Verbum et Ecclesia
ISSN: (Online) 2074-7705, (Print) 1609-9982

The incomprehensibility of God: Reciprocal interdependence between mystery and knowledge

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Dates:
Received: 25 June 2024
Accepted: 28 Aug. 2024
Published: 04 Oct. 2024

How to cite this article:
Van der Merwe, D.G., 2024, 'The incomprehensibility of God: Reciprocal interdependence between mystery and knowledge', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), a3227. https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.3227

This research investigates the theological concept, 'The incomprehensibility of God', from a Johannine perspective. The **primary objective** is to discern the 'incomprehensibility of God' from a reciprocal interdependence between knowledge (understanding) and mystery. It explains how the endeavour to *understand* the divine, continuously prompts *mystery*. Humans can only know, communicate with, relate to and talk about God, in terms of human perspectives and conventions within the human idiom. Therefore, the *modus operandi starts* with an articulation of how this dualism (knowledge versus mystery) relates and should be interpreted. This is *followed* by a discourse analysis of the Johannine prologue to point out various semantic networks to facilitate dualistic reasoning in this research. **Thereafter**, the incomprehensibility of God is discerned from the following four perspectives: the 'identity', 'articulation', 'activities' and 'involvement' of God in God's creation as formulated according to the Prologue of the Gospel of John. **Finally**, the investigation of and contemplation on the incomprehensibility of God becoming a spiritual, cognitive and discerning never-ending event.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The contribution of this research endeavours to point out that, when believers meditate about God, examine scripture, experience and worship God in everyday life, the proximity and tension between knowledge, experience and mystery about God will always be present, evident, experienced and will continue to evolve.

Keywords: incomprehensibility of God; knowledgeable; experience; mystery; interdependent; new enquiries; never-ending-venture.

Introduction

The title of this essay clearly states that this research concentrates on *The Incomprehensibility of God* as conceivably evident *from the Gospel of John* with a particular focus on the Prologue of the Gospel of John. Given its theological sublimity, the Gospel of John used to be the most significant text that was accessed to comprehend the Trinity, in particular Christ as part of the trinity and the trinitarian doctrine. For early Christian Trinitarian thought, the theology of the prologue was crucially valuable, beginning already from the first verse: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and was God'. The explicit reference of the Word as God (Jn 1:1) attests that the complete divinity of the Word was undisputed (cf. Davis 2016).

In this research, the Prologue will be the focal point. Although it seems as if the theology of John is Christologically centred, the nucleus seems to be theocentric (Rainbow 2014:72; Thompson 1993:177–204).[1] Table 1 verifies that the Gospel of John is saturated with references to 'God'.[2]

It never occurs to the FE[3] to argue about the hypothetical possibility of **God's existence**, or even attempt to verify in the concept what Godself has said and done. For the FE (also other biblical authors), the inference is sufficient: 'God has revealed Godself, therefore God is' (Rainbow 2014:72). Christians traditionally confess that they know God as God has been revealed to them, but do not comprehend God in essence or completely, as God is in Godself.

1.See an extensive list of scholars for further verification in Rainbow (2014:72–73).

2.In 4:26; 8:28; 12:49 Jesus refers to acting on behalf of God.

3.References to the author of the Gospel of John will be 'the Fourth Evangelist (FE)'.

TABLE 1: Explicit text references to God in the Gospel of John.

ὁ θεὸς	ὁ πατήρ	ὁ κύριος	ὁ οὐρανός	δεῖ	τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πέμψαντός με
God	The Father	The Lord	The heaven	*It is required*	*Will of Him who sent me*
Reference to God	Reference to God	Reference to God	Symbol of God	Idiom of the fixed will of God	Will of God
85x	121x	4x	18x	7x	4x

Source: Rainbow, P.A., 2014, *Johannine theology*, The Gospels, the Epistles and the Apocalypse, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL

This raises the inquiry whether God, as revealed, truthfully represents the essence of God. Conceivably, viewed within the cognitive boundaries of believers, God, logically speaking, cannot reveal any divine essence to people (Davis 2016).[4]

Fundamentally, comprehending the incomprehensibility of God would be acknowledging those Scriptural references to it. The Greek adjective, ἀνεξιχνίαστος[5] occurs only twice in the New Testament (Rm 11:33; Eph 3:8).[6] Paul applies it to delineate and to refer to the incomprehensibility of the divine. In the *protasis* of Romans 11:33, Paul refers to 'the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God'. In the *apodosis,* he verifies this statement in the reference, 'How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways'. In Romans 11:34–36, Paul elaborates further on this divine incomprehensibility with rhetorical questions: 'For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his councellor?[34] Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?[35] For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen'[36] (cf. Schreiner 1998:639). Thenceforth in Ephesians 3:8, Paul refers to the 'unsearchable riches of God'.

The **objective** of this research is to understand 'the incomprehensibility of God' according to the Prologue of the Gospel of John from a reciprocal interdependence between knowledge and mystery. Therefore, the *modus operandi* ***starts*** with an articulation of how this dualism (knowledge *vs* mystery) should be interpreted. This is ***followed*** by a discourse analysis of the Johannine prologue to point out various semantic networks to facilitate the dualistic reasoning in this research. **Thereafter**, both the incomprehensibility and knowledgeability of God are then discerned from the following four perspectives resulting from the discourse analysis: the 'identity', 'articulation', 'activities' and 'involvement' of God in God's creation and personal revelation as formulated in the Prologue of the Gospel and elsewhere in the Gospel. **Finally**, the investigation of and contemplation on the incomprehensibility of God becoming

4.Davis (2016) refers to Pseudo-Dionysius who insisted that 'we know nothing, or virtually nothing, about God's essence. This is because God is also said to be transcendent, unlimited, incomprehensible, inscrutable, and ineffable'. The conclusion, 'God in essence is beyond our comprehension'.

5.Danker (2000:77), defines it as '*inscrutable, incomprehensible*'.

6.'ἀνεξιχνίαστος': 1 Corinthians 2:16 can be added here: 'For who has known the mind of the Lord to instruct him?' 'But we have the mind of Christ'. See also Psalm 145:3 – 'his greatness is unsearchable' and Ephesians 3:20 'Now to him who is able to do immeasurably [ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ] (beyond all measure) more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us …'. Paul also uses the adjective ἀνεξεραύνητα [unfathomable, unsearchable] '… are His judgments and His ways past finding out'.

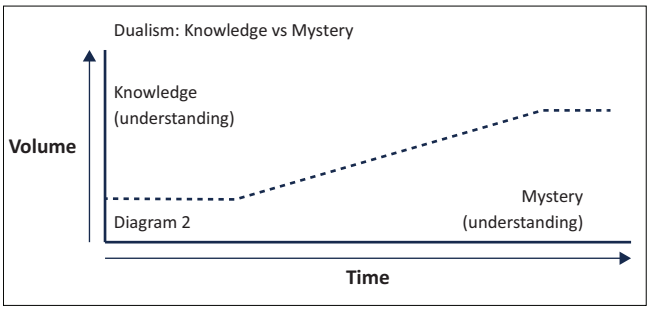

FIGURE 1: Depiction of author's subjective experience: Any form of relevant knowledge about God is acute and indispensable.

a spiritual, cognitive and discerning never-ending event. The concern of this research is to emphasise that *mystery is reciprocally interdependent on related knowledge.*

Mystery reciprocally interdependent on related knowledge

The dualism of knowledge versus mystery

The question that immediately arises, after reading the heading, is, 'Why such an approach?' Previous experiences in my research deemed me in choosing this approach, in relating mystery [μυστηριον] and knowledge [γινώσκω, οἶδα] dualistically to make sense of understanding 'mystery'.[7] About 25 years ago during dedicated research, I became aware that my research generated continuously more and more questions about God's *revelation* and *involvement* with God's creation. Quite a number of these questions are still pertinent and significant today.[8] In my research for illumination, I became aware of the critical and severe bond between *knowledge* and *mystery*. The more I advanced in my research in biblical (theological) knowledge, the more related mysteries evolved.

Via Figure 1 (indisputably not absolute), I endeavour to display my subjective experience[9] that any form of relevant knowledge about God is acute and indispensable to comprehend something about the incomprehensibility of the enigmatic (mysterious) side of God.

Irrespective of how the relation between *knowledge* and *mystery* interacts with each other, of interest is that they

7.References to 'mystery' in this research resonate with how it is formulated by Bavinck and Danker. For Bavinck (2004:II, 19) 'Scripture is far removed from the idea that believers can grasp the revealed mysteries in a scientific sense. The truth is that the knowledge that God has revealed of himself in nature and Scripture far surpasses human imagination and understanding. In that sense it is all mystery, for it does not deal with finite creatures, but from beginning to end looks past all creatures and focuses on the eternal and infinite One himself. Mystery faces the incomprehensible One'. For Danker. (2000:662) it refers to 'Secret thoughts, plans, and dispensations of God … which are hidden [*from*] human reason, as well as [*from*] all other comprehension below the divine level'.

8.'If God is *omnipotent*, why didn't God …? If God is *omniscient*, why did God allow evil …? If God is *omnipresent* where was God when …?' Even statements from fellow Christians, like: 'Don't worry, God *has a plan* or God *is in command*, or God sees the *overall picture*!' According to Louw (2000:5), '[*i*]n our postmodern culture many [*Christian believers*] experience God as indifferent to suffering and evil and as an abuser'.

9.I am aware that no diagram does total justice for which it has been used for. At least it evokes a better understanding in communication. Xu (2019:43) successively elucidates that both Barth and Bavinck confirm the compatibility of the incomprehensibility and knowability of God. They never experienced it atypical to relate these concepts in the doctrine of God.

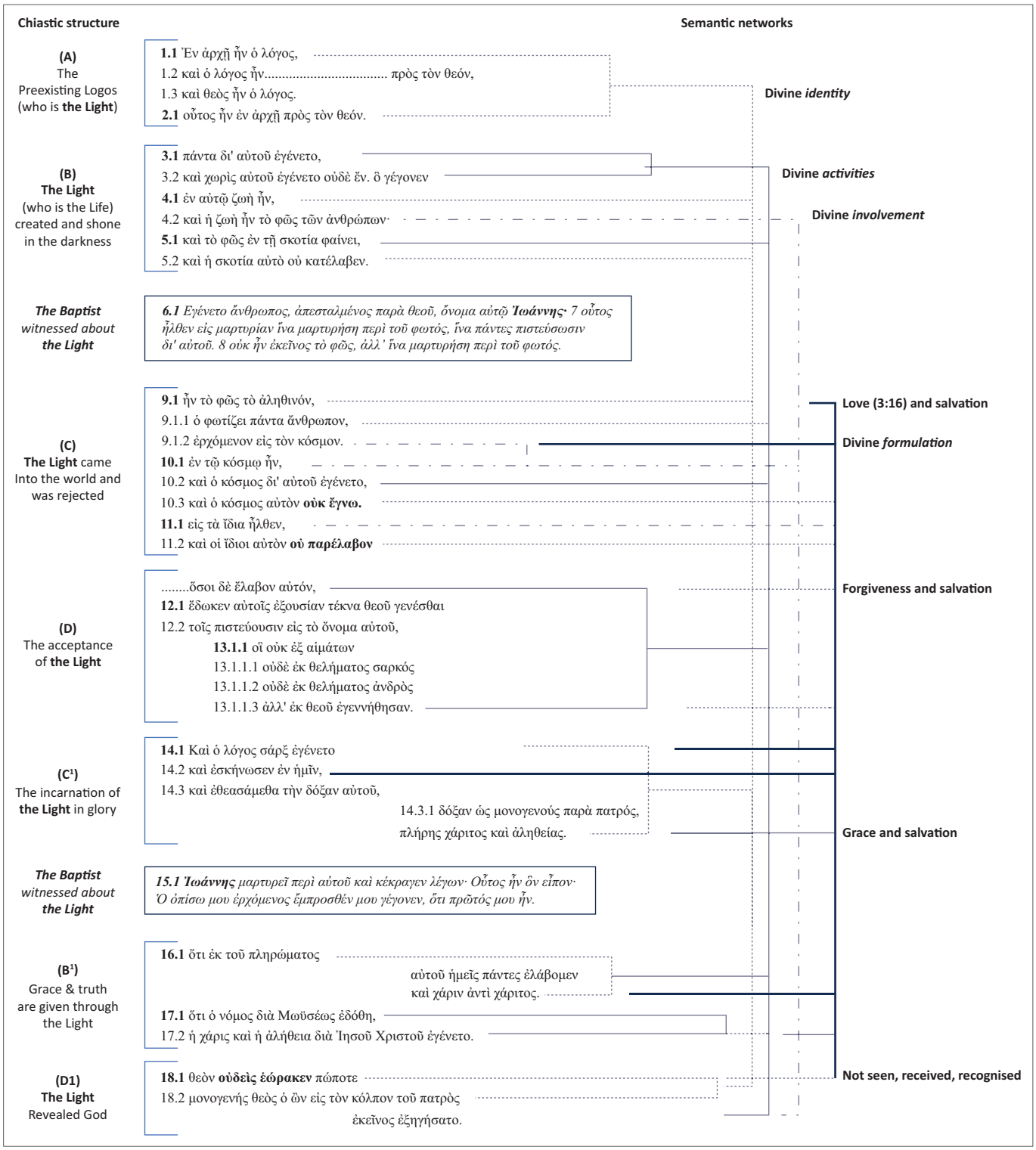

FIGURE 2: Discourse analysis and semantic networks of John 1:1–18.

both resolve one another. The diagonal line indicates that as time moved on, during my research (generating knowledge and understanding), the mystery and incomprehensibility surrounding God sprouted. Hence, knowledge and mystery are like the two sides of a coin. *Both divine knowledge and divine mystery influence the comprehensibility of both as well as the incomprehensibility of both.*

This experience finds verification in the reference by Pass (2018:254) that the self-knowledge of God is inestimable and co-extensive with the being of God. This does not at all infer that either God, or the embodiment of God's thought in creation,[10] may not appear mysterious to believers. In fact, both God and creation of God appear to be mysterious for

10.The noun 'creation' is used not only in reference to the physical creation, but also to the variety of events in this creation.

believers. God is a mystery! This implies not that all thoughts about God can be uncovered by human reason. Both, *mystery* and *incomprehensibility* endure – in both *knowledge about* and *experience* of the Creator and creation and the *involvement* of God with the creation of God.

The relation between knowledge and mystery

Pass (2018:254) refers to Bavinck who concedes that mystery operates as a constraining concept. Both Creator and creation are shrouded by mystery, albeit for different reasons. 'Creation is ontologically intelligible', yet the knowledge about creation bears an asymptomatic character. Reason may unfold new vistas of scientific and theological knowledge; yet with each discovery, reason encounters a declining horizon. 'God too is ontologically intelligible', yet every attempt of reasoning is completely limited. God may be known through human idiom, yet 'the point where the finite touches the infinite and rests in the infinite is everywhere indemonstrable'. As a limiting concept, however, mystery performs an additional function. Mystery maintains 'to be the properly doxological character of creaturely knowing' (Pass 2018:254).

The limitations of creaturely knowing might be succeeded by expressions of hope, that in *future* the mysteries encountered now will become more apparent, 'Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known' (1 Cor 13:12). Important to be considered is the 'incomplete character of creaturely knowing'. It is neither a dreadful consequence of the fall, nor a quality of the human condition to be voided in the future glory. 'Faith will pass over into sight [*1 Jn 3:2*], but even in glory "full" knowledge remains "finite" knowledge'. Apprehension will never pass over into comprehension. This could not erase any discrepancy between the finite and the infinite (Pass 2018:254).

Discourse analysis and semantic networks of John 1:1–18

Johannine prologue orientation

The main title refers to the Gospel of John. The Prologue (1:1–18), as the selected biblical text, will be analysed in exploring the *incomprehensibility* of God.[11] To comprehend the impact of the language of the Prologue,[12] that language (text) should be valued as a composition of a specific era and reflects the systems and orientations of a particular worldview.[13] Language can conceal and reveal many established illusions, consciously and unconsciously. The strength of the Johannine prologue is that its significance overflows any established boundary (see also Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:1).

Where the concepts, λόγος and μονογενὴς, seem to be central to the Prologue, the θεὸς-concept constitutes the centre point.[14] The Prologue in the Gospel of John is beautiful. It is compelling and mysterious. It is captivating. Any effort, seeking to comprehend or encompass the entire meaning of the verses, will eventually fade. Words and phrases should not be conjoined.[15] They are *within* and nevertheless *beyond* any comprehension. They consist of the supremacy to lead readers to areas not previously visited or experienced. It challenges and persuades. As both a spiritual anchor and slide, the Johannine prologue is a masterpiece.

Over nearly two millennia, many theologians have struggled to understand the meaning of the Johannine Prologue. The language of the FE is special; a language that speaks about a world in a way, different from everyday speech. It infringes common language and logic (Goldenberg 1990:4 quoted by Lawrence 2004:8, 9). The Prologue, a spiritual mystery, will always remain a mystery. The mystery cannot be solved because its mysteriousness is not a result of missing data or information. The mystery arises from its fullness, which cannot be wholly comprehended by the ordinary mind. When yielding to it in contemplation, then the mystery will play its proper role to facilitate readers to evolve (Lawrence 2004:9). When reading the Prologue, it seems that the two concepts, λόγος and μονογενὴς, introduce the mystery of the Prologue.

The following discourse analysis of the Prologue aims to expose and identify its reasoning and rhetoric.

Discourse analysis and semantic networks

Discourse analysis of Johannine prologue (1:1–18) and semantic networks (four dualisms)[16]

These networks facilitate the investigation of the *incomprehensibility* of God from the following four different, although complementary, perspectives:

- *natural versus supernatural (identity and being)*
- *cataphatic versus apophatic (articulation and formulation)*
- *immanence versus transcendence (involvement and activities and experience)*
- *comprehensibility versus incomprehensibility (understanding and comprehending).*

11.A philological analysis of the textual context of John 1:1–18 points out its revelatory emphasis in the context of the Fourth Gospel. The Logos as the divine Creator is denoted in his special relationship to this world and humanity. Divine communication happens in a setting discontinuously with the first creation (Zuiddam 2016:10).

12.Anderson (2008:8) is of the opinion that the Johannine Prologue begins innovatively with cognitive and experiential discourses. Conventionally and literarily, it expounded 'by means of dialogical explorations of the truth and its meanings. That is what is reflected in the Johannine text, but also what is furthered through it'.

13.Referring here to the three-story worldview of antiquity: the *heavens* (firmament) above – the *earth* in the middle – the *Sheol* beneath (to the Hebrew mind *Sheol* refers to the state or abode of the dead, Ps 88:3, 5).

14.For verification see Introduction.

15.'God' (1:1); 'in the beginning' (1:1); 'was with God' (1:1); 'All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made' (1:3); 'born of God' (1:13; also cf. 3:3, 5); 'one and only [μονογενὴς]' (1:14, 18; cf. 3:16, 17); 'grace upon grace' (1:16); 'in the bosom of the Father' (1:18).

16.As a matter of semantics, it seems as if the semantic networks are formulated in terms of contrasts or opposites. It should not be interpreted as such but interpreted as complementarily to one another. The one interprets the other.

The incomprehensibility of God according to the Gospel of John: Mystery reciprocally interdependent on knowledge

Between God and us there stands the *hiddenness* of God, in which He is far from us and foreign to us except as He has of Himself ordained and created *fellowship* between Himself and us – and this does not happen in the actualising of our capacity, but in the miracle of His good-pleasure.[17] (Barth 2004:182)

Natural *versus* supernatural (identity and being)

In his excellent doctoral thesis, *The supernatural in relation to the Natural*, M'Cosh (1862) correctly stated that the Bible implies a distinction between the natural and supernatural and accordingly evolved on it. This scriptural inference is not drawn hypothetically or theoretically. Already in the Prologue, *both the natural and supernatural* are referred to as divine operation (also see Jn 1:1–5), as a manifestation of divine glory [μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός], (Jn 1:14) and communication of the divine will (Jn 1:18; also cf. Jn 4:34; 5:30; 6:328; 8:29). Within this interaction, the distinction is respected and unequivocally entreated to. The FE pointed out occurrences in human nature beyond 'human or mundane agency' [ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν], (Jn 1:13). This would function as evidence for heavenly interventions or even the endorsement of revealed doctrine. See also John 3:2 when Nicodemus 'came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God' (cf. also Jn 3:3, 5), and in John 1:13, 'who were born, not blood or the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God' (M'Cosh 1862:151).

From these two examples in John (1:13; 3:2), it is evident that the supernatural, although different from the natural, should not be regarded as being detached from the natural or that no relationship, at all, exists with the natural. Instead, the supernatural is intensely involved in the earthly sphere in unison with humankind (see Jn 1:1–18; M'Cosh 1862:152).

In life, believers accommodate themselves to modes of procedures, to a way of life related to God which they cannot fully comprehend. In the *natural economy of God,* humans act upon laws of which their nature is unknown to them. The sciences do not always have answers to everything or what the nature is of any kind of denotation. The *supernatural economy of God* deems to be an equivalent. God's economic revelation enables believers to exercise faith, although it is seldom enough to grant believers total understanding of divine doctrine. Believers must believe 'in much which they cannot completely understand' (cf. Jn 1:1–5); 'believe in the eternity of God, while they cannot conceptualise eternity'[18]; 'believe in a triune nature of God', while the mysterious relation between the persons is unexplainable – one to the other and three to the one (M'Cosh 1862:347–348).

McDowell (1994:77) refers to *evaluation* as a relevant dimension of reality. It is part of the natural world. It cannot be fully comprehended scientifically, but there is no insuperable mystery concerning what it is and how humans relate to it. There is more to the natural world than what can be explained scientifically. Another example: the conception of human nature is broad enough to accommodate the reality of ethical formation and practical wisdom (Ellis 2023:3). Limits exist to what humans can comprehend and these limits are also applicable to the religious context. Religious belief certainly encompasses commitment to the mysterious and unclear 'other-worldly' realm (see Jn 1:12; Ellis 2023:4).

Talk about God as a supernatural being already suggests a constituent of personhood. Therefore, within this context, Robinson (1963:15) denotes God to be a '[*p*]erson, who looks down at this world which he has made and loved from "out there"'.[19] This envisages God to be 'an external, personal, supernatural, spiritual being' and that God is a conscious being, more than what humans are in this respect. Such a conception is familiar from the Bible, where God addresses, is addressed and is related to in a way not dissimilar to the way we as humans relate to one another. However, nowhere in the Bible is it declared that God is a person, although God is expounded in many other ways above and beyond.[20] The doctrine of the Trinity reserves the category of personhood to the 'persons' of the Trinity (Ellis 2023:6). The reality of God is similarly mysterious, and this insinuates to what extent this mysterious reality can be articulated (Ellis 2023:12).

A faithful relation with God requires something (Ellis 2023:14), more than metaphysics and epistemology. It requires a praxis: the capability and reality of love! (Ellis 2023:15). In 1 John 4:16 we read, 'God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them'. Love encompasses everything. Everything that is not connected to love is meaningless and empty. A relationship with God is not a matter of theorising or defining the being on the other side. The question is whether this relationship is truthful (Ellis 2023:13).

Cataphatic *versus* apophatic (formulation and articulation)

Definition

The archetypal debate in Christian theology and spirituality concerns what can or cannot be articulated about God. This debate is typically 'framed in terms of apophatic and

17.Author's own emphasis.

18.Eternity is always compared with time (without beginning or end).

19.The statement, 'who looks down at this world' refers to the worldview of antiquity.

20.Compare Davies (2022:433) who states that 'The Bible compares God to people such as shepherds, kings, fathers, builders, and a husband whose wife has cheated on him. But it also compares God to a lamb and an eagle and a case of dry rot whilst also asserting that God is like nothing else'.

cataphatic approaches to theology' (McGrath 2016:164).[21] The lexeme '*apophatic*' derives from the Greek word ἀποφατικός [negative] (cf. McGrath 2016:164), 'away from speech' ἀπό [away from]; φασις [speech or assertion or unsaying]. According to Franke (2007:I, 1), apophatic practice is conventionally tied to negative theology, founded on the assessment that language is almost (Wesselinof 2024:1) inadequate for declaring *what* God is.[22] From a philosophical perspective, ἀπόφασις aims to obtain knowledge or understanding of an object, in this scenario God, by negating concepts or descriptions that might be applicable. This signifies the outcomes of thinking, articulating and writing, regarding the inexpressible, which cannot be formulated. According to Turner (1995:34), 'the apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language. Απόφασις speaks through negation and/or denial and indicates forms of meaning that lie beyond any conscious grasp or ability of humans to rationally describe'.

The lexeme 'cataphatic' comes from the Greek word καταφατικός, meaning 'positive', derived from the verb 'to say yes' or 'to affirm'. It denotes an approach in theology indicating that positive statements may indeed be made about God. It is sometimes also referred to as the *via positiva* [positive way]. The *cataphatic* approach allows to say positive things about God (McGrath 2016:165) – for example in John 1, that ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν (v. 4), φῶς (vv. 4, 5), ἀγαπάω (from vv. 14, 18; 3:16),[23] χάριν (vv. 14, 16, 17), ἀληθείας (v. 14), πάντα [everything] was made through God.

Terminology and phrases in the Prologue which carry both apophatic and cataphatic understanding in John 1 are: 'ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν' (v. 1); 'πάντα δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο' (v. 3); 'ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς' (v. 4); ἀλλ᾽ ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν (v. 13); ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος αὐτοῦ (v. 6); χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος (v. 16). From these explicit cataphatic phrases, inherent apophatic significances are present. In the Prologue, God has never been explicitly formulated negatively, although the abovementioned phrases prove that at times implicitly apophatic formulations can be derived (e.g., unlimited, a time not existed, immortality, cannot be created).

Strengths and weaknesses

In both approaches, there are strengths and weaknesses. A tangible weakness occurs when God is reduced to the level of human characteristics because God exceeds by far expressions in human terminology. The *apophatic* approach and articulation (formulation) safeguard the mystery of God by pointing out the limitations of language.[24] The debate continues (McGrath 2016:165).

These two approaches in endeavouring to articulate God are coherent and substantial assertions about how God can or cannot be represented. The claims have substantial inferences for how metaphysical theology will be conceived. No one can commence the task by describing the ultimacy of God. That task cannot be completed. It cannot even commence. If the *Ineffability Thesis*[25] is correct, then no one can fundamentally articulate God[26] (Jacobs 2015:8).

Objectives: Divine articulation

Apophatic discourse, paradoxically, aims to formulate God in terms of negative concepts or descriptions. While cataphatic conventions (the 'way of affirmation') emphasise what has been revealed and is perceptible, apophatic discourse (the 'way of negation') resides on what remains secreted. It is viable to say merely what God is not. This implies that apophasis attempts to eliminate ways of talking about God (Franke 2007:37). It must be accepted that *God is*! God cannot be known through language (Scripture) or creation alone. According to the Prologue, God can also become known through direct experience (Jn 1:12, 13, 16, 18)[27] (Wesselinof 2024:2).

A naïve question would be: can we articulate *who* God is? Such a question attests there is an answer. The reality is, 'God is indefinable and indescribable' (Jn 1:1, 18). From the Prologue of John, eight explicit references to God [θεός] appear,[28] enabling believers to label aspects God is not. Unfortunately, what God is, is mysterious. However, the apophatic dimension of God is *proleptic* because of the present cataphatic dimension of God: it conditions believers to be receptive to the insights about the being of God in their relationship with God, which forces them into the realisation of seeing and experiencing the true God (Jn 1:5, 9, 14, 16). Only seeing and hearing about the true involvement of God in their lives (Jn 1:4, 5, 10, 11, 13, 18) is a means to the highest dimensions of experience (cf. Wesselinof 2024:8).

21.According to Jacobs (2015:16) 'Claims of apophatic or mystical theology are deeply entrenched in the Christian tradition'. Wesselinof (2024:5) points out three main reasons to employ apophatic definitions and descriptions. The *first* reason is about *morality*. 'Apophatic definitions are oriented towards achieving an ethical transformation. Socrates aims to dispossess Hippias of his arrogance, and so the apophatic approach to the problem of beauty functions as moral corrective'. The *second* reason is *epistemological*. 'Apophasis draws on epistemic considerations to free us from our mistakes, misunderstandings, and misconceptions'. The *third* reason is *ontologically*. 'Apophatic definitions establish the limit of human knowing, and so prescribe the preconditions required to establish a cataphatic definition or set of definitions, or at least achieve some positive insights into the nature of the topic at hand'.

22.'Apophatic discourse is a form of written or spoken communication that attempts to describe a thing by speaking of what cannot be said about it' (Franke 2007:I, 1).

23.Although the verb ἀγαπάω does not occur in the prologue, it is suggested by μονογενὴς (Jn 1:14, 18) which resonates and relates to its occurrence in John 3:16 where the incarnation relates to the love of God.

24.God has not been seen, only referred to exist (Jn 1:1, 2, 18). The Word became flesh (Jn 1:14) to declare the Father (1:18) in a limited way that would be comprehensible to humans.

25.Jacobs (2015:8) has pointed out that if anyone should wish to describe God in any way, as loving, merciful, forgiving, redeeming, they should preferably do it apart from theology. They should stop expressing *only* fundamental truths. God is one in *οὐσία*, three in *ὑπόστασις*.

26.People might think that the ineffability of God has *primarily* to do with humans, 'their limited finite mental capacities', or the 'limitations of their language'. Therefore, 'humans cannot correctly describe God'. This is partially true! In fact, it is judicious to say, 'that God and his transcendence ground the ineffability of God'.

27.According to Kant (1965:432ff) extend experiences human knowledge. Therefore, God must reveal Godself and must be experienced for humans to have any knowledge about God. Only if God has revealed Godself then there is something. Even though very little is knowledgeable and can be perceived, it will lead to knowledge. The statement of Bavinck (2004:64) resonates with this of Kant that 'any denial of the knowability of God coincides completely with the denial that God has revealed himself in the works of his hands'.

28.'ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν **θεόν**, καὶ **θεὸς** ἦν ὁ λόγος' (Jn 1:1); 'οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν **θεόν**' (1:2); 'ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ **θεοῦ**' (Jn 1:6); 'τέκνα **θεοῦ** γενέσθαι' (Jn 1:12); 'ἐκ **θεοῦ** ἐγεννήθησαν' (Jn 1:13); '**θεὸν** οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε' (Jn 1:18); 'μονογενὴς **θεὸς**' (Jn 1:18).

Immanence *versus* transcendence (involvement, activities and experience)

These two qualities should be incorporated here explicitly, making 'biblical' theology move away from theory to *experience*. These are probably the two most exploited qualities of God: the immanence and transcendence[29] of God. These two qualities should saturate the accounts of biblical theology which understands the immanence and transcendence of God in referring to God to be both known and unknown (Van der Merwe 2020:9).

Experiencing the immanence of God

The FE characterises the immanence of God with biblical vocabulary in John 1 such as *creating* (vv. 3, 10), *light* (vv. 4, 5), *forgiveness* (v. 12), *grace* (vv. 14, 16, 17), *truth* (vv. 14, 17), and *love* (vv. 14, 18) and John 3 (vv. 16, 18) among others.[30] The application of these attributes to God is absolute; they are intelligible and definite. They are rationally comprehensible, can be explored, even be well described from a Johannine perspective, *can be experienced* and can be regarded as fundamental qualities of God. These few references about God demonstrate how the FE communicates *something* (involvement, activities and experience)[31] about this mysterious divine being. It enables believers to witness about God, to talk with God, to experience God and live in the presence of this God every day (Van der Merwe 2020:9).

For Burke (1977:4), the absence of seeking God (Jn 1:12) in a person's life, means the absence of experiencing the immanence of God. To such people, theology will only remain theory. They will not and cannot discover and personally experience the continuous self-revelation (involvement & activities) of God (Jn 1:12, 14, 18; Jn 14:26; Jn 16:13). Critically important is that it requires a *specific mindset*. Burke refers to Rahner who verifies this understanding in his argument that immanent revelatory experiences of the mysterious God can effectively be experienced in the very common experiences of everyday life. Only those who are receptive to the revelation and insight of God, allocate opportunities and places for God to speak. The immanent revelation of God should not be sought in the extraordinary or the miraculous. The self-revelation of God already may be present and experienced within the Christian believer and the regular things in everyday life.

Christians hold on to the immanence of God via the active involvement of God in their lives. This stimulates the notion of God's being (*who* God is) and actions (*what* God does). That God is unlimited, infinitely wise, infinitely powerful, mysterious, among others are notions that cannot be discarded. Divine revelation and involvement enable believers to recognise certain aspects or features of the essence of God. What can be known will indeed not be much; it will be impossible to understand fully the things that can be known. Even confessions such as, 'God is infinitely life (Jn 1 v. 4), light (Jn 1 v. 5) or holy (Jn 17 v. 11)', faithfully reflect something about the essence of God but cannot fully be comprehended (Davis 2016).

Simultaneously, parallel and complementary to the immanence of God, God also emerges to be incomprehensibly transcendent. Conradie (2013:51) claims that even though believers might not comprehend what divine transcendence entails, it happens to be the transcendence that enables believers to become aware of, understand and experience the divine immanence from another perspective. 'Our experience of the transcendent is always immanent' (Conradie 2013:39, 41).[32] In addition to Conradie's claim, Bentley (2018:2) explains life to be a journey of continuously seeking the truth and the understanding of reality. This life is all about this journey now (the immanence), while the transcendence facilitates believers to be grateful, to experience and to understand the journey.

Experiencing the transcendence of God

Many Christians think that God can only act according to faith assertions as defined and explained in theologies. However, both ancient and contemporary theologies acknowledge the incomprehensible transcendence of God.[33] Du Toit (2011:11) prompts that in the divine-human relationship, some kinds of boundaries occur that may or can never be crossed. Any form of existence beyond such divine boundaries may probably never become knowledgeable and may be termed the 'transcendent' (Van der Merwe 2020:9).[34] Transcendence, then, can be described as relating to moments where human knowledge and experiences are loaded with faith confessions and where deeper unexplainable divine dimensions occur. Such confessions denote the transcendent dimensions of divine nature (1:1–3, 14, 18), divine existence (1:1–3) and divine activities (creation, 1:1, 10; regeneration, 1:13; salvation, 1:14). Consequently, 'Christian believers cannot afford to try to negate the transcended origin of transcendence' (Nürnberger 2011:198).

Therefore, in the many irrational or unexplainable incidents happening in everyday life, dedicated believers will be alerted to and realise that they are **experiencing 'Someone'** different, only to be appropriately referred to as a *misterium*

29.The language used to theologise about God is by far inadequate! It cannot theorise the full mystery and transcendence of God.

30.See also commanding (13:15; 15:12), loving (3:16; 15:12), promising (14:16; 15:26), guidance (16:13), comforting (chs 13–17), righteous (16:8, 9; 17:25), peace (14:26–27; 16:25–33; 20:19, 21), holy (Holy Spirit, 1:33; Holy Father, 17:11), and more.

31.Burke (1977:370) points out the following metaphors from the Old Testament: 'Deliverer, Rock, and the always-present Shepherd to his flock', and more. According to him 'Good theologies, revisionist as well as classical and ancient, all admit the impenetrable Mystery of God. Classical theologies affirm this Mystery by describing God with a list of theoretical absolutes like all-good, all-knowing, omnipresent, eternal, unchanging, among others. Such philosophical abstracts do emphasise the holy Mystery of God'.

32.Also, Hick (1997:57), 'Using (perforce!) our human conceptuality, we can say that there is an ultimate source and ground of the universe in both its physical and its non-physical aspects – "all things visible and in-visible," … the Transcendent. The Transcendent is universally present and affects human consciousness in many forms what can be called religious experience – within which can be included the pervasive sense of living in the presence of God'.

33.The following, above-mentioned, immanent characteristics of God also consist of transcendental accounts and experiences: forgiveness (1:12), guidance (16:13), creating (1:3, 10), grace (1:14, 16) commanding (13:15; 15:12), loving (3:16; 15:12), promising (14:16; 15:26), comforting (chs. 13–17), righteous (16:8, 9; 17:25), light (1:4, 5), peace (14:26–27; 16:25–33; 20:19, 21), truth (1:14, 17; etc.), holy (Holy Spirit, 1:33; Holy Father, 17:11), grace (1:14, 16, 17) and more.

34.Du Toit (2011:2) termed the experience of crossing the limits as one of transcendence.

tremendum[35] (Otto 1936:12). Kearney (2010:8, 11), in his book, *Anatheism. Returning to God after God*, – refers to this 'mysterious Being' as 'the Other', 'the Stranger' (2010:15) and 'the Guest' (2010:15). For Christians, it is not so mindboggling and strange but definite that the perception of 'divine nature or essence stretches far beyond any knowledge and consequently all human linguistic expression is inadequate' (Strezova 2012:176). The figural averts God from the literal. Faith is certainly not just the virtuosity of the impossible but rather the capability of endless hermeneutics (Kernay 2010):

> Spiritual art may thus teach us that the divine stranger can never be taken for granted, can never be reduced to a collective acquis, but needs to be interpreted again and again. (p. 14)

God's self-presentation or self-designation in John 1 (v. 14) is one decisive moment of God's revelation of divine love, forgiveness and grace (vv. 13, 16, 17). The unveiling of the impassible identity of God is neither first nor (Durand 2018:431) ultimate in the economy of divine revelation and activities. It presupposes salvation and intensifies the divine glory (Jn 1 vv. 12–14). It is highly appropriate that God comes close and introduces Godself via the incarnation (immanence), so that the prominence of the mysterious transcendence of God could not be reduced to a pure negative conceptual moment. The transcendence, also present in the context of the incarnation, can be termed a 'relational transcendence', distinct from an 'absolute transcendence'. 'If not, it would be a pure distance from the world and would be reduced eventually to a "contrastive transcendence," an incorrect opposite of immanence' (cf. Durand 2018:432).

How to picture the inconceivable (God, 1:1–4)? How to give expression to limitless ('grace upon grace', 1:16), the immeasurable (1:3) and the invisible (1:18)? How to give form to immensity (1:32–35), immortality (1:1), or localise mystery (1:1–18)? Any attempt to compose an image[36] of the invisible God would be impossible because the invisible, by the very fact of being beyond the reach of vision, cannot be epitomised in a picture. Any assertion of the paradoxical nature of God, both visible and invisible at the same time, occurs to be deficient according to Exodus 33:20, 'No one shall see my face and live, said the Lord'; Deuteronomy 4:15, 'You have not seen his likeness' (Strezova 2012:177); until John 1:14, 'The Word was *made flesh*'.

The use of the Bible in theologies should take advantage of both the immanence and transcendence of the mysterious God to implement these two qualities of God in the writing and practising of biblical theology.[37] It should more explicitly saturate the thinking about God to make the Bible message more acceptable, comprehensible and applicable today in a post-postmodern world. Both God's immanence and transcendence will foster different kinds of spiritualities and conduct (cf. Van der Merwe 2020:10).

Comprehensibility and incomprehensibility of God (understanding)

Comprehensibility of God

In the Johannine Prologue, the reader is already introduced to God in the first verse, 'Εν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος'. 'God' is not a name. The Johannine God has no name. Even though the Gospel several times says that God has given his name to Jesus, we are never told what that name is. God's name is to be found, apparently, only through Jesus (5:43; 10:25). But while God may be nameless, 'God' is not annulled of meaning for the reader. Whereas the denotative meaning of 'God' allows the reader entry into the narrative, the connotative meaning is provided largely by the associations of the term 'θεὸς' with 'ὁ λόγος' (cf. Caird 1980:45). The most significant designation of God is 'πατήρ'.[38] Clearly the characterisation of God in the Fourth Gospel entails discovering who this 'Father, who has sent him (Jesus)', is (cf. Thompson 1993:189).

In the Prologue, certain indicators of the character of God are missing. Although implied, God is not named, nor featured as a character. Even though God never appears in the Prologue, God certainly subsists as a character in the Prologue. The *actions attributed to God* in the Prologue are either implied, assumed, or understood indirectly through the actions of Jesus and indispensably give direction in the Prologue and the narrative (Thompson 1993:188).

God is firstly identified with *the Word* (1:1) and secondly as *the Father of the Son* by the FE (1:14,18; also 3:35; 5:18). Later in the Gospel most of the references to God as Father are in direct speech in the words of Jesus. The following three spaces in the Gospel reference 'the Father' most often: *firstly*, in the discourses of Jesus in the central section of the Gospel (chapters 5–6, 10); *secondly*, in the harsh debate of Jesus with the Jews (chapter 8) and *thirdly* in the Farewell Discourses (chapters 14–16; Thompson 1993:196).

The Prologue does not significantly bestow information about 'God', although much about God is assumed or implied in the text. It succeeds in drawing the reader into the text so that the reader will recognise and understand God from the point of view of the FE and Jesus, the principal character in the Prologue (Thompson 1993:200). It is constantly communicated to the reader that 'the activity of Jesus' is 'the work of God' or reveals the 'glory of God'. 'God' is never displayed to the reader. The reader is told that God sent John the Baptist 'to bear witness of the Light'

35.'The transcendental is thus thinkable but, for beings like us who lack "intellectual intuition," it's not knowable. Any attempt to step outside the epistemic into the ontological, to take these Ideas for concepts of real things, is "transcendent" and "for that reason ... delusion"' (Barabas 1997:189).

36.It is important to restate here that God *images* and God *concepts* do not mean the same thing. Hoffman (2000) refers the *God image* to a person's 'experiential understanding of God' and has more to do with emotions and is often nonverbal. Whereas, on the other hand, according to Lawrence (1997), 'the *God concept* is a person's cognitive understanding of God – a linguistic or verbal action used to signal one's knowledge of God' (cf. Counted 2015:7).

37.Du Toit (2011:2) states it categorically that transcendence is not the antonym of immanence. 'Immanence is fraught with transcendence – so much so that one could argue that the very experience of this-worldly transcendence compelled us to posit metaphysical transcendence in the first place (metaphysical idealism)'.

38.Cf. also 'ὁ πέμψας με' (Jn 3:33; Jn 7:28); 'τοῦ πέμψαντός με' (Jn 4:34; Jn 5:30; Jn 6:38; Jn 7:16, 18); 'τῷ πέμψαντί με' (Jn 5:24); 'τὸν πέμψαντά με' (Jn 7:33); among others.

(1:6, 7); those who receive Jesus 'are born of God' (1:13); God grants life (5:21–29), gives true manna from heaven (6:22–59) and raises the dead (6:54; 11:38–44). The reader only reads about these divine activities when reading about the activities of Jesus (1:3–5, 9–11, 14–18). Both Jesus and the FE state, 'No one has ever seen God' (1:18). If God then never appears,[39] how is it possible that anybody could 'see God' at all? Jesus reprimands his audience, 'You have never heard God's voice' (5:37). If God thenceforth barely speaks, how could they hear God? A reader will experience the status quo. There is no dramatic depiction of the opening of the heavens,[40] no vision of God, no theophany and only one instance of God speaking. The characteristics of the predicament of Jesus' audiences apply also to the reader: 'God's voice you have never heard; God's form you have never seen' (Jn 5:37; Thompson 1993:201).

Of all the characters in John, God is the least circumscribed. This Johannine style is appropriate because many other *avenues to know God* as well as *narratives about God* exist on behalf of the reader. The reader's conception of God is mostly textually bound. The motive rests in the fact that there is so much to be *communicated*, to be *contemplated* and to be *known* about God. It was the prerogative of the FE, influenced by his spiritualities about Jesus, to communicate specifically selected information, although not all, in constructing the character of God. The magnificence of the Johannine text is that the reader is always occupied (Thompson 1993):

> [*I*]n tension between the objective constraints of the text and the constraints of the knowledge, imagination, cultural location, religious convictions, and spirituality by which the reader's reading of God is informed. (pp. 186–187)

The divine 'assumed' actions are mostly 'comments by another character' (usually Jesus) or 'comments by the FE'. The following assertions illustrate this claim: 'all things were made through [*the Word*]' (Jn 1:3) and 'the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (Jn 1:17). Additionally, the FE also implies that God sent John the Baptist (Jn 1:6); that God begets (or gives birth to) the children of God (Jn 1:12–13). In other chapters, the FE states explicitly that 'God so loved the world' (Jn 3:16); 'gave his only Son' (Jn 3:16, 34); 'gives the Spirit without measure' (Jn 3:34); 'loves the Son' (Jn 3:35; Jn 5:20); and 'has placed all things in his hands' (Jn 3:35; Thompson 1993:189). Then, the actions of God are also made known to the reader by the words of Jesus.

For more clarity, it is useful to distinguish between 'activities' and 'actions'. The FE will fully describe an activity of God, but nowhere are the actions of God dramatised for the readers to extract their own inferences from these actions. 'Narration' about the actions of God occurs more than 'showing' what God does. The consequence is that the character of God remains indirectly accessible to the reader, only through the words of Jesus and even less coming from the FE (Thompson 1993:190). The actions of Jesus as presented in the Gospel, characterised God as 'generously, indiscriminately gracious, healing, life-giving, judging, liberating, illuminating and revealing'.[41] Each of these characteristics manifest actively and concretely when Jesus acted or spoke directly to a specific person. These were the actions of Jesus, not God. 'Insofar as the characterization of God is achieved through the characterization of Jesus, then God is an active and present God' (Jn 1:13; Thompson 1993:193).

Incomprehensibility

Bavinck (2003:1619) stresses the doctrine of creation and makes the knowability of God the presupposition of the incomprehensibility of God. He opines that: 'Although knowledge is attainable in theology, it is untrue of comprehension'. According to him substantial differences occur between 'knowing', 'being acquainted with' and 'comprehending'. 'Knowing' pertains to the existence of something, the *that*; 'being acquainted with' concerns the quality of something, the *what*; comprehending relates to the inner possibility of something, the *how*. Believers can only comprehend limited things about God; in fact, they comprehend only those things which they can control.

In an elaboration on the previous paragraph, Bavinck argues that both the terms, 'incomprehensibility' and 'comprehension', have ontological implications. To comprehend designates the recognition of the 'being (existence) of something'. Incomprehensibility, again, denotes that the 'being of something' occurs to be beyond the cognitive activity and capacity of humans. In this context, the *incomprehensibility* of God indicates the human ability to perceive the being (existence) of God. Bavinck argues that the knowledge of God is a mystery that 'surpasses human imagination and understanding'.[42] God is incomprehensible because God is 'the eternal and infinite One' (Bavinck 2004:II, 36; cf. Xu 2019:39).[43]

39.Appearances of a person reveal something of the character and identity of that person.

40.Jesus' reference in John 1 v. 51, to 'see heaven opened', has a different meaning: And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and *the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man*'.

41.'The Father seeks true worshippers (Jn 4:23); works (Jn 5:17,19–20); loves the son (Jn 5:20; Jn 10:17; Jn 15:9; Jn 17:23, 26); shows the Son what he is doing (Jn 5:20); raises the dead and gives life (Jn 5:21); gives authority to the Son to have life (Jn 5:26) and execute judgment (Jn 5:27); gives his works to the Son (Jn 5:36); sent the Son (Jn 5:37, 38; Jn 6:29, 39, 57) Jn 8:16, 18, 26; Jn 11:42); testifies to Jesus (Jn 5:37; Jn 8:18); set his seal on the Son of man (Jn 6:27); gives true bread from heaven (Jn 6:32); gives "all" to the Son (Jn 6:37; Jn 13:3; Jn 17:2, 7); "draws" people to him and teaches them (Jn 6:44–45, 65); judges (Jn 8:16); instructs Jesus (Jn 8:28); is with Jesus (Jn 8:29); seeks Jesus' glory (Jn 8:50, 54); knows the Son (Jn 10:15); consecrated the Son (Jn 10:36); hears the Son (Jn 11:41); honors those who serve Jesus (Jn 12:26); glorifies his name (Jn 12:28); will come and "make his home" with believers (Jn 14:23); will send the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:26); prunes the vine (Jn 15:2); loves the disciples (Jn 16:27; Jn 17:23); glorifies Jesus (Jn 17:1, 24); "keeps" what has been given to the Son (Jn 17:11, 15); sanctifies believers in the truth (Jn 17:17)' (Thompson 1993:190).

42.Burke (1977:39) refers to both Rahner and Dunne who made a critical statement that 'the Mystery of the transcendent God is found not just beyond daily existence but also within the human person'. Both reason that believers' understanding of themselves, their personal experiences of life, can constitute an acceptance of the ongoing revelation of God. Rahner asserts that all people, with or without any knowledge of Jesus, have received implicitly what he calls 'the gracious revelation of God' (Burke 1977:39). Because of the supernatural grace of God each person consists of (Burke 1977:39), according to Rahner, a 'supernatural existential'. Rahner interprets this divine life, itself, as the self-communication of God. The phrase 'supernatural existential' signifies in this essay those 'experiences and capabilities of life which are not inherent to human nature' (Burke 1977:40).

43.This ontological significance is further enhanced by Bavinck (2004:38) who opines that when believers dare to speak about God the question that arises is: 'How can

For Bavinck (1909):

> [C]reation was the first revelation (see Jn 1:3, 10), the principle and foundation of all revelation; but, on the other hand, every revelation is also a creation, a divine work, to accomplish something new, to make a new commencement, and to unlock the possibility of a new development. (p. 265)

Hence, for Bavinck, the incomprehensibility of God discloses the truth that the self-revelation of God, already started with and is based on creation, remains imperative for humans to identify and know God. God's incomprehensibility and revelation are essentially related to each other (Xu 2019:40, 41).

In addition to this fundamental *ontological* implication of the incomprehensibility of God, Bavinck successively formulated his assessment from an *epistemological* perspective. He prolongs that the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of both the being and the essence of God is axiomatic to Christian theology (Bavinck 2004:46). The intention is not a denotation that, an inauguration of any Christian theology, with the hypothesis of the incomprehensibility of God, can fully get hold of knowledge about God. Instead, Bavinck (2004) writes:

> To a considerable extent we can assent to and wholeheartedly affirm this doctrine of the unknowability of God. Scripture and the church emphatically assert the unsearchable majesty and sovereign highness of God. There is no knowledge of God as he is in himself. We are human and he is the Lord our God. There is no name that fully expresses his being, no definition that captures him. He infinitely transcends our picture of him, our ideas of him, our language concerning him. He is not comparable to any creature. All the nations are accounted by him as less than nothing and vanity. 'God has no name. He cannot be defined'. He can be apprehended; he cannot be comprehended. There is some knowledge [γνωσις] but no thorough grasp [καταληψις] of God. This is how the case is put throughout Scripture and all of theology. And when a shallow rationalism considered a fully adequate knowledge of God a possibility, Christian theology always opposed the idea in the strongest terms. (p. 29)
>
> There is, therefore, no exhaustive knowledge of God. There is no name that makes his essence known to us. There is no concept that fully encompasses him. There is no description that fully defines him. That which lies behind revelation is completely unknowable. (p. 46)

The following two points can be discerned from the foregoing reasoning. *Firstly*, the *ontological* implication of the incomprehensibility of God deems to be the basis for its epistemological implication. The quintessence of God is incomprehensible; therefore, the knowledge about God will never become complete. *Secondly*, the incomprehensibility of God is *epistemologically* used to describe both the 'limit' and 'extent' of human knowledge and experience about God. Consequently, human beings can never absolutely know God. This denotes that the relation between the incomprehensibility and knowability of God can only be understood by employing finite analogical language to describe the infinite God. This analogical way of reasoning is explicitly determined by God's creation (Jn 1:3, 10). The use of analogical language presupposes and proves the knowability of God. By way of explanation, the revelation of an intelligible God in creation constitutes a precondition for humans to describe God analogically. As Bavinck (2004:II) argues:

> [W]e are certainly not nullifying God's knowability. God's incomprehensibility, so far from cancelling out God's knowability, rather presupposes and affirms it. The riches of God's being – riches that surpass all knowledge – are in fact a necessary and significant component of our knowledge of God. (p. 78)

Therefore, the incomprehensibility of God is one fundamental constituent to comprehend and to experience God[44] (cf. Xu 2019:42).

A never-ending exciting relationship? – Curiosity and experience

The remaining question is, 'If this is the state of affairs, how can humans speak about, even communicate with this (monotheistic although trinitarian) God?' The FE then, influenced by the Old Testament and the early Christian church, as already indicated, identifies God with 'πατήρ' (Jn 1:18), Jesus as 'μονογενὴς' (Jn 1:14, 18; also Jn 3:16, 18) and believers as 'τέκνα θεοῦ' (Jn 1:12) to constitute the *familia Dei* in John. To become part of the *familia Dei,* people must be born [ἐγεννήθησαν] into the *familia* of God [ἐκ θεοῦ] Jn 1:13; cf. also the Spirit [ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος], Jn 3:5, 6, 8. These metaphors not only objectify the divine, but also enable believers to talk about the divine in everyday living, to communicate with the divine and to experience the divine in everyday living. The FE further solves this problem in the apodosis of John 1:18 by referring to 'μονογενὴς θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατ' (Van der Merwe 2019:2). The 'one and only God' [μονογενὴς θεὸς] will make the Father known. Those who accept the Son (Jn 1:12) will be 'ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν' (Jn 1:13) into the *familia Dei* and become 'τέκνα θεοῦ'. The *familia Dei* then is constituted by God as Father, the Logos as Son of God, believers as Children of God and the Spirit-Paraclete as the one who constitutes the family (cf. 3:3, 5) and educates the children of God (cf. Van Der Watt 2000). For the FE, within the confines of the *familia Dei,* the environment is constituted where God can become reasonable and can also be experienced continuously (Van der Merwe 2019:3).

The doctrine of the Trinity remains unfinished but continues to foster new enquiries, continuous research and 'lived experiences'. Isn't this fascinating? Undeniably, it is! For

we? We are human and God is the Lord our God. Between God and humans there seems to be no such kinship or communion that would enable any believer to name God truthfully. The distance between God and us is the gulf between the Infinite and the finite, between eternity and time, between being and becoming, between the all and the nothing'.

44.Xu (2019:42) points out that both *Barth* and *Bavinck* relate the incomprehensibility of God to the divine essence. For them, God in the essence of being God is incomprehensible. This concludes that both Bavinck and Barth, concur that, the 'knowledge of God' concept, cannot be understood positivistically. Nonetheless, according to Xu (2019:42), where Barth prioritises the incomprehensibility of God over the knowability of God, Bavinck, again, uses the incomprehensibility of God to qualify the knowability of God, insofar as the latter is the presupposition of the former. This pictures the contrary reasoning of Barth and Bavinck about the experience of God. This research clearly resonates with Bavinck's reasoning about 'the human experience of God'.

those who continue scrutinising it, and indeed finding themselves still puzzling over it, it continues to be an unending process of curiosity, learning, incomprehensibility and management. *Humans can only know, communicate with, relate to and talk about God, in terms of human perspectives and conventions within the human idiom. These perspectives, conventions and idiom change and develop over time. Biblical hermeneutics, therefore, must adapt to and accommodate these changes and developments in new encapsulations of the experiential understanding of God. This emerges from continuous research of both, the original biblical texts and their recontextualisation in everyday living.*

Christians can never give up but keep on seeking intelligibly to understand this conundrum of the Trinity, the trilogy of divine *love*, *forgiveness* (communion), *grace* and the involvement of God in the creation of God (cf. Van der Merwe 2019:11). Anderson (2008:8) refers to Mikhail Bakhtin who reminds us that 'there is never a first meaning nor a last meaning'. We all are involved in the making of meaning. In that sense, the polyvalence of the Johannine levels and modes of dialogue invites the readers to design new connections between the open receptors of the many dialogical features of the narrative. In so doing, our certainties are challenged as the invitation to mystery is extended.

Conclusion

The *objective* was to discern the 'incomprehensibility of God' from the perspective of a reciprocal interdependence between knowledge (understanding) and mystery. It was prompted by how the endeavour to *understand* the divine continuously prompts *mystery*. Therefore, the incomprehensibility of God was discerned from the following four perspectives: the 'identity', 'articulation', 'activities' and 'involvement' of God in God's creation as formulated according to the Prologue of the Gospel of John.

The comprehensibility of God seems to be the presupposition for the divine incomprehensibility. This deems not to overemphasise the comprehensibility of God but rather to consider more the hiddenness and incomprehensibility of God which can lead to reliable knowledge about God. In summary, the intelligible God who is incomprehensible simultaneously desires to reveal himself to be known (Xu 2019:45).

Whether we adopt an archaic faith or a post-postmodern faith, let us keep on finding peace in the way we believe, the way we humbly and faithfully understand and experience this incredible and incomprehensible divine being which we refer to as both trinitarian and monotheistic. Although we cannot comprehend or image this Being, we will continue to believe in this Being. The Bible presents this Being to us to facilitate our continued relationship with this God, which is characterised by a sustained lived experience of *dialogue* and divine *involvement* in our lives every day. Christians can only know, communicate with, relate to and talk about this God, in terms of human perspectives and conventions within the human idiom.

Acknowledgements

This publication is the result of a paper read at the EABS international conference during July 2024 at Sofia University, Bulgaria. The theme of the unit was, *The incomprehensibility of God*.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contribution

D.v.d.M. is the sole author of this research article.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by the author.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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