

Does Rian Venter Make (Theological) Sense?

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‘... the limping will remain’ (Venter 2022:5)

1. Introduction

Engaging with the systematic-theologian Rian Venter in acknowledgement and celebration of his academic theological contributions for well over thirty years demographically from Pretoria to Lusaka and ultimately to Bloemfontein, is an awarding and theologically enriching experience. He has widely and constructively contributed to South African scholarship on systematic-theological reflection. One of the most prominent foci of his academic scholarship – apart from exploring systematic-theological disciplinary reflection and methodology – has been, from day one until now, the nature and art of religious experience or spirituality (and specifically the experiencing of God, the God-question and Trinity). In most of his latest publications, he strongly emphasises *sense-making* within theological reflection, proposing a (threefold) constructive-theological way to move beyond the traumatic Covid-19 experience. It’s a ‘beyond’ that he explicates with the hope that some of the insights that have been generated by the pandemic will be preserved and have enduring significance. What are these insights for him, and how did they come about? In my engagement with him, I will restrict myself to his three latest publications, namely *Making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic from the Bible – Some perspectives* (2021), *Divine hiddenness, the melancholic self, and a pandemic spirituality* (2022a) and *Pandemic, theological sense-making and the Triune God* (2022b). I will first present and reflect on the core of his expositions and arguments in the three publications, then secondly focus specifically on his understanding of and emphasis on ‘sense-making’ within a pandemic spirituality, posing the question ‘Does Venter make sense?’ I will answer the question by making use of evaluative criteria that I formulated earlier with regard to South African scholarship on Covid-19.

Lastly, I will engage critically with his contribution and the manner in which he sees our unfinished reflection on God and spirituality.

2. Venter on God and theological reflection

In *Making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic from the Bible*, which he co-authored with the New Testament scholar Francois Tolmie, each of the authors respectively presents a biblical and systematic-theological perspective on the Covid-pandemic. Against the background statement that more people turn to religion in times of crisis, and from a discussion of six selected studies by biblical scholars (Walter Brueggemann,¹ Ying Zhang,² John Goldingay and Kathleen Scott Goldingay,³ N.T. Wright,⁴ Philemon M. Chamburuka and Ishanesu S. Gusha,⁵ and Peter Lampe⁶), the biblical scholar Tolmie raises a number of methodological and reflective issues that come from their contributions. They are: the source documents of Christianity provide us with a richness of biblical traditions and notions (holiness; mercy; compassion; kingdom, lament etc) that are relevant to such a crisis; each one of the scholars clearly reflects his/her respective social context from which he/she interprets the Bible; a strong emphasis is placed on both lament or groaning as a response to the pandemic *and* on a reluctance to interpret the pandemic as a punishment from God; the determinative role of one's view of God in making sense of the pandemic is discussed; and lastly, strong emphasis is placed on the fact that things cannot continue as before (Tolmie & Venter 2021). In his perspectives, Venter states upfront that intellectual engagement with a complex problem requires a multi- and inter-disciplinary effort. Furthermore, making sense of the pandemic not only requires an appeal to Scripture – including an awareness of the plurality inherent in biblical texts – but also imagination in a rhetorical move beyond the biblical texts. It is a hermeneutical 'move' that necessitates constructive theology. In his own qualifying words:

1 The title of the book that he published: *Virus as a summons to faith. Biblical reflections in a time of loss, grief and uncertainty* (2020).

2 The title of the article that he published: *Reading the Book of Job in the pandemic* (2020).

3 The title of the book that they co-authored: *Thinking with the Old Testament about the pandemic* (2020).

4 The title of the book that they published: *God and the pandemic. A Christian reflection on the coronavirus and its aftermath* (2020).

5 The title of the article that they co-authored: *An exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–35) and its relevance to the challenges caused by COVID-19* (2020).

6 The title of his book: *Health and politics in the COVID-19 crisis from a New Testament hermeneutical perspective* (2020).

The ‘critical correlation’ between an existential exigency and possible relevant biblical resources necessitates *constructive theology*. The distance between the 2020 pandemic and the ancient textual witnesses is vast; only by way of some form of imaginative construal could meaning result – or, to employ typical hermeneutical idiom, could new possibilities for life be generated (Venter 2021:7).

Sense-making within a *constructive theological move* (that is, for Venter, the question: how does one theologise critical contemporary challenges?) entails, for him, wrestling with the core symbols of the Christian faith. At least three argumentative moves should take place (cf Venter 2021:7), namely relating the challenge (or crisis) to the symbol of the Divine,⁷ incorporating⁸ the challenge into the overarching narrative(s) of the Bible, and subsequently pursuing or exploring a ‘way of life’.⁹ Venter also rephrases the moves as forming the lenses for a theological hermeneutic for reading the Bible in a time of pandemic. Thus, for him, sense-making ultimately entails ‘a comprehensive and coherent reading whilst listening to the voice of the text’ (Venter 2021:7). And in the listening – Venter (2021:8) adds at a later stage – is at stake a ‘peculiar imagination that thinks creatively [of] ontology, vulnerability, materiality and surprise together’. It is in this sense that Venter can insightfully claim that sense-making entails more than an intellectual explanation since emotive responses ‘sensibly’ come into play. To this important remark, I will return below.

In *Divine hiddenness, the melancholic self, and a pandemic spirituality*, Venter (2022a:207) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted societies worldwide and occasioned intense intellectual reflection *to make sense* (my emphasis – DPV) of the phenomenon. Insightfully he states: ‘The COVID condition confronted intellectual disciplines with their public responsibility and the occasion to re-envision their very nature’ (Venter 2022a:207). A new horizon for doing theology has subsequently appeared, namely a state of insecurity (no longer flourishing but a quest for security!). In pandemic terminology, he warningly defines the ‘new horizon’ of doing theology, namely that it cannot take place under

7 For Venter, a Christian theologising of the pandemic should emphatically be done in the light of the being and the act of the God who identified Godself as Father, Son and Spirit. A Trinitarian approach is for Venter theologically non-negotiable!

8 Venter (2021a:7) describes the second argumentative move as a ‘story that invites participation’, for which I use the word ‘incorporation’, for reasons that will be made clear in the final section of the article.

9 Venter op. cit. (7) calls it the ‘performative function’ of the process of sensemaking.

conditions of sanitation. Our thinking about the Christian faith, explains Venter (2022a:208), is always contaminated by 'historical dynamics of, for example, politics, culture, or wider intellectual *sensibilities*' (my emphasis – DPV). For him it entails the exploration (read: *responsible re-imagining*) of the contours of a pandemic spirituality.¹⁰ His exploration is undertaken as a disciplinary and multi-disciplinary interpretative effort. It entails for him a threefold interpretative moment, namely proposing a specific naming of God (proposal: hiddenness of God¹¹), to discern a unique self-understanding (discernment: the melancholic self) since traumatic pandemic experiences have 'not left the human self untouched',¹² and lastly, intimating corresponding practices¹³ (practices: lament and othering). Venter (2022a:221) insightfully delineates the contours of a pandemic spirituality in stating:

The absurdity of the condition should be accepted; life should be embraced with a courage to be ... A pandemic spirituality operates with a different logic and language. God is hidden, the mood is melancholic, transcendence should take place in the banality of everyday routine, fully embodied, with a gaze towards the other. In this condition of anxiety and even despair, one should continue with faith, hope and love, but these should be radically reinterpreted for a new material and disruptive moment.

Venter, in concluding, remarks that the pandemic may pass, but that he hopes that the insights generated by the pandemic will be preserved and have enduring significance with regard to the angle of interpreting God (hiddenness), the human self (melancholy) and the practices of self-care (the meaning of everyday bodily life and the face of the other).

10 Descriptively he states: 'The astounding ability of human beings to resist threats, *to make sense* (DPV – my emphasis) and to adapt has been crystallising' (Venter 2022a:208).

11 By means of scholarly examples (Brueggemann, Barth and Tracy), Venter shows how complex it is to interpret the concept of 'hiddenness'. From the examples, he discerns at least three fundamental insights, namely that it refers to the very otherness of God, the very nature of the divine; it could denote the strange providential power of God; it shows that the presence of God is to be found *sub contrario* in conditions of extreme suffering and calls for ethical action (Venter 2022a:213).

12 In relation to the pandemic, the 'new self' that correlates appropriately with a pandemic and a 'hidden God' brings about several options, namely vulnerability, or melancholy (revealing God's otherness and darkness).

13 According to Venter (2021b:216), it refers to 'acts directed beyond immediate sensory concerns'.

In *Pandemic, theological sensemaking and the Triune God*, he asks a question that he subsequently answers in the affirmative, namely whether it is the task of theology to relate the (disruptive) experienced reality to the world of viruses and pandemics. For him it is! Theologians did indeed respond (see Venter 2022b:1) and in this regard, he comments on their responses:

Christian theology has displayed a striking vitality, in addition to an intuitive reflex that theology should creatively interact with social realities, in order to contribute to public sensemaking (my emphasis – DPV).

What is at stake is precisely the ‘identification of the Divine in a specific trinitarian manner’ and therefore ultimately the question ‘whether the trinitarian confession of God could contribute to some form of *sensemaking* (my emphasis – DPV) under conditions of a pandemic’ (Venter 2022b:2).¹⁴ Or put differently: whether new configured conceptions of God can result from a crisis. His configuration is subsequently directed by broadening the framework of the question with more questions: How is the pandemic understood? Merely disruptive? Or perhaps as historical caesura? How is ‘doing theology’ understood, and even more importantly, what does it entail to approach theology as sensemaking?

To answer his posed questions, Venter defines sensemaking as a hermeneutical activity, an imaginative play of questions, interests and concerns within a specific historical context (cf Venter 2022b:3). As a hermeneutical activity, Venter cautiously (read: imaginatively) and sensitively moves ‘*horizontally*’¹⁵ from (re-)naming God as key symbol, and especially as Trinity¹⁶ – from ‘sheer pleroma, sheer saturation’ (Venter 2022b:6) – to the crux of Trinitarian sensemaking, namely four ways in which the Trinity could function discursively. First, in the traditional doctrine of ‘appropriation’,¹⁷ the appropriation brings about the challenge

14 He repeats his question in a more difficult but concise formulation in the subsequent paragraph as follow: ‘How could this faith function heuristically and performatively in a time of disruption?’ (Venter 2022a:2)

15 My use of ‘horizontally’ must be understood in a specific qualified sense as word play on Venter’s (2022a:5) formulation: ‘The presence of God, the God who is weak, vulnerable and suffers, and who is hidden and incomprehensible could be the horizon for sense-making’.

16 In a heuristic provocative manner, Venter (2022a:7) states: ‘The cognitive correlative to Trinity is imagination’.

17 Venter (2022a:8) explains: ‘The work of the Father, Son, and Spirit *ad extra* is one, but also differentiated as creation, salvation and perfection.

to imaginative sense-making to interpret them with contingency.¹⁸ Second, addressing the outstanding task of evil for which Venter proposes an ‘oppositional heuristic’ which, following Jenson, ultimately points to the impenetrability of God’s moral agency. Third, social Trinitarians who have designed various relational anthropologies. Insightfully, Venter (2022b:10) elaborates: ‘The performative effects of the Trinitarian confession reach beyond mere therapeutic moments, gestures of comfort and hope; it nurtures the formation of a *self* as such, a particular kind of human being’. Venter, however, argues (2022b:11) that this is not enough! From the ‘hiddenness of God, the silence and the problematic presence’ we should explore more human practices. He can therefore state:

Expressions of lament, melancholy, and anxiety do not betray the Trinitarian confession (Venter 2022b:11)

Fourth, the doctrine of the Trinity has the potential to re-order power relationships. Therefore Venter (2022b:11) remarks: ‘Sense-making takes place in social contexts and is always *political practice*’.¹⁹ After all this is said, Venter *softly* concludes that sense-making with a strange God remains a leap of faith.

From the three articles on sense-making by Venter, the question arises whether his proposal for a pandemic spirituality makes sense. I will answer the question in reference to an earlier engagement with South African scholarship on the pandemic. The ultimate question will be whether they – and Venter in this particular case – in their pursuit of sensemaking help us constructively beyond the pandemic to new insights.

3. Does Venter make sense?

More than a year ago the Danish theologian Niels Gregersen, acting as guest-editor for the theological journal *Dialog*, asked me to write an article on the African experience of Covid-19. I accepted the invitation in the

The distinctive contribution of an intentional Trinitarian approach might be found in this instance’. He subsequently elaborates: ‘The challenge to imaginative sense-making would be to interpret these appropriate associations with some contingency’. He then suggests that we attend to life, cruciformity and novelty.

18 Powerfully, Venter (2022a:8) makes his point: ‘The Trinity allows for thinking life, pain and healing simultaneously’. And: ‘In a full Trinitarian approach to a virological pandemic, interpretative avenues of fecundity, suffering, novelty, time, and justice could suggest a meta-narrative that might make sense’ (Venter 2022a:9).

19 Elsewhere he elaborates: ‘Believers participate in this community of the eternal political life of God’ (Venter 2022a:12).

published article *Sanitation, vaccination and sanctification: a South African theological engagement with Covid-19* (Veldsman 2021a). I limited myself to the South African experiences as expressed in thirty scholarly academic journal publications by South Africans. Apart from listing the themes that they had addressed, I specifically posed the question on their ‘sense-making contributions’ from a formulation of tentative directives or – as it was also called – evaluative criteria.²⁰ The simple guiding question was: If I were to pose the question on whether they help us to theologically [and] insightfully move beyond the pandemic, what tentative criteria could assist us with our evaluative efforts? In what follows, I will first list the themes, and then the criteria. I will then subsequently engage with Venter’s ‘constructive theological move’, applying the criteria to his ‘move’, and finally I will focus on Venter’s hope for insights beyond the pandemic.

The following main themes or foci that were listed from South African academic theological publications grappling with Covid-19 were: the doctrine of God; hermeneutics and use of scripture; theodicy; anthropology; ecclesiology; pastoral care; technology; mission; morality, theology–science debates, and concrete societal issues²¹ (Veldsman 2021). For asking whether their contributions ‘helped’ us to make theological sense of the pandemic, the following guiding evaluative criteria were formulated by means of questions. The evaluative/directive questions (see Veldsman 2021a:7–8) were:

- Does the contribution entertain ‘more eyes’ (and ears – and all our other senses) on the identified issues? That is the necessary requirement of interdisciplinarity. And with interdisciplinarity comes the crucial disciplinary discernment of the hermeneutical acknowledgement of a ‘multi-focal’ approach in our sensemaking of the pandemic.
- Does it acknowledge the pluriversal context in which it is reflecting? That is, the contextual given of an epistemological pluralism.
- Does it reflect hermeneutical sensitivity not only as interpreter (Where am I/we speaking from?) but also for the contextual relevance (for whom is what important and why) of that which is being interpreted?
- How does – from the connectedness of all that is – the integrative approach for our sensemaking in which he emphasises the significance of religion–science discourses find expression in taking on the

20 The formulated tentative directives or evaluative criteria are clearly qualified in my exposition as ‘tentative’ and ‘incomplete’. They merely function as guidelines to enable a judgement on the worth of the contributions (cf. Veldsman 2021a).

21 For brief notes on each of the themes, see Veldsman (2021a).

identified issues. But also: how is the practical face of the sciences (that is, technology) recognised and managed in its contextual agency?

- How is affectivity in its constitutive role in sensemaking movements and their conversational encounter (explicitly/implicitly) valued, integrated and managed?

If I apply these (tentative) evaluative criteria to Venter's contribution, he complies with most criteria in an exemplary manner, and interpretatively moves us beyond a pandemic spirituality. He does indeed make good theological sense in directing our 'doing theology'. The 'more eyes' are not only explored with regard to doing theology and the specific field of systematic-reflection, but also in relation to other fields (for example, the sciences, sociology, psychology, philosophy) of enquiry. My only hermeneutical concern regarding the 'more eyes' (and ears) is why he does not take (read: incorporate) the other remaining senses more seriously (for example, touch) in a pandemic experience of which he himself said: 'It has not left the human self untouched'. Of insightful importance is his emphasis on a Trinitarian approach (as basis for his sense-making) that he imaginatively employs to broaden (and deepen) a multi-focal exploration of correlating material practices – and also of their revision (for example, dark side). His emphasis on multi-focal exploration is extremely important since each interpretative lens refigures the interpretative outcomes with a richness and broadness of 'more voices' on the experiences. From his understanding of sense-making as more than merely an intellectual exercise comes the refigured self in his strong emphasis on mood, contextuality and embodiment. But the important outstanding question that still has to be addressed is: what about the *more* that he hopes for of post-pandemic preserved insights?

The pandemic has not completely passed (with occasional contemporary and worldwide flare-ups), but has intensely and widely subsided from its initial traumatic devastation. Venter points to preserving (post-pandemically) the suggested angle of interpreting God (hiddenness), the human self (melancholy) and the practices of self-care (the meaning of everyday bodily life and the face of the other). They represent as revisionary response his interpretative moves of theological sensemaking of the Covid-19 traumatic experience. And he has indeed done it in exemplary fashion. To Venter, I would like to pose in conclusion the question: Have you interpretatively revised and stretched, given your insightful emphasis on embodiment and specifically mood, *sensemaking* as more than merely intellectual explanation? For doing theology, sensemaking indeed entails – as you insightfully argue – 'a comprehensive and coherent reading whilst listening to the voice of the text' (Venter

2021a:7). But then you promisingly add that what is at stake is a ‘peculiar imagination that thinks creatively [of] ontology, vulnerability, materiality and surprise together’. Is your ‘think ... together’ indeed radically more than an intellectual explanation as hermeneutical endeavour?

I turn in conclusion to a critical broadening of Venter’s pursuit of sensemaking.

4. Our never-ending unfinished reflection on God, self and practices

Venter will be the first to acknowledge that our reflective efforts and interpretative moves on making sense of the Trinity with love as its grammar comes from and entails ‘sheer pleroma, sheer saturation’ and is therefore inexhaustible and never-ending. It will always remain ‘unfinished business’ ‘that incessantly flows – in his own words – from a “peculiar imagination that thinks creatively [of] ontology”, vulnerability, materiality and surprise together’. Venter’s Trinitarian approach in the re-imagining and re-naming of God is an exemplary directive (as first interpretative movement). So is his exploration of correlative practices (as third interpretative movement). It is on the second interpretative movement, namely the self, that I would like to comment critically in reference to the ‘more’ that he would like to preserve as insight beyond Covid-19.

In my academic opinion, one of the strongest neglected dimensions of all of our intellectual endeavours that I find implicitly in his ‘more’ can ironically be found in his use of the word ‘movement’ and reference to ‘mood’. As said earlier: Venter interpretatively wants to move us as ‘fully embodied persons’ in sense-making beyond the pandemic. Spontaneously, I would like to connect argumentatively and explicitly his proposal of ‘move’ with ‘emotions’, specifically prompted by the Latin etymology of the word, namely ‘*emovere*’. It denotes ‘to move, moving’. It is precisely our emotions (part and parcel of our (embodied) interpretative movements) that brings about movement – or not – in our everyday lives. Or perhaps it is more clearly elucidated in a remark by the Canadian philosopher Ronald De Sousa (2013:1) who wrote:

No aspect of our mental life is more important to the quality and meaning of our existence than emotions. They are what make life worth living, or sometimes ending.

Thus, at the very core and heart of all of our sense-making, of our courage to be, lies *that* (read: affectivity) which brings about interpretative

movements (namely mood, feelings, emotions) in the banality of our everyday routine – as Venter himself states – in the condition of anxiety and despair. Put differently: the methodological acknowledgement (and thus integration) of subjectivity (with its affective–cognitive dimension of embodied personhood) in our doing of theology, is in my opinion the most fundamental layer of an authentic post-pandemic spirituality. However, it is precisely its acknowledgement and incorporation that urge and force us, for the sake of the justification of our interpretative moves and credibility, to move beyond the self to intersubjectivity – where ‘the other(s)’ (as persons, methodologies; fields of enquiry) have the last and responsible say. If the Covid-19 traumatic experiences have left no one ‘untouched’ and we yearn to be ‘in touch’ again with reality, it implies that the ‘more’ will only (radically/holistically) be found affectively deeper – for very good, embodied reasons. For me, Venter interpretatively directs us convincingly to the more of the insights we should preserve. For the deeper touch, we will have to explore and broaden our model of rationality for sense-making. To name but one insightful contemporary possibility, it is the work of the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney on carnal hermeneutics (which Venter actually refers to!). From Kearney’s (2021) most recent work, *Touch*, I would like to add a (affective) touch to Venter’s ‘more’ that can capture the deeper touch.

As embodied persons of ‘flesh and blood’, we as *Homo sapiens* (‘wise person’), are the way that life knows life, and all our sense-making efforts find expression in *sapientia*, wisdom (cf Veldsman 2021b:7). As an *anthropos* (‘upward gazer’),²² each of us is a (self-)conscious, embodied person with a number of body systems made up from groups of organs and tissues. These work together to perform important functions of and for the body. It is especially the nervous, endocrine and integumentary/exocrine systems that represent our first (pre-reflexive and pre-conceptual) embodied interpretative engagement of our affective experiencing of our life worlds. Kearney (2021:36) insightfully explains:

Our first wisdom comes through touch mediated by flesh – where our sensing is already a reading of the world, interpreting things as this or that, constantly registering differences and distinctions.

22 See Kearney (2021:33) for the interesting background to Plato’s reference to the etymology of *anthropos* as ‘upward gazer’.

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He adds:

Since all our senses involve touch, and since touch involves mediation, all our sensations can be said to involve semantic interpretations of some kind, understood as a primal orientation in time and space prior to theoretical consciousness (Kearney 2021:39).

Thus for Kearney, our first intelligence, that begins with the vulnerability of the skin that negotiates our primary feelings of things, is epidermal. He therefore concludes: 'In touching the world we are constantly prefiguring, refiguring and configuring our (sense-making – DPV) experience' (Kearney 2021:39).

Venter's explication of sense-making of a pandemic spirituality in the three movements of re-naming God (who is for us), the mood of melancholy (in acknowledgement of our fragility) and the practices of self-care, makes so much more and deeper sense than merely intellectual explanation with a much stronger touch of affectivity. This insight we should courageously preserve in doing theology even though the 'limping will remain' (Venter 2022a:5).

