping om eerbied vir die lewe te hê, ontsag vir God se wonderbare gawes, sluit sekerlik ook in dat ons vrolik sal wees. Mense sal wees wat ... hulle verwonder oor die goeie, hulle gou verbly; mense wat dankbaar en met vreugde die geheimenisse van die skepping elke dag opnuut raaksien ..."

Joie de vivre is also characteristic of Smit as a person and a theologian, and is evident in his column. Like the biblical teacher of wisdom he stands in awe before life without always expressing that awe in explicitly theological terms. Humour is an integral part of such reflections (Smit 2011):

The problem with humour – as with regret – is that it often comes too late. Think of Ben MacLennan's *Apartheid: The Lighter Side*. Nothing but news reports from back then. What politicians said, officials did, spokespersons spoke publicly – painfully absurd after the fact. Yet it appears only in 1990. We need such self-ridicule in the midst of the kairos, also right now, not one day.¹⁹

SPIRITUAL VALUES?

As mentioned earlier, there are also columns in which Smit deals more explicitly with faith convictions and theological concepts – especially when the column's theme is inspired by the liturgical calendar. These pieces probably relate most directly to what most readers will expect in a column entitled *Geestelike Waardes*. However, Smit inherited this title of his column and it is unlikely that he would have chosen it. In conventional usage "spiritual" has too much the connotation of inner, non-bodily, other-worldly – "a resting-place along the way" rather than a journey on a winding road. The latter, which David Bosch (2001) called a "spirituality of the road", comes closer to the "spirit" of Smit's theology: faith has to do with the present and future of this world, this life.

That Smit sees it in this way is often clear from his columns. Take the column "Heilig" (Holy) (Smit 2009:15-17): "The art of living is to discover the exceptional in the ordinary, the eternal in the everyday ... to learn to discern true holiness."

Nor would "values" have been Smit's chosen title. He is quite critical of a liberal theology that, in the spirit of Immanuel Kant, wants to relate faith above all to values and morality. Worse still, the combination of "values" with "spiritual" suggests a dualistic value system, as if faith has to do with the "things above" rather than the "things below". In fact, the author of *Colossians* uses these phrases ironically, in order to show that those who are concerned with so-called elevated things, like contact with heavenly beings, are actually busy with all too human things, things below, whereas the "things above", the things of God, have to do precisely with worldly matters, for instance, how men and women, and masters and slaves should treat one another. The things below are the things above!

This is also the secret of the Christian gospel – and the offence of it. The Word became flesh and lived among us ... God has made a home among us, in our time, so that we may see his glory ... God's shapes among us do not really impress us. We would have expected his presence so differently! ...

... Surely God should look different, come differently ... more recognisable, more Godly, more holy ... as we would expect Him to be ... If we want to see Christ, says Luther, we should not yearn for the heavens, but look around us. Not look for Him there, for He is to

¹⁹ "Die ding met humor – soos met spyt – is dat dit dikwels te laat kom. Dink aan Ben MacLennan se *Apartheid: The Lighter Side*. Bloot nuusberigte van tóé. Wat politici gesê, amptenare gedoen, joernaliste geskryf, woordvoerders die publiek gevoer het – ná die tyd pynlik belaglik. Dog dit verskyn eers in 1990. Ons kort dié self-spot reg in die kairos, ook nou, nie eendag nie."

be found here ...²⁰

But perhaps it is a good thing that DJS' column bears a title that Smit would not have chosen himself. Precisely the stereotyped expectations of the kind of thoughts and emphases to be found in a column on "spiritual values" create an opportunity for the sort of reversals and surprises so characteristic of Smit's columns (and of his theology in general).

Thus he tells the story of one Mrs. Shapiro from Brookline, Massachusetts, who took to the Himalayas in search of a holy man who lived on one of the most inaccessible peaks. After many toils and privations, among them a stay of several days in a cold cave with little to eat, she is at long last given permission to see the holy man: "And indeed, there he sits, the holy man. Mrs. Shapiro approaches him without further ado and says: 'Marvin, come home now for once! Now isn't that a real sort of saint? That Mrs. Shapiro?'"²¹

If this is what "spiritual values" means, then Smit's column may bear that name!

"PUBLIC OR "POPULIST"?"

In conclusion, once more: Is DJS a "public" theologian? In the sense in which Thiselton, among others, speaks of the "public" nature of the church and its witness in the New Testament (Thiselton 2007:21, 24, 41 46-49, 53, 55, 106, 178, 243-244, 246-252, 320-325, 556-558), certainly. DJS does not hide the Christian message under a bushel and is interested precisely in points of contact and resonances between Christian faith and everyday life, both on the wide canvass of "society" and in the smaller, though equally important, picture of the joys and heartaches of unknown individuals. In his academic and other theological writings, Smit often makes a plea for a church that speaks out audibly on issues of the day and concerns itself with such issues (Smit 2008b; Koopman and Smit 2007). This is even inevitable given his understanding of the different forms of the church, for if ordinary believers in their daily lives are also the church, then "involvement" with the challenges and possibilities of life, shared with neighbours, fellow citizens and others, is unavoidable.

Yet enough has already been said about Smit's question marks concerning the theological use of the term "public" to make it less than obvious to call him, without qualification, a "public" theologian – despite the fact that he is a leading figure in present-day "public theology". This label will probably not be easily cast aside for some time to come. However, precisely for that reason it might well be worthwhile to also consider other characterisations of Smit's theology – the more improbable the better.

I want to suggest that Smit, especially also as columnist, can be called a "populist" theologian. This will probably not only surprise Smit's fellow scholars, colleagues and friends, but will

20 "Die kuns van die lewe is om die buitengewone in die gewone te ontdek, die ewige in die alledaagse ... Om ware heiligheid te leer herken. / Dis ook die geheimenis van die Christelike evangelie – en die aanstoot daarvan. Die Woord het vlees geword en onder ons kom woon ... God het onder ons kom huis opsit, in ons tyd, sodat ons sy heerlikheid aanskou ... / God se gestaltes onder ons beïndruk ons nie regtig nie. Ons sou sy teenwoordigheid eintlik so anders verwag! ... / ... God behoort darem anders te lyk, anders te kom ... meer herkenbaar, Goddeliker, heiliger ... soos óns sou verwag Hy moet wees ... / As ons Christus wil sien, sê Luther, moet ons nie hemelwaarts hunker nie, maar rondom ons kyk. Hom nie daár gaan soek nie, want Hy is hiér te vinde ..."

21 "En daar sit die heilige inderdaad. Mevrouw Shapiro stap summier nader, en sê: 'Marvin, kom nou 'n slag huis toe!' Nou, daár is nou vir jou 'n regte soort heilige, of hoe? Dié mevrou Shapiro?'"

also make Smit himself fall off his chair. After all, the word “populist” suggests a concern for popularity, “playing to the gallery”, and might as such suggest a type of theology that seeks to “market” the gospel, soften the *scandalon* of the cross, “give the people what they ask for”. That is certainly not Smit’s aim! Least of all in his column. Jesus himself was, after all, no populist rabbi in that sense of the word either – as the cross overwhelmingly shows.

However, I borrow my reference to “populist theology” from Tony Jones, who, in his foreword to Philip Clayton’s book *Transforming Christian Theology for Church and Society* (2010:viii), stresses the need for such a theology:

If there is to be a salvation of mainline Christianity, it will be theology. Indeed, it will be populist theology. I’m going to repeat that: *the salvation of progressive Christianity will be populist theology* [italics in original].

He then praises Clayton as a practitioner of such theology and contrasts his “populist” approach with that of many other theologians: “they are for the most part completely uninterested in promulgating their ideas over the high walls of the academy (gasp!) by posting something on Facebook.”

It can certainly not be said of Clayton that he tries to sell an easily digestible theology. What can truly be said of him is that, like Smit, he produces not only academic work, but also puts his impressive academic knowledge and insight in the service of the populous. This he does, inter alia, by means of a lively blog in which he enters into discussion with “ordinary” (also non-Christian) people, and through publications such as the book just mentioned, which are accessible to a broad church audience. Smit does the same with his varied oeuvre, and especially in his newspaper column – something that cannot be said of all “public” theologians.

Perhaps the initial shock of the word “populist” can be softened by linking it to the πολλοί (polloi), the “crowds” to which the gospels refer so often (cf. Brand 2010). Although Jesus was continually in discussion with other rabbis, other teachers, his real audience was the crowds, the πολλοί. His ability to address them, to find particularly for them, “old and new things” from Scripture – with stories, witty sayings and concrete acts of care and compassion – was probably part of what made him “unpopular” among the religious elite. In this sense of “populist” Jesus was most certainly a “populist”, and Jones is right to suggest that we are today in great need of good “populist” theologians like Dirkie Smit.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article is that the excerpts from the Geestelike Waardes column discussed here, and the elements of “ecclesial”, “public”, and “populist” theology highlighted in it, will awaken enough enthusiasm and curiosity among others to exhume and unravel further the theological wealth in this part of Smit’s oeuvre. I hope that I have succeeded in this and that, in addition, something has shone through of a former journalist and current colleague’s great appreciation for Smit as a theological columnist. May he continue for many years to come!

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