

John de Gruchy: A Reformed mystic?

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Abstract

In this essay the life and some of the writings of John de Gruchy are revisited in light of a retrieval of an understanding of mysticism rooted in the Early Church. In revisiting the concept of mysticism through the work of different scholars the question is posed whether the work of John de Gruchy reflects this understanding of mysticism and if he can be seen as a Reformed Mystic.

Keywords

Mysticism; Reformed spirituality; John de Gruchy

1. Introduction

I would like to start by thanking John de Gruchy, who always had an open heart for young scholars and theologians. I experienced it through the years as he regularly created spaces where my love of theology could be rekindled and shared with others.

This essay is written from a specific place. As John himself was deeply aware in all his writings, theology can never be divorced from context. Each of us goes on a journey determined by choices, external factors and opportunities. How we critically engage with the Triune God on this journey is *per se* our theology.

If the central theme of the this essay, namely a Reformed reflection on mysticism, seems strange to some readers outside of this tradition, I hope that they may recognise and honour something of my own journey of theological reflection born from the specific Dutch Reformed tradition I

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was brought up in and studied in, which did not always open up all the worlds and traditions embedded in Christian thought through the ages.

This essay is therefore in part a reflection on some theological questions that I have been struggling with for a while in dialogue with the writings and life of John de Gruchy.

I will begin to place these reflections within a personal story and setting. John de Gruchy helps us by reminding us that academic discourse can never be separated from us being truly human in this world.

A few years ago, I attended a SPIRASA² conference in Johannesburg. The scholar Bernard McGinn, renowned for his writings on spirituality was amongst the speakers, well known for his writings on spirituality. I really enjoyed listening to him. However, a few times during the conference, sometimes prompted by comments and questions from the audience, McGinn expressed his doubts that there is something like a Reformed mysticism. I have not been a student of spirituality for a very long time, but the little that I have read and experienced in my own life made me feel that I do not agree. However, having a gut feeling is not the same as presenting a coherent theological argument. This essay is an attempt at such an argument, in which I want to qualify an understanding of mysticism that may be embraced in a Reformed setting and I will do so in dialogue with the life and work of John de Gruchy. The reader would recognise that most of John's later works are referred to, due to the limitation of the essay some choices had to be made. De Gruchy being such a prolific writer only selected material has been chosen. I am deeply aware of only touching the tip of the iceberg of nuance and possibility.

Within this expanse of possibilities, I want to ask whether John de Gruchy can be seen as a Reformed Mystic. Maybe at first, I need to take away the adjective Reformed and come back to that later. However, being left with the word "mystic" already conjures up stereotypical images – especially in Reformed company. The word "mystic" is a highly contentious term and the in this essay I will, during my argument, put a definition on the table with which I choose to work with.

2 SPIRASA: The Spirituality Association of South Africa

In the Reformed tradition I can imagine people conjuring up different images when they hear the word “mystic”. We either see somebody (like a Teresa of Ávila) clasping her hands and gazing upwards with a benign or pious expression on her face or a desert dweller with a beard receiving visions and fighting demons. The strong rationalist side of our Protestant academic education would immediately reject this concept of being a mystic as too subjective and too full of the language of experience – and therefore theologically suspect.

I am however of the opinion that a retrieval of the understanding of mysticism in the Church before the *Aufklärung* and especially in the Early Church can help one to formulate a definition that would make the theme of this essay a little less awkward and a good deal more valid.

I will start by reflecting on the reputation of/connotations of terminology like spirituality and mysticism. Receiving my own theological education at the end of 1980’s and beginning of 1990’s at Stellenbosch University I must confess that these were words that I was not confronted with. My first real engagement with mysticism was in my research for my book *Ontmoeting met die Heiliges*.³ Something I learned while writing that book was that most people who were recognised as saints in their contexts, recognised God’s grace in their lives and experienced Gods presence as a gift. They never even thought of themselves in terms of saintliness. This helped me to move away from an often-stereotypical Protestant misunderstanding of saints as seeing their own holiness as their achievement that does not recognise the graceful initiative of God. This insight lead to my reflections on the reception of words like mystic or mysticism.

John also does not make my task easier by telling readers that he does not see himself as a mystic, albeit in the popular sense of the word.⁴ Hopefully he will also be gracious towards my exploration. I am also deep under the impression that I cannot in any way honour the depth and width of his theology with a fleeting essay on one theme.

3 Lisel Joubert, *Ontmoeting met Heiliges. Verhale van hoe mense hulle geloof geleef het* (Kaapstad: Naledi, 2013).

4 John W. de Gruchy, *Led into Mystery. Faith seeking answers in life and death* (London: SCM Press, 2013),16.

Therefore, in this essay, I wish to present the work of some scholars who revisited the concept of mysticism as it was understood in the Early Church. In reformulating a definition of mysticism in light of the work of these scholars, I will use that definition to look at the work and life of John de Gruchy and in an effort to answer the question put in the title of this essay.

2. Revisiting mysticism

Cunningham and Egan,⁵ in their introductory book on Christian Spirituality, in a concise manner help to open up a dialogue on the understanding of the concept of “mysticism” by looking at the historical roots and meaning of the word.

They trace the word “mystic” back to the Greek word *myo*, which means “to close the eyes” - in the sense of a reaction to a religious experience. The same root is the basis for the Greek word *mysterion*, mystery, which according to the authors, is seen as an encounter with divine mystery.⁶

In the Early Church the word mystical was also associated with Scripture and the sacraments. It was used to talk about the deeper or hidden meaning of Scripture and *mystikos* also described the encounter with Christ in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. The “mystical body”, therefore also referred to the Eucharist until the 12th century when the term started to refer to the church as well.⁷

The important insight that Cunningham and Egan formulate is the understanding of mysticism within an ecclesial context: “The patristic and medieval use of mystical presupposes an ecclesial, corporate context rather than some individualized mystical experience.”⁸ According to them, it was only in the late Middle Ages that union with God was perceived in an individualised fashion. It was this that, gave rise to the modern idea of mysticism as the transformation of individual consciousness. In the Early Church mysticism was all about participation in the church, an encounter

5 L. S. Cunningham, and K. J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality. Themes from the Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996).

6 Cunningham and Egan, *Christian Spirituality*, 125

7 Ibid., 125

8 Ibid., 125

with Christ hidden in the Scriptures and a mystical encounter with Christ hidden in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.⁹

It is this retrieval of the above patristic understanding that forms the basis for many scholars revisiting mysticism and mystical theology in past years. Cunningham and Egan propose the following definition: “The mystical life is an embrace of one’s humanity, a humanity that finds its fulfilment in living more consciously in the presence of God.”¹⁰

Andrew Louth¹¹ also shares his reservations about the baggage surrounding the word “mysticism”. He writes:

I am worried about the way the term has emerged within the Christian tradition, so that it is now freighted with meanings that affect its present-day use, not least because this history, and these meanings, are unknown to those who use the term – and freighted with meanings, not simply in a lexical sense, but freighted with a claim to a certain authority, made in particular times and particular contexts, claims that do not simply slip away when the times and contexts recede from conscious memory.¹²

According to Louth,¹³ “mysticism” is not found in the fathers but *mystikos* is, and that these words are conflated with each other is not necessarily correct. As Egan and Cunningham did, he wants to understand the word in its history. Louth refers to the work of P. L. Bouyer¹⁴ who showed that *mystikos* was used in patristic Greek in three different ways: The first was the mystical meaning of Scripture, second was in the context of the liturgy where from the fourth century the word “mystical” is frequently used to designate the liturgical texts and ceremonies (even items of liturgical furniture). The third is least common and refers to the Christian life.

9 Ibid., 128

10 Ibid. 124

11 Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

12 Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 203

13 Ibid., 204

14 P. L. Bouyer, *Mysticism: An Essay on the History of a Word*, (in Louth, *ibid.*, 204)

Bouyer opens up more possibilities in his explanation of the word than Cunningham and Egan in theirs did. According to Bouyer the word comes from the Hellenistic mystery religions. The root of the word is *my*, which refers to the idea of keeping together of lips, silence, or a secret kept. The noun *mysterion* means a secret, and the adjective *mystikos* something secret or hidden. The one who initiates another in the secret is a *mystagogos*, the one initiated is a *mystes*, and the process of initiation is *mystagogia*. For Bouyer however the similarity to mystery religions is superficial – at heart is the understanding of Christ as the divine *mysterion* (as in Paul).¹⁵

In light of the above, *mysterion* has not to do with a secret (as something that I cling to because only I understand it) but it refers to the fact that it is God's mystery and therefore beyond comprehension. The most common context of *mystikos* in the Early Church was the reference to the hidden meaning of Scripture: “for Christians the whole of what they come to call the ‘Old Testament’ finds its true meaning in Christ. God’s plan for humankind to which the Scriptures bear witness is made plain in the Incarnation.”¹⁶ This meaning revealed in Christ remains mysterious because the life in Christ is endless in its implications.¹⁷

Again, the sacramental and ecclesial character of this word family comes to the fore. Christians share in the life in Christ through the sacraments (*mysteria*), and the word *mystikos* is used in terms of sacrament as a way of designating the hidden reality encountered and shared through the sacraments. The word also refers to the hidden reality of the life of baptised Christians. In this context Louth is of the opinion that mysticism has nothing to do with something elitists or aloof, but simply means the “lived reality of Christianity itself”.¹⁸ True mysticism is ecclesial not individualistic.

The reasons for the change of meaning of the word is not the main focus of this paper, however the implications need to be noted. Louth gives one reason as the strange alteration of meaning that occurred between the

15 Ibid., 205

16 Ibid., 205

17 Ibid., 205

18 Ibid., 205

Byzantine world and the Latin West.¹⁹ The Greek Fathers who used *mysterion* (meaning hidden and secret) was translated in Latin as *sacramentum* or transliterated as *mysterium*. *Mysterium* and *mysticus* began to develop a life of its own. This went hand in hand with a specific interpretation of the work of Dionysios.²⁰

Translation, context, and the rereading of old texts all played a role so that, as Louth describes it: “The term ‘mystical’ becomes opaque; instead of designating something that is a sign of something hidden; it designates the hidden reality itself. It acquires a quite different charge.”²¹ The mystical with time becomes a challenge to the priesthood because devotional literature talked about devout individuals establishing access to the reality of God, sometimes through sacraments or by discovering within oneself a point at which one is immediately present with God or described as a point that in which God is born in us.²² This led to a conflict between the mystical and institutional because where with the fathers the mystical referred to the hidden reality of the baptised life of the Christian within context of scripture and liturgy, that context fell away in the Middle Ages and the focus became the hidden life of the individual Christian who in inwardness can find contact with the divine.²³

McIntosh latched onto this conflict that with time spirituality became associated with that which contrasted with the body and began to be

19 Ibid., 210

20 Louth also reacts to scholars who interpret Dionysius solely in Neo-Platonic terms by reclaiming him as a Christian thinker who wrote a mysticism with a biblical and liturgical symbolism. It is a later reading of Dionysius that used him as the basis for an individualistic understanding of mysticism (in *ibid.*, 206).

21 Ibid., 210

22 Ibid., 210

23 Louth does not think mysticism is some settled concept with a clear definition, but rather a religious strategy that belongs to early modern Europe, which means that he does not entertain the idea of a canon of Christian Mysticism. His critique of McGinn’s work “History of Western Christian Mysticism” is that it assumes such a canon, which for Louth is too eclectic. For Louth, mysticism is not an universal religious phenomenon but “one of the elements of the fragmentation of the Western Christian tradition that took place in the later Middle Ages and issued in, among other things, the Reformation”, in *ibid.*, 211

seen as a highly refined state of the soul²⁴ – and became the playground or battleground surrounding theories of how an individual can strive for perfection.

Louth, just as Cunningham and Egan, comes back to the New Testament language describing the mystical life of the fathers as the ‘life with Christ hid in God’ of Colossians 3, a life which is ecclesial, lived in the Body Of Christ, nourished liturgically, and which is certainly a matter of experience, though not of extraordinary experiences.²⁵ For Louth the recovery of the patristic notion of the mystical is the rediscovery of our humanity in Christ which makes the ecclesial and sacramental dimensions part of the mystical and not to be contrasted with it.²⁶

In light of the above it is valid to ask: What is the difference between mysticism and the mystical life in Christ as we find it as a core theme of Paul’s writings in the New Testament? The participation in a new life in Christ is – according to the New Testament – one of the implications of the Gospel narrative of the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. (Gal 2: 19–20).

Phillip Sheldrake²⁷ also writes about the Patristic understanding of mysticism: “Early theologians did not write about ‘spirituality’ or ‘mystical theology’ as distinct areas of knowledge. The very heart of patristic theology was mystical.”²⁸ Sheldrake writes that patristic “mysticism” is not to be confused with the later Western interest in subjective religious experiences or in detailed itineraries for the spiritual journey.²⁹ Concurring with the work of Louth, “mysticism” was fundamentally the life of every baptised Christian who comes to know God revealed in Jesus Christ through belonging to the “fellowship of the mystery” that is the Church. This life

24 Mark. A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 7

25 Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 213.

26 *Ibid.*, 201.

27 Phillip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology. Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 1998).

28 Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology*, 37.

29 *Ibid.*, 37.

was supported by the exposure to Scripture and the participation in the liturgy.

Mark McIntosh discusses mysticism within the bigger issue of an ensuing poverty of thought and life if spirituality and theology are divorced as academic disciplines. This divorce of theology and spirituality also influences our understanding of “mysticism”. One of his core questions is: How do we re-weave spirituality and theology? At the heart of this Protestant scepticism of mysticism lie the dichotomy that was created by the Enlightenment between spirituality and theology: My rational thoughts about God and my experience of God in my day to day life. McIntosh describes his goal as: “...I am concerned here to articulate the concrete particularities of Christian spirituality and theology as a basis for rediscovering their integrity, precisely because I doubt very much whether there *is* any such thing as spirituality or theology apart from their concrete historical life.”³⁰

McIntosh also realises that he cannot talk about mysticism without talking about spirituality. For him the spiritual is the dimension of life which is engendered and empowered by God. “Spirituality, in other words, is not something the believer *has* but is a new pattern of personal growth taking place in the community of those who have been sought out, converted and cherished by the risen Christ.”³¹ He also reminds us of how this was understood in the early church: “Spirituality in this early Christian sense is inherently mutual, communal, practical and oriented towards the God who makes Himself known precisely in this new pattern of life called church.”³²

For McIntosh, “... spirituality calls theology to an honesty about the difficulty of understanding what is unfathomable ... an openness to what is never a puzzle to be solved but always a mystery to be lived.”³³ Mystical theology is therefore a theology that lets its own speech be questioned and even stripped away by the mystery of God.³⁴

30 McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 5.

31 *Ibid.*, 6.

32 *Ibid.*, 7.

33 *Ibid.*, 15.

34 *Ibid.*, 40.

For McIntosh the mystical is not the inner experience of the Christian, but the hidden meaning and transformative understanding discovered in Christ. The hidden but now divine will that is revealed to re-unite all things in Christ.³⁵ Liturgy enacts the history of God with us in order to move it away from individual experience. In understanding our humanity, it is important for McIntosh "... that the mystical journey does not involve the *overcoming* of human nature but rather the *participation* of human life in that identifying pattern of activity or mission which is Christ's."³⁶

Denys Turner³⁷ set out to write a philosophical history of some theological metaphors. To be more precise, the metaphors that has to do with interiority, ascent, light and darkness or in the words of Bonaventure, the metaphors about "the journey of the soul into God".

These metaphors are then also the metaphors of the apophatic and are especially found in writings influenced by Neoplatonism. Looking at these metaphors from a modern-day discourse, he realised that what these early writers understood as mysticism has nothing to do with "experientialist" meanings attached to it today. Turner went a bit further: he also raises the possibility that the so-called experiential mysticism that took its inspiration from Dionysius was actually an inherent critique on experience.³⁸ Turner writes: "Whereas we appear to have 'psychologized' the metaphors, the Neoplatonic mediaeval writer used these metaphors in an 'apophatic' spirit to play down the value of the 'experiential'"³⁹ For Turner: "Perhaps there is something to be learned from that Christian theological tradition which consciously *organized* a strategy of disarrangement as a way of life, as being that in which alone God is to be found."⁴⁰

One of the dangers that most scholars always perceive in their study of mysticism is its close ties to later Neoplatonic traditions/philosophy. (But did not most important traditions in the church emerge hand in hand with

35 Ibid., 43.

36 McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 195

37 Denys Turner, *The darkness of God. Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

38 Turner, *The darkness of God*, 3

39 Ibid., 4

40 Ibid., 8.

a shift in philosophical thought and with the help of that language e.g. Aristotle and Scholasticism, Renaissance and Reformation?)

Therefore, Len Hansen can help us to recognise our suspicion as perhaps linked to the stereotypical and not the nuance. As he writes: “Maybe we need to be suspicious about our suspicion of traditions that are entwined in Christianity from the beginning.”⁴¹

3. Which mystic are we talking about?

John de Gruchy helped me understand the enriching process of the retrieving of neglected Christian traditions as viable themes for discourse for our own context today,⁴² and especially for myself retrieving traditions that have become vague in my own specific Reformed Protestant tradition but which have roots in the origins of the Christian church. A responsible retrieving of tradition always goes hand in hand with a transforming of that tradition. Using the language of retrieval and transformation, it becomes quite possible to retrieve a specific understanding of mysticism to enrich our reflection on spirituality today. De Gruchy recognises that it is in the dynamic of contested interpretations that new growth and pathways in theology appear.

In my quest to retrieve an Early Church understanding of mysticism certain themes were identified: (1) A deep ecclesial identity. This identity is grounded in an understanding of being baptised in Christ. This ecclesial identity is linked with a New Testament understanding of the believer as being a new creation. (2) A strong sacramental understanding which links the mystery of Christ with the mystery of the sacraments. (3) A reading or hearing of Scripture with the aim of being transformed as well as (4) an insight into the bigger vision (*teleos*) of God and his creation.

I am however also hesitant in retrieving aspects of this early understanding of mysticism to create a specific definition of mysticism, which will not

41 Len. D. Hansen, “Reformed Mysticism? Toward transforming a Tradition Via the Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Retrieval” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 139 (March 2011), 110–119.

42 John de Gruchy, “Transforming Traditions: doing Theology in South Africa Today” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 139 (March 2011), 7–17.

honour the mystery of a life in Christ. I would rather work with a circle of associations than with specific definitions. Imagine a circle with the word mysticism in the middle and then filling the circle with associations, e.g. words like sacrament, liturgy, community, transformation, hidden but good, life, beauty, reflection and fulfilment. Sheldrake's comment needs to be considered: "Throughout its history. Christianity has struggled with its discomfort at the wild and disruptive side of God and with the unpredictability of God's way of leading".⁴³ Our talking about God needs to hinge on the margins.

4. John de Gruchy as mystic?

With such a circle of associations I would like to enter into dialogue with the life and work of John de Gruchy. A person is his or her words, writings, deeds and presence – and much more.

In reflecting on John in terms of the mystical as was identified above, I want to identify themes of liturgy and sacrament, communion, theological reflection, mystery, language, justice and fulfilment. It must be mentioned that John de Gruchy's own reflection on his life journey as seen in his books *A Theological Odyssey*, *My Life in Writing* and *I Have Come a Long Way* helped as conversation partners in engaging with his theology. As I have already mentioned: this essay focuses on one aspect of understanding his theology and does really give honour to the fullness of his life's work.

4.1 Liturgy and sacrament

One has a different experience of someone once you have worshipped with them and has received the sacrament from his or her hand. I have participated in the eucharist service at Volmoed with John leading the office quite a number of times.

In his reflection and own worship, he embraces the role of the liturgy and sacrament and understands liturgy as a vehicle of the truth, the power of which can never be underestimated. Therefore he writes that we need: "... careful reflection on what we do in the liturgy in order to discern whether

43 Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology*, 25.

or not it reflects the truth revealed in Christ.”⁴⁴ He reminds and recognises that it is God that works in liturgy and sacrament, and who is evoking a response.

If we rethink the mystical understanding in the early church it makes sense that De Gruchy also laments the overly cognitive understanding of the Holy Communion in the tradition of Zwingli which hinders the sacrament to become the place where a desire for something bigger than our certainties are born.

He himself wants to retrieve the understanding of Holy Communion of Calvin which he recognises as being essentially more mystical than most Calvinists tends to or want to believe: “He is the host at the table, giving himself to us through the Spirit in the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the cup. In this way, we are united with him in his death and resurrection and with each other within the “body of Christ”.⁴⁵ De Gruchy quotes Calvin writing to a friend: “I adore the mystery rather than labour to understand it.”⁴⁶ The sacrament and liturgy inherently invites community.

4.2 Communion / being together

The communal character of the church and the fellowship of believers also a core theme in De Gruchy’s life and work. He lives as part of a community at Volmoed and throughout his life, initiated communities of scholars, friends and strangers. John writes: “Ever since I visited the Taize Community in France in 1964, I have been attracted to life in community.”⁴⁷

Writing about Christian humanism he is well aware of the danger of individuality that disregards common humanity. This quest, which De Gruchy also calls a craft, of becoming truly human – becoming more truly ourselves – never happens outside of community.⁴⁸ We must first recognise ourselves as human, which will help us rethink what it means to contribute to human wellbeing. Teresa of Avila once wrote that the test of our mystical

44 John de Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey. My Life in Writing* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2014), 84.

45 De Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey*, 87.

46 De Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey*, 87.

47 John W. de Gruchy, *I Have come a Long Way* (Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 2015), 239.

48 De Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey*, 145.

experience lies in the growth of the love of our neighbour. This theology of being a Christian Humanist is not only reflected in his academic work but in his informal discussions, sermons, blogs and all type of interaction. One can call John a theologian amidst a community.

4.3 Theological reflection or the writing of theology

The word *theoretikos* used by the early church fathers can help. Theological thought was not just a purely rational exercise but also a contemplative exercise. *Theoria* was understood as a vision as well.

Louth⁴⁹ reminds us that the word “theoretikos” also underwent a change of meaning just like the words surrounding mysticism. The modern word “theoretical” means abstract, hypothetical and speculative, which, as Louth rightly states, is the opposite of practical and experiential. Louth writes: “Much modern Christian apologetic exploits this split between the theoretical and the experiential, and presents Christianity as a matter of lived experience, not abstract theological matters, among which the dogmatic is often included. In the Greek of the Fathers, however, this split can scarcely be represented in words or concepts.”⁵⁰ *Theoretikos* in the early church meant seeing and knowing in a deep and transforming way where *theoria* is a “dispassionate seeing and awareness constituting genuine knowledge” a knowledge which means a “participation in that which is known, in the One whom we come to know.”⁵¹ If one talks in this manner, Louth says: “The mystical life, the ‘theoretical’ life, is what we experience when we are caught up in contemplation of Christ”.⁵²

In his book *A Theological Odyssey*, John de Gruchy also recognises his theological journey as leading deeper into mystery in talking about this journey in the language of Homer: “Not because my theological journey has been epic in proportion, but because like Homer’s hero it has been a long adventurous journey marked by many episodes along the way, but always,

49 Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 214.

50 Ibid., 214.

51 Ibid., 214.

52 Ibid., 214.

so it has become clear, leading towards home or deeper into mystery.”⁵³ A journey in which much had changed including himself.

In De Gruchy’s reflection on what it means to be a theologian something of this discussion of the Greek fathers and *theoretikos* is reflected. Being a theologian is for him a way of being in the world – not just writing learned articles. To be a theologian is a form of prayer, contextual and shared with fellow travellers.⁵⁴ He returns to the central narrative of this journey: “Yet, the narrative of Jesus Christ remains at the centre of the enterprise and in turn gives meaning to the story of our lives as Christians.”⁵⁵

What I appreciate of this journey is John’s incorporation of 21st century science, realising that we cannot write a theological anthropology in this day and age with a 5th century anthropology. His research into neuroscience shows a willingness that his theology be enriched with what science has to offer. John was editor of the book *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*⁵⁶ that was part of the project at STIAS (Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study), where scholars from all disciplines talked about the challenges of being human together.

4.4 Mystery or the journey of unknowing

This journey of theological reflection or *theoretikos* is not a journey in which one is in control of the path or the outcome. John de Gruchy himself writes of this journey as “the journey of unknowing” using the language of apophatic mysticism. Apophatic mysticism is like the experience of darkness or incomprehensibility and is also described as imageless mysticism. God is beyond words and images in contrast with kataphaticism which focuses on the experience of what can be known, said or symbolized about God.⁵⁷ Sheldrake writes: “Apophasis is not a branch of theology but an attitude

53 De Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey*, 1

54 *Ibid.*, 2

55 *Ibid.*, 2

56 John de Gruchy (ed), *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa* (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2011).

57 Cunningham and Egan, *Christian Spirituality*, 131-132.

which should undergird all theological discourse, and lead it towards the silence of contemplation and communion.”⁵⁸

This journey of unknowing in his life was intimately connected with the loss of his son Steve. A journey mingled with grief. De Gruchy shared his struggle with his readers in his book *Led into Mystery*. He writes that the way of “unknowing” begins when it dawns on us that God is beyond our knowing and that the answers to ultimate questions also beyond our grasp.⁵⁹ This does not mean that the mystery of God revealed in Christ is irrational or blind, rather a play between reason and faith. Again he uses terminology of *theoretikos*: “It is only in the end that the mystery is revealed in its fullness, when we know even as we are known”, and: “But now, as we journey through life, the revelation of the mystery of God in Jesus Christ does not mean that everything we want to know is disclosed to us, but that everything we need to know for each step of the way is made known to us as we travel.”⁶⁰

This journey on the path of unknowing is lived theology. It is our worship, our pause to wonder, our contemplation and reflection that we can begin to discern honest answers.⁶¹

McIntosh reflects on one way in which to speak of mysticism which reflects the above: “Perhaps I might call it a characteristic theological stance; a way of grounding all the doctrines of Christianity in God’s plan to draw the whole world to Godself in Christ.”⁶²

This also includes language of transformation. As De Gruchy writes that doing theology is to come to a knowledge of God and the world that is more equitable and just.⁶³

58 Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology*, 26.

59 De Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey*, 153.

60 De Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey*, 153

61 *Ibid.*, 153

62 McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 39.

63 De Gruchy, *Theological Odyssey*,

4.5 Language

John de Gruchy introduced me to the work of the neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist⁶⁴ who opens up the dynamic of the hemispheres of the brain and has something to say about language that theologians need to hear. For McGilchrist most forms of imagination, spiritual thinking and artistic creativity require us to transcend language, or as he explains language “in the accepted sense of a referential code.”⁶⁵ He goes further to write: “Metaphoric thinking is fundamental to our understanding of the world, because it is the *only* way in which understanding can reach outside the system of signs to life itself. It is what links language to life.”⁶⁶

In his book about the ultimate mysteries of life and death De Gruchy therefore turns to poetry and literature to speak, realising that our rational philosophical systems cannot help us here. Embracing mystery is the embracing of paradox, a place where words becomes inadequate or plain silly.

The mystical tradition of the church, especially the Eastern traditions, were traditions of poetry, hymn, liturgy and icons (the beautiful). He also wrote on the beautiful, the icons and the aesthetic, reminding us that “a revolution of the church’s imagination cannot happen unless the church becomes a community within which aesthetic experience is part of what it means to be Christian in this world”.⁶⁷ This reclaiming of aesthetics was a reaction against the ugliness on different levels of Apartheid South Africa.

Justice cannot then be understood without beauty. De Gruchy did not then only write thoroughly about the history of theological aesthetics, as seen above, but also more narrowly in introducing an age old tradition of iconography to Protestant readers and in such a way breaking open possibilities of being during worship which honours vision and tradition.⁶⁸

64 Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

65 McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 107.

66 *Ibid.*, 115.

67 John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 242.

68 John W. De Gruchy, *Icons as means of Grace* (Wellington: Lux Verbi.BM).

4.6 Justice and fulfilment (teleology)

A typical reaction towards a stereotypical understanding of mysticism is that it is a flight out of the world. That “practising” mysticism created a cosy place that need not bother with bigger social suffering and injustice. De Gruchy shows us that communion, liturgy, scripture becomes place from where I engage with the world and where I return, that all theology has to do with justice. He shares his own part in the struggle for justice in South Africa in his writings, which need to fill these penultimate times we live in.⁶⁹

Seeing the bigger picture, always being reminded of the end, is part of the mystery of redemption and creation – realising that the “end is given in the beginning” and that the end is good.⁷⁰ De Gruchy invites us into this bigger narrative in his thought-provoking book *The end is not yet: Standing firm in apocalyptic times*. He reminds us that we “can do no other than trust the God who has become known to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in whom all things find fulfilment”, because in the end we will be “saved by grace”.⁷¹

This encloses the whole of creation. De Gruchy works from the affirmation that God’s covenant with humankind and the earth is a redemptive and inclusive covenant and that is why God’s grace and not God’s judgement has the final word.⁷²

This understanding of the bigger picture does not then negate action and deeds in the present. As a doctoral student in Germany in the late nineties, I found the following book of John, translated in German, at a secondhand bookshop: *Beten und Widerstehen. Ein Lese- und Arbeitsbuch aus Südafrika*. Although the original English title *Cry Justice* was well known in certain circles in South Africa it did take on a different meaning for a South African in Germany and reading in German: “Christen leben von der Hoffnung da, wo Hoffnung aussichtslos geworden ist. Christen

69 John W. de Gruchy, *The End is not yet. Standing firm in Apocalyptic Times* (Minneapolis: Yale Fortress Press, 2017), xxi.

70 Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought, Seeking the Face of God* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 137.

71 De Gruchy, *The End is not yet*, 165.

72 De Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey*, 73.

weigern sich, die Gegebenheiten so hinzunehmen, wie sie sind: sie weigern sich zu glauben, dass es keine anderen Möglichkeiten mehr gebe; dass alles letztlich sinnlos sei; dass der Kampf für Recht und Gerechtigkeit keinen Zweck habe.”⁷³ Entwined in his theology is justice and hope.

5. A Reformed mysticism?

John de Gruchy realises that to call oneself Reformed can encompass many things, but he does that because he realises that one has to do theology from a place. He understands a truly reformed church as a listening church, to be silent before the word, before speaking to the word and itself.⁷⁴

In reflecting on the life and work of John de Gruchy I was helped very much by the work of Belden Lane, especially his book *Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality*. Lane looks at Reformed spirituality to help us understand this tradition in light of the ecological dangers, wanting to say that words like longing and desire is not strange in Reformed theology. He sums up what he calls the vigorous convictions of a Reformed tradition: as a response of awe before a grand and powerful God seen in majesty of nature and transformed lives that we read about in Scripture; an amazement that this God is full of love and grace which evokes gratitude and adoration; a need to probe intellectual mysteries of the faith while recognising the metaphorical and limited nature of theological language; a concern to carry theological reflection to its completion in transformation of culture and seeking of justice and lastly a view of church as organic and interdependent unity of diverse people knit by Word and Sacrament into Body of Christ.⁷⁵

I would dare to say that one is perhaps human before one is Christian, and one can be a mystic before being Reformed. Mystics of the Reformed persuasion will never leave the Word, will always be rooted in the grace of God, which forms their past, present and future, living in the community and the world in expectation of the day which will be good.

73 John de Gruchy, *Beten und Widerstehen. Ein Lese – und Arbeitsbuch aus Südafrika* (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag GmbH, 1988), 143.

74 De Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey*, 78.

75 Belden C. Lane, *Ravished by Beauty. The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

6. Conclusion

A good question could be: Did I write the above tongue in the cheek or was it as serious reflection on the concept of mysticism and its nuances. Hopefully those that know John de Gruchy, travelled with him on his journey, read his books, worshipped with him, shared his insights, would realise that within this circle of associations surrounding mysticism as understood in the early church his name can also be written.

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