

# (Practical) Theology: A story of doubt and imagination

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Theology as a story of doubt and imagination is to be understood against the background of interdisciplinary social science and in contrast to the traditional paradigm of theology as a system of propositional certainty. The concepts of doubt and imagination are part and parcel of narrative research and can also be linked to postfoundational philosophy. The relevancy of this theological paradigm will be discussed on the basis of the following: (1) It is in touch with its own doubt, (2) It is in touch with its own story (tradition), (3) It can therefore interact with other stories, stories of hope and despair, stories of suffering, stories of power and of marginalisation, (4) It can also imagine alternative stories.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The interaction with 'other stories', which is one of the important outcomes of this postfoundational approach, makes it possible for theology to be a humble but important participant at the interdisciplinary conversational table.

**Keywords:** Practical theology; postfoundational; installation art; narrative theology; autobiography.

## Introduction

The other day when my car had to go to the garage for a service, I was driven back in a courtesy vehicle. With me in the car was another client. Both of us were taken to our workplaces. I was to be dropped off first, at the main gate of the University of Pretoria. Arriving at the gate of the university, the other person in the car asked me whether I was a lecturer, and then he wanted to know in which field. When I told him that I am in theology, he said to me: 'And how are you doing with the God-problem?' I asked him what he meant and then he said: 'The problem of how God is involved in the issues of this life'. At that point I had to get out of the car, and that was the end of the conversation. But it gave me something to think about. What are we doing in theology? Are we working on what he called the 'God-problem'? If not, then what are we working on?

The God question is returning today with a new sense of urgency. One hears much talk about the 'return of the religious' in contemporary world politics. Debates on the relations between the secular and the sacred are prevalent and arresting. Many speak of a 'religious turn' in continental philosophy or, contrariwise, of an 'antireligious turn' in a new wave of critical secularism (Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens). Vital disputes about theism and atheism have not disappeared as some expected, resulting from the Enlightenment and subsequent declarations of the death of God by Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. The God question keeps returning again and again, compelling us to ask what we mean when we speak of God (cf. Richard Kearney, Lloyd Geering, Brian Mountford).

The question is: how do we engage with these God questions?

The traditional position for a theologian is to take a knowledgeable position. As the word *theologian* suggests, we have knowledge of God (*theos* and *logos*) and therefore are supposed to give God-answers. We have, after all, a God's-eye view of the world.

But the world is changing, and we are changing with it. Theology is changing and has been changing through the ages. As theologians, we are much more reluctant to give easy answers to life's questions. In order to identify and understand these changes, we need to look at our current theological interpretation in the light of the historical development.

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## Where we are and where we come from

The developments of Western theology can only be understood in light of and as part and parcel of cultural and philosophical developments in the west. In order to provide a quick overview of the paradigmatic changes that brought us to where we are today, we can have a quick look at three examples from the history of the painting of the human face (Kearney 1998:7–14). With a postfoundational paradigm, I do not think it necessary to defend the use of art in the process of reflecting on cultural and philosophical history. In another article (2021:107), I have referred to Wentzel van Huyssteen's view on aesthetic forms, such as storytelling and painting, which should be considered as part of scientific research.

The first is an anonymous icon of Christ the Pantocrator (Figure 1). These icons, of which this one is an example, were mostly the product of one of the Byzantine schools of medieval iconography and were generally unsigned. The common practice of portraying the eyes of Christ as expressionless was a symbol of the main purpose of the icon, namely to invite the onlooker to travel through the vacant eyes into the transcendence of God, rather than linger on the surface level of purely human expression and sensation. Church authorities effectively discouraged experimentation with more expressive, realist or life-like modes of painting.

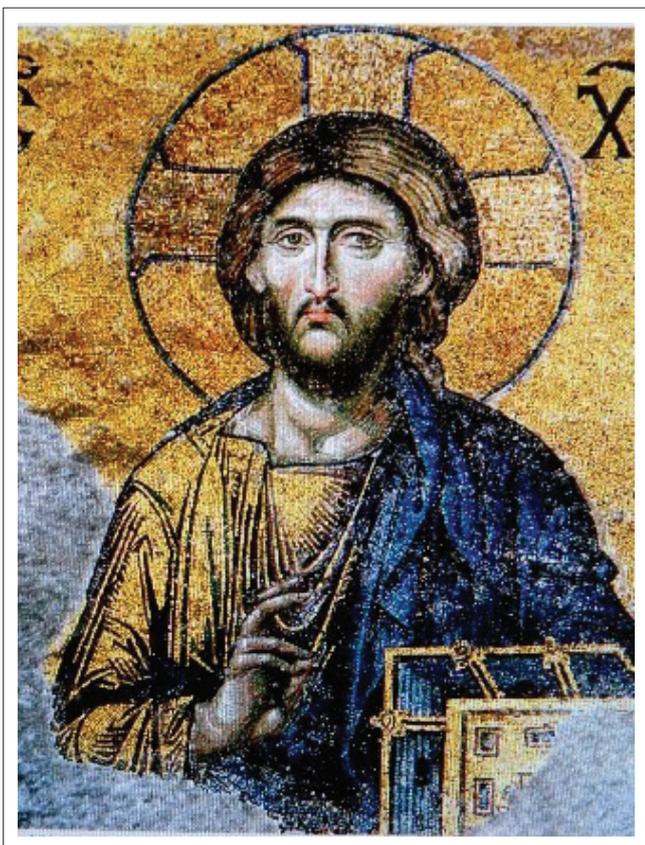


FIGURE 1: A medieval icon of Christ (premodern imagination).

On the contrary, the self-portrait art form of the modern era lays the primary stress on the image as a medium of human expression. 'The sacramental prayer has turned into an existential cry' (Kearney 1998:10). These self-portraits (Rembrandt, Van Gogh and others) represent a turning away from the traditional modes of painting resemblance (a mimesis of nature or God) to an autonomous expression of humanity. Even long before Van Gogh's self-portrait (Figure 2), the paintings of the Italian Renaissance were pointing in this humanist direction. El Greco's version of St Maurice, for instance, received the following rebuke from the Inquisitor of Toledo: 'I like neither the angels you paint nor the saints. Instead of making people pray, they make them admire. Beauty inserts itself as an obstacle between our souls and God' (Kearney 1098:10).

In the pop poster of Martin Sharp, (Figure 3) the theocentric and the anthropocentric are replaced by the ex-centric paradigm of parody. It is 'ex-centric' in the sense that the self-conscious subject is ex-centric to itself and not functioning as a controlling origin of self-expression. Sharp's image of Van Gogh's self-portrait is confusing and paradoxical. One does not know whether to regard it as art or pseudo-art, which in itself is an indication of its postmodern character. On the one hand, there is a resemblance with medieval icon art, with its impersonal and formal expression; on the other hand, it is totally different in that it does not seek to direct the onlooker's attention towards some transcendent being but only to be a playful

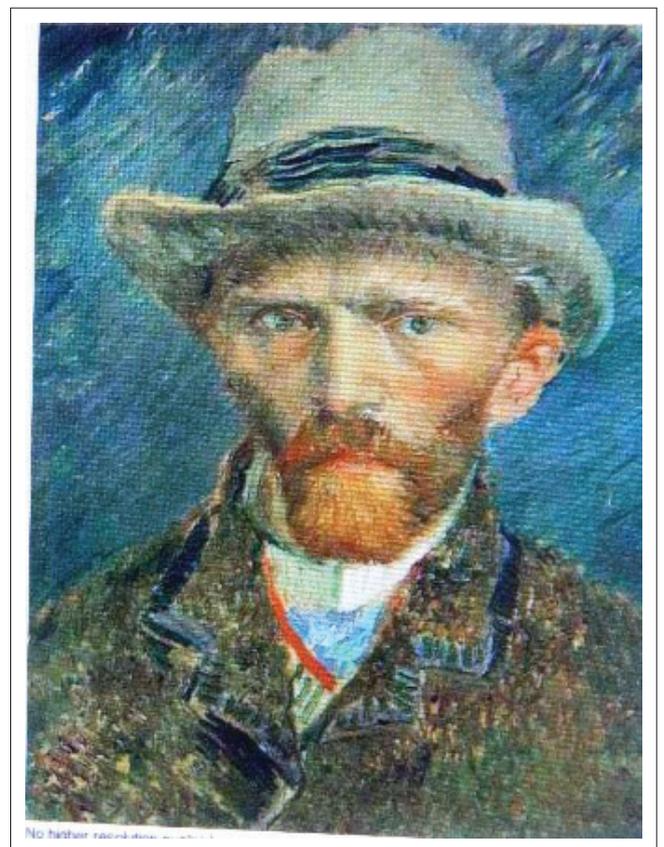
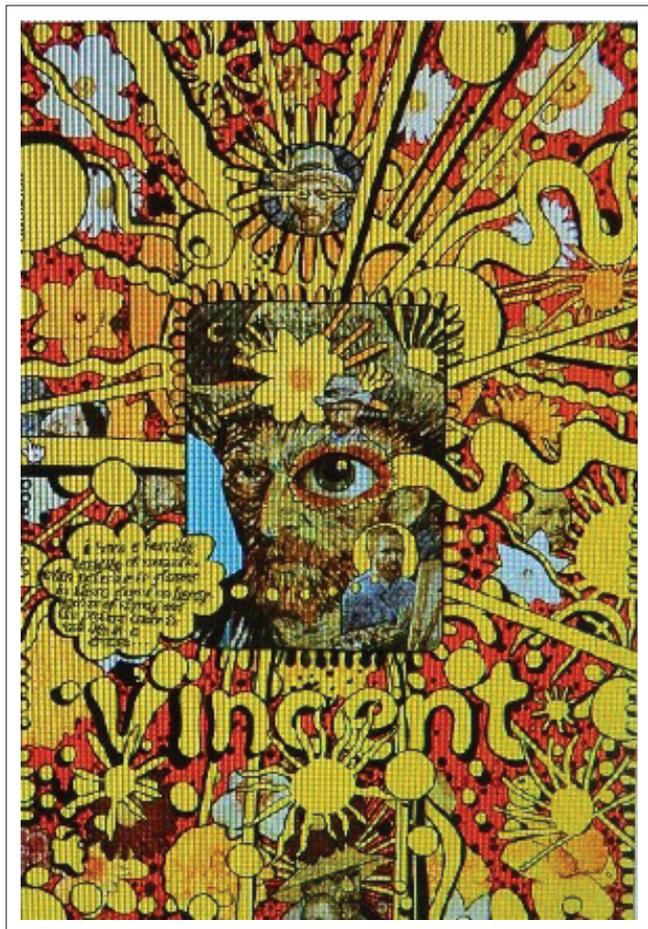


FIGURE 2: A Van Gogh self-portrait (modern art).



**FIGURE 3:** Martin Sharp's pop poster of the Van Gogh self-portrait (postmodern).

item of popular consumption. The artist becomes the bricoleur: 'someone who plays around with fragments of meaning which he himself has not created ... The artist becomes a "player" in a game of signs, an "operator" in an electronic media network' (Kearney 1998:13).

These images represent cultural–historical phases, which can be referred to as paradigm shifts. In an effort to translate these into theological categories and explain the theological developments, we can make use of Lindbeck's typologies.

George A. Lindbeck (1984)<sup>1</sup> identifies three models in order to explain theological development up to the present:

- The propositionalist model
- The experiential–expressionist model
- The cultural–linguistic model

The propositionalist model is a label for all of traditional orthodoxy, as well as some forms of neo-orthodox theology. According to this model, the propositions of theology (the confessions and other formulations) are thought to correspond directly to what is real and true. They simply describe what is. For instance, the proposition of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is not understood in a metaphorical sense but as a description of who God is.

<sup>1</sup> I also make use of C.V. Gerkin's (1997:106–110) usage of Lindbeck's work for pastoral theology.

Behind the eyes of the icon, there is a truth that can be captured with theological propositions. Therefore, the real work of theology is the articulation of propositional truth, whether in preaching, pastoral counselling or in any other field of ministry.

The experiential–expressionist model represents a significant shift. According to this understanding, theology is the expression of the common core of human experience. Theology becomes more dependent on art, poetry and aesthetics than on scientific statements. It characterises the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who is regarded as the father of practical theology. He grounded his theology on the common human experience of complete and utter dependence. In the words of Lindbeck (1984:22):

The structures of modernity press individuals to meet God first in the depths of their souls, and then, perhaps, if they find something personally congenial, to become part of tradition or join the church.

It is not difficult to understand that this leads the way to a dominant individualism of our time. There is also a clear link with the more modern theologian Paul Tillich and his correlation model. Human experience prompts the questions that theology seeks to answer. And where these theological answers are not convincing for the individual mind, the road is paved for secularisation.

The following quote from Lindbeck (1984: 33) conveys something of the cultural–linguistic model, and hopefully you will also recognise something of it in the third image (the pop poster of Martin Sharp):

It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (although it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulations of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of these subjectivities.

This new paradigm shift is usually referred to with the broad term of postmodernism, and this poster image exhibits something of the parodic, paradoxical, multilayered and complex nature of this worldview. But in spite of all the complexities that are a part of the baggage of the term 'postmodernism', it is clearly an opposite, a response to and a deconstruction of the certainties of the past. Both the propositional truths and the subjective expressions of the so-called core of human experience of the past are questioned and deconstructed, with parodic art as an important communication vehicle.

Theologically, we can refer to the paradigm shift away from foundationalism to anti- or nonfoundationalism. Foundationalism takes as its point of departure that there is absolute truth and that it is available and can be

accessed through thorough research. This truth represents the 'God's-eye view'.

Anti- or nonfoundationalism can be regarded as the opposite. Where the previous approach works with the ideal of a universal position that provides the answer to all problems, this approach takes it for granted that foundations or fundamentals do not exist and that we only have a diversity of opinions (as expressed in the pop poster of Sharp).

The question is where are we now? The poster image of Sharp was produced in 1968, and Lindbeck's publication with his description of theological models was produced in 1984. Are these descriptions and images still representative of our current cultural, philosophical and theological paradigm?

The answer is 'yes' and 'no'.

'Yes', because this new era has only started, and great paradigm shifts do not occur overnight. 'No', because the very nature of this new era is that it consists of an ongoing, rapid transition. The power of globalisation is so strong and the current is moving so fast that we cannot even oversee the transition taking place.

Theology, with its age-old foundational paradigm, is still trying to recover from the shockwaves of postmodernism. Theologians are so well-trained in the business of propositions that the antifoundational or relativistic trends of postmodernism remain a strange environment and we are struggling to adapt to it.

With this process of adapting to new times and ideas, one of the most exciting developments in philosophy and theology is what we can refer to as a 'third way', which is different from the foundational approach and different from the relativistic approach. This third way is known as the postfoundational approach. It is an effort to move beyond the modernistic boundaries of practical theology as a very formal, rationalistic venture. On the other hand, it is also an effort to avoid the relativism of antifoundationalist theories.

In order to explain this (practical) theological paradigm, I found myself more attracted to the poster image of Sharp (show image), but on the other hand, I was dissatisfied because it is not capturing the basic understanding and approach of postfoundational practical theology.

One of the newer, emerging forms of art provides us with an enlightening metaphor. That is land art and installation art, and I want to share one or two images with you.

**The Gates** was a site-specific work of art by Bulgarian artist Christo Javacheff and French artist Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon, known jointly as Christo and Jeanne-Claude. The artists installed 7503 vinyl 'gates' along 23 miles (37 km) of pathways in Central Park in New York

City. From each gate hung a panel of deep saffron-coloured nylon fabric. The exhibit ran from 12 February 2005 to 27 February 2005.

Coloured prayers is the creation of Jacques Coetzer (2011). The inscription says:

A drive through the countryside is often meditative, with mountain, field, and sky drifting past. Occasionally a flash of colour will signal domestic life – washing hung out on a fence outside a homestead or labourers' cottages. Merely blown about strings of brightly hued clothing connect people and landscape, and so the very ordinary and intimate becomes public. clothelines, like prayer flags, can be imagined to send out personal meditations on the wind.

These images provide a backdrop against which we can start to imagine the meaning of postfoundational practical theology as narrative theology.

I would like to use the rest of this article to unpack my understanding of (practical) theology as 'a story of doubt and imagination', against the backdrop of these images.

## Theology as story...

One can ask the question: what is new about this? Story has always been a part of theology, and the knowledge and insight about the role of stories in our Bible and in theological developments are not new. It is for anyone to see that most of the Old Testament is a narrative or story account of the history of Israel. The same is true of great sections of the New Testament, and Jesus was a storyteller *par excellence*.

So story is not new to theology. And yet, narrative theology is something new and different. I have explained this in my book *Om tot verhaal te kom* (1996), and I have explored the idea of narrative practical theology from various angles in different articles (2005, 2009a, 2009b, 2011). Let us take the images again and reflect on how story was perceived and used in theology:

- The first image Figure 1: As we have seen, this image represents what Lindbeck calls propositionalistic theology. Within this paradigm, story is probably frowned upon, except for the dominant story. Theology is about the truth, the One Story, God's story. Theology must only provide a view of God and must not be distracted by other images or stories. This story of God is, of course, carried by the dominant and powerful story of the church.
- The second image Figure 2: When looking at this image, we think of the experiential-expressionist theological paradigm, where theology is understood to be the expression of the common core of human experience and therefore becomes more dependent on story. Story as an expression of human experience becomes a valued object of study. We can refer to this as narratology – the knowledge of narratives – as a way of theological understanding. The story is an object of study and interpretation.
- The third image Figure 3: The theology that goes with this image is Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model. Here we think of a collage of stories, all on the same level and each

in its own right – the typical postmodern approach of ‘your story and my story’. In contrast to the One Story, the story of the truth, a multiplicity of stories, all equally relative to the truth, come to the fore. Story no longer carries the objective truth but becomes the expression of subjectivity. We can also refer to this as constructivism, with language and storytelling as major instruments.

- The fourth image Figure 4: This image shows that it is not about stories, but about storying. The important shift is away from stories as such to the process of storying. This is a discovery that the whole of reality is like constructing an installation and walking through the gates of the installation. We construct reality on an interactive and social basis. We refer to this as social constructionism. Stories are a social product, and they function socially.
- Within this frame of thought, God is also discovered as the storied God. God is not above history but has a history, and God’s history is part of our history, while our history is part of God’s history. Our relationship with God is storied. As we walk through life, we story our spirituality, religiously and theologically.

These last two images capture the ideas of postfoundational or narrative theology much better than the parodic and chaotic image of the pop poster.

To summarise, the word ‘story’ or ‘narrative’, when applied to theology, creates all kinds of misunderstanding and false claims. Story indeed features in theology through the ages and can be studied in and used in all subdisciplines. Stories can be studied from a variety of epistemologies. You can be totally



FIGURE 4: An image of coloured prayers in Stellenbosch – installation art.

positivistic and structuralistic in your approach and be very interested in stories. In that case, stories are phenomena, objects of study, which can be analysed and interpreted. But the narrative approach is not about using stories in order to find data or to understand the context but rather about being storied, about being drawn into the installation of stories. It is not about us telling stories but about stories telling us.

Narrative theology is about the realisation that stories are not only the means through which we give expression to our experiences, but they are also first and foremost the means through which we construct our experiences and our realities (Sclater 2003:317). Through the process of languaging we form our stories, but in the same process we are formed by them. It is a never-ending process of storying and becoming, becoming and storying.

This knowledge has major implications for the way we understand and do practical theology. If we are no longer the objective experts who study our field, but if we are drawn into our research stories and with our participants are constructing new realities, we are accountable on a different level. The criterion for good research is no longer objectivity, but rather subjective integrity. The question now is: how do we participate in this installation? How do we reflect on the clothes on the washing line?

Only if you understand that we are not talking about the study of stories, but about being storied, you will understand why the following concepts become so important:

- Doubt as a leading metaphor (not-knowing position)  
Theologians are often perceived as the champions of certainty and belief. But the truth is that the more you dwell in the vicinity of the ultimate questions of life, which is per definition the task of the theologian, the more likely you are to become disoriented. Such disorientation, however, is a prerequisite for the reaching of re-orientation (Brueggemann). But this re-orientation is not the same as regaining old certainties. It is rather finding assurance in the creation of a new identity. This implies a new role for theologians at the interdisciplinary table – no longer as the guardians of religious tradition, but as the ones who can formulate on the one hand the value of the traditions of interpretation but at the same time express doubts about those interpretations.
- Embrace paradoxes  
A few weeks ago, the internationally known South African theologian Jimmie Loader delivered a lecture on campus about ‘Bipolar Theology’. In the lecture he showed that you can find in Wisdom Literature this inherent bipolar theology. On the one hand, there is the wisdom of causality (if you do good, good things will happen to you; if you do bad, bad things will cross your path), but in the same breath or text, you find a deconstruction of that very system of thinking.

So this is a message from the core of theological thinking, and yet when entering the public domain and in

conversation with others, the theologian often finds it difficult to embrace this paradoxical position. We are more comfortable to carry with us the eye of certainty than to start a construction or installation with others.

The implication of inviting a paradox and doing theology with a paradox is to be confronted with messiness or chaos. Things no longer fit in neat little boxes. This is therefore the route of diversity. It brings us to a place where we not only tolerate diversity but also embrace it. The washing line (image) provides us with an even better metaphor than the very orderly land art of Christo's *The Gates* in Central Park.

I thought J.R. Daniel Kirk (New Testament theologian from Fuller) has a nice description of this washing line reality on his blog:

It is about suggestions and questions. It's about thoughts clanging around that haven't found a way to resolve in some sort of palatable harmony. Like real life, it's a mess of happenings and thoughts and interpretations and rightness and wrongness.

#### Embodied and local theology

Storied theology is always contextual, local and embodied. It does not make claims of generalisation. Its contribution is on the level of giving a voice for unheard and marginalised stories.

The postfoundationalist approach forces us to listen to the stories of people in real life situations. It does not have the aim of merely describing a general context but of confronting us with a specific and concrete situation. According to Van Huyssteen (2006a:10), '... embodied persons, and not abstract beliefs, should be seen as the locus of rationality. We, as rational agents, are thus always socially and contextually embedded'.

This way of thinking is always concrete, local and contextual, but at the same time it reaches beyond local contexts to transdisciplinary concerns. It is contextual but at the same time in acknowledgement of the way in which our epistemologies are shaped by tradition. Van Huyssteen (2006a:22) refers to the postfoundationalist notion as 'a form of compelling knowledge', which is a way of seeking a balance between 'the way our beliefs are anchored in interpreted experience, and the broader networks of beliefs in which our rationally compelling experiences are already embedded'.

## The rise of (auto)biographical theology

It is then clear that in narrative theology, the emphasis shifts from the dominant stories to the small, even marginalised real-life stories.<sup>2</sup> But these stories can never be studied

<sup>2</sup>The concepts of auto-ethnography, which include autobiography and interdisciplinary work, were explored in the book *Unfolding narratives of Ubuntu in Southern Africa* (2019) and in my 2021 article 'Together in the world! Postfoundationalism re-discovered in Ubuntu'.

alone. They can only be understood in their relation to the metanarratives of church and society.

I agree with Jacobs (2003:25) that narrative theology has the potential, but it is also challenged, to create a bridge between the metanarratives of church and theology on the one side and individual life stories on the other side. On the one hand, the group story provides the safety and space for the individual story to be embedded into a bigger context; on the other hand, there is the danger of a discourse becoming so dominant that it leaves no space for the development of personal stories. When the narrative integrity of a given single life is not accepted and respected, the space can become more fragile than safe. The problem, as seen by Jacobs, is that church theologians can be more concerned with 'the narrative coherence (or incoherence) of whole traditions', than with 'what makes a human life coherent' (Jacobs 2003:25).

## Interdisciplinary participation

All of this leaves us as theologians in a paradoxical new equilibrium, where we not only feel fragile but also find a new safety. The important point is that this equilibrium is only to be found when we participate in the installation art of interdisciplinary research, not on the basis of having a God's-eye view, but on the basis of being an equal partner, contributing to this installation.

The theologian has a contribution to make to these discussions where no one else can. The questions about God are asked everywhere, sometimes in obscure language. The recent discussion about the best name for the so-called Higgs particle or Higgs boson is an example. Although the title of Leon Ledermann's publication, *The God Particle Universe Question*, was seemingly formulated to elicit a positive response from the United States Congress, it revealed something of the underlying question about God and the universe that surfaces often and in many ways in many disciplines. If theology can retire from the task of defending God, or rather a theistic understanding of God, and ask real research questions with the other disciplines, it can participate in a meaningful way at the interdisciplinary table.

## Relevance

The paradox is that the more exposed, fragile and even wounded the theologian becomes in the interdisciplinary process, the more safety is experienced, and the more relevant the theological contribution becomes.

## Conclusion

Back to the question of the other passenger in the car:

The God question was answered in different ways through history: we can imagine a God answer in each of the images.

With the narrative understanding (Figure 4), the God question is not answered; instead, people are invited to take a walk in the park, or a walk under the washing line, which would hopefully facilitate meaningful questions about God.

I can imagine that when we do that:

- in participation with others
- with humility
- not-knowing instead of being experts
- with subjective integrity
- with doubt, but also imagining new possibilities

that we will always be fragile, but in a safe place at the interdisciplinary table.

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J.C.M. is the sole author of this article.

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## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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