



RADBOD UNIVERSITY NIJMEGEN

FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

METAMODERN THEOLOGY

IN DIALOGUE WITH METAMODERNISM – A NEW PARADIGM FOR SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

THESIS TO OBTAIN THE DEGREE "MASTER OF ARTS" IN THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES
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²⁴Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. ²⁵Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. ²⁶And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks." But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!"¹

Genesis 32: 24-26

I hereby declare and assure, Matteo (T.M.T.) van den Brink, that this thesis has been drawn up independently by me, that no sources and tools other than those mentioned by me have been used and that the passages in the work whose verbatim content or meaning from other works – including electronic media – has been taken by citing the source are made known as borrowing.

¹ New King James Version (NKJV)

¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. ¹³And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.²

1 Corinthians 13:12

Someone says to me, "Let me understand, in order to believe." I answer, "Believe in order to understand."³

Saint Augustine

I have found the abode wherein You dwell unveiledly – an abode surrounded by the coincidence of contradictories. And [this coincidence] is the wall of Paradise, wherein You dwell. The gate of this wall is guarded by a most lofty rational spirit (...). Therefore, on the other side of the coincidence of contradictories You can be seen – but not at all on this side.⁴

Nicholas of Cusa

² Idem.

³ Saint Augustine, 'Sermon 43. On what is written in Isaiah: unless you believe, you shall not understand', in *The Works of Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century: Sermons*, translation by Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle, (Brooklyn, New York, New City Press, 1990), 240.

⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God [De Visione Dei]*, Ch. 9(36). In *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, translation by Jasper Hopkins, (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001), 679.

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ABSTRACT

Over the previous decades, in the wake of post/modernism, a novel sensibility has emerged, both in contemporary culture and in academia: *metamodernism*. This thesis is dedicated to an initial exploration of the points of intersection between metamodernism and theology, resulting in the idea of a new paradigm for systematic theology. Metamodernism can be understood as an overarching *structure of feeling*, a *heuristic label*, and a *prescriptive program* for scholarly endeavors. As it turns out, five features of the metamodern sensibility are particularly suited for a conceptual dialogue with theology: the *cautious return to metanarratives*, the principal dynamic of *oscillatory overcoming*, the *ambiguous* attitude towards *transcendence*, the *dialogical* understanding of *reality*, and finally, the profound awareness of *pluralistic identities*. Consequently, from a theological perspective, these features can be advanced conceptually into five elemental properties of metamodern theology: the basic principles of *repetition* and *vibrancy* (which combine into *vibrant repetition*) and the fundamental characteristics of *resonance*, *dialogicality* and *community*. Together, the basic principle(s) and the fundamental characteristics constitute the general structure of metamodern theology as a new paradigm for systematic theology; a paradigm which is already shaping the discipline today, and will continue to do so in the future – as will become obvious through an anthology of a number of recent publications in systematic theology. Hence, it will be made plausible that the introduction of the metamodern theological paradigm is an inspiring, promising, and perhaps even necessary evolution for the discipline.

LAY SUMMARY

Postmodernism is over. A new structure of feeling has arisen in the global West. And theologians should take note. In this thesis, I develop the new paradigm of metamodern systematic theology, in which the descriptive framework of metamodernism is explained and used prescriptively. Exploring the ways in which metamodern theory and theology can engage in a conceptual dialogue, it becomes clear that the dominant structure of feeling of this day and age harbors certain interesting possibilities for theology. By crafting a ‘metamodern theological lens’, a tool for interpreting and developing metamodern strategies in order to connect to this *Zeitgeist*, I call theologians to take up these possibilities affirmatively, yet critically.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the course of last year – during which I have been working on this thesis – extraordinary events have transformed the world we’re living in. To me, the most outstanding episodes have been the continuing war between Ukraine and Russia, the outbreak of new violent conflict in Israël and Gaza, and (within national borders) the election results of November 2023, marking a significant increase in right-wing preferences of the Dutch electorate. All of these events have left pronounced traces on the world I am inhabiting every day; from discussing political decisions on financial support for Ukraine with my disillusioned local barber, to witnessing (in my hometown Utrecht) radical student protests against institutional ties with Israel and the war in Gaza, to digesting the recent delivery of the fiercest right-wing coalition agreement ever in Dutch politics – at breakfast with my housemates.

Purely by being in the world today, incidentally following the news and simply trying to get on with daily life, it’s hard to evade the conclusion that these are particularly polarizing and perplexing times. It has increasingly become apparent that many people are suffering from the complexities of life in our modern, globalized, pluralistic world. In fact, it takes a lot of effort, and particularly a certain amount of ‘anchoring’ (in non-destructive structures), to avoid the feeling of being lost. *It feels like the world is falling apart* is a sentiment that resonates shockingly well with especially younger generations. We are a culture led astray, yearning for structure. And it is my conviction that theologians have an important role to play in addressing these outcries, by providing shelter under their own roof – that of the Truth of faith in Christ – in the shape of structural orientation, inspiration and consolation. That’s the point of this thesis. [And that’s also kind of the point of this preface, which is indeed totally an elementary, yet not un-sincere (!) attempt to prevent the hypocrisy of not addressing public issues myself *whilst* calling other theologians to engage with public issues.]

Over the past decade and a half, scholars have started to take note of a *cautious return to metanarratives* in culture, as a reaction to the increasing perplexities of everyday life and the prevalent nihilism that is (perceived to be) the result of the postmodern era in the global West. This new, emerging sensibility in the West – to be understood as an overarching structure of feeling that shapes our experience, thought and practices, beyond particular life-orientations – is called *metamodernism*. [The self-aware attitude displayed in the previous bracketed section, combining irony with sincerity, serves as a first example of the metamodern sensibility, as I will explicate later.] It is exactly in the resurging desire for metanarratives that this metamodern *Zeitgeist* intersects with the task of theology, which is to advocate faith in God, with the truth of Christ at its center. That being said, it is absolutely not as simple as returning to some sort of premodern Christian society. Modernism and postmodernism have taught us valuable lessons which shouldn’t (and practically can’t) be discarded. The challenge is to incorporate these ‘episodes of enlightenment’ into our theological endeavors and practices in a constructive and faithful fashion, as lots of theologians and philosophers have done over the past centuries. This thesis is an attempt to continue just that – in a novel fashion.

Every time I travelled the trajectory between Utrecht and Nijmegen in the past academic year, the train halted at the construction site of the new Ede-Wageningen train station. Numerous times I found myself observing the new roof from below: it has been constructed out of thick, wooden beams, organized

into a pattern of adjacent triangles – the strongest structural shape possible. One time, I suddenly realized that, in fact, I have been occupied with the same task as the construction workers at the site. The only difference being that the ‘roof’ I built is the conceptual framework called *metamodern theology*, the triangular shape I put forward is constructed out of the three ‘beams’ of *resonance*, *dialogicality* and *community*, and the driving principle behind my endeavor is called the theological task of *vibrant repetition*. All of this will become clear over the course of this thesis.

This (perhaps oddly specific) reflection most importantly reveals that I wouldn’t have been able to finish this project without all kinds of different, sometimes surprisingly everyday instances of inspiration, support or (at times badly needed) distraction. Hence, I would like to thank all those who provided either multiple or just one of these ways of assistance – family and friends, teachers, co-students, and of course my girlfriend – and this list should probably also include the One who has been of assistance from behind ‘the wall of Paradise’, although I wouldn’t be able to supply a list of His direct contributions to this work, nor would I even want to come close to raising the suggestion that the upcoming words would in some sense be directly inspired by Him. I’ll leave questions of divine inspiration up to the reader, this time. In any case, I’d like to thank Daniël van de Beld and Miguel Lammers in particular, since their feedback assisted me in editing this work. Up and above that, special thanks go to my supervisor: prof. dr. Christoph Hübenthal. Without his contributions, enthusiasm and encouragements to develop my own line of thought, I could not have written this thesis.

MATTEO VAN DEN BRINK

Utrecht, May 2024

OUVERTURE

It is time for us to face the truth – the age of metamodern theology has arrived. Excuse me, did you say *metamodern theology*?! Yes. Metamodern theology. Over the previous decades, a new type of sensibility has emerged in the global West. From the remains of an age which is generally referred to as ‘postmodern’, a new “structure of feeling” has arisen, like a phoenix from the ashes.⁵ Both in contemporary culture and in academia. The dominance of postmodernism, which ended more than two decades ago, has been superseded by the emergence of a new sensibility, after which the attitudes, convictions and discourses of our contemporary age are fashioned. Notwithstanding the immense variety and diversity of perspectives in today’s world, this emerging sensibility can be discerned as a collection of widespread structural patterns which underlie its pluralism. To use the words of the authors who coined the term: “[t]his emerging structure of feeling, (...) we will call this structure of feeling *metamodernism*.”⁶ In very general terms, metamodernism can be described as a cultural sensibility which is “oscillating between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony,” integrating both of these structures into an overarching framework, whilst still, however, preserving their difference; that is to say, without dissolving them into a universal totality.⁷

PROBLEM

Predominantly throughout the humanities, metamodernism has received a reasonable amount of attention ever since its appearance in 2010, particularly in cultural studies and in philosophy, but also in social sciences.⁸ As for theology, however, attention for this concept has been scarce – in my opinion: lacking. Especially given the content and significance of metamodernism, which I will set out to explain in this thesis, this hiatus is remarkable. Over the past decades, a lot of thought has been focused on the relationship between theology and culture, the religious and the secular, church and world. Parallel to this, the rise of the metamodern sensibility is described in part as a cautious return to metanarratives and transcendence, in the wake of the postmodern *incredulity towards metanarratives* and its devotion to *the plane of immanence*. Nevertheless, a rigorous exploration of potential points of intersection between metamodern theory and systematic theological endeavors has not been undertaken thus far.

⁵ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 1, no. 2 (2010): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677>.

⁶ In fact, metamodernism is just one of the alternatives used to describe what lies “historically *beyond* postmodernism”. I side with Vermeulen and Van den Akker in their justification of the usage of ‘metamodernism’ as opposed to terms like ‘hypermodernism’, ‘pseudomodernism’ or ‘post-postmodernism’, concluding that ‘metamodernism’ appears to be the option with the biggest potential. See: *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 1.

⁸ For sociology/psychology, see: Anita Pipere and Kristīne Mārtinsone, ‘Metamodernism and Social Sciences: Scoping the Future’, *Social Sciences* 11, no. 10 (October 2022): 457, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11100457>; Hanzi Freinacht, *The Listening Society: A Metamodern Guide to Politics, Book One* (Metamoderna ApS, 2017); Jonathan Rowson and Layman Pascal, *Dispatches from a Time Between Worlds: Crisis and Emergence in Metamodernity* (Perspectiva, 2021), chap. 6.; For philosophy, see: Jason A. J. Storm, *Metamodernism. The Future of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

The resurgence of religion and spirituality, both in contemporary culture and in academia, provides the perfect foundation and opportunity for theology to enter into the conversation. People have always to a larger or lesser extent been looking for meaningful (meta-)narratives, in the quest to live good, fulfilling and meaningful lives. Yet what characterizes our time more than the past few decades is a renewed momentum behind spiritual and religious exploration and experimentation. Incidentally, providing a metanarrative for a good, fulfilling and meaningful life is precisely what theology has been concerned with for ages. Thus, in this thesis, I will develop the idea of metamodern theology as a new paradigm for systematic theology, explicating why the introduction of metamodern theory inside the bastion of theology is an inspiring, promising, and perhaps even necessary step; both eso- and exoterically.

RELEVANCE

Does the 'introduction' of such a 'novel paradigm' imply that systematic theology is in crisis, then? I would say: yes and no. It is not in the sense that (1) the discipline would be dying; up to this day, systematic endeavors are pursued by the brightest of theologians and the most promising of students.⁹ It is not in the sense that (2) postmodern critiques would have definitively devalued the importance of systematic theology; postmodernism has predominantly functioned as an urgent invitation to reform and reappraise the discipline (rather than as a final deathblow).¹⁰ And it is not in the sense that (3) it would have lost its place within the bigger economy of all theological disciplines; on the contrary, in a (likewise emerging) field like public theology for example, the importance of systematic theology is explicitly acknowledged.¹¹ Yet throughout these explications, a trace of crisis (or development, or change) seeps through, and this 'crack' brings the importance of metamodern theological paradigm to light.

In the first sense (1), it is my contention that a lot of current endeavors within systematic theology, both by the brightest of theologians and (especially) by the most promising of students, are already to a large extent 'metamodern' in nature.¹² We just haven't thought to call it that. The general point is: to the extent that we are living in a metamodern age, this overarching sensibility is – already – very much shaping theological endeavors. Let me briefly give two examples (from very different theological perspectives).¹³ In her book *God, Sexuality and the Self* (2013), Sarah Coakley – English Anglican priest and systematic theologian – presents a new type of systematic theology (which she describes as a 'contemplative *théologie totale*') in a particularly metamodern fashion:

⁹ At least, that's what theologians themselves like to think, see e.g. Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On The Trinity'* (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction*, E-Book (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2017); Katherine Sonderegger, 'Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God. Acquisitions editor Michael Gibson interviews Katherine Sonderegger' (interview), 2015, accessed 08-05-2024, via https://ms.fortresspress.com/downloads/9781451482843_interview.pdf - and I have to agree with them, notwithstanding the gradual decline in the amount of students over the decades (loss of quantity does not inevitably translate into loss of quality).

¹⁰ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 41.

¹¹ Christoph Hübenal and Christiane Alpers, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Public Theology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2022), 8.

¹² This will be explained in more detail in ch. III.

¹³ Which also serve to underscore, importantly, that metamodern theology comes in many different guises.

The theological method proposed here fully endorses the significance of ongoing *interaction* with modern and postmodern secular philosophy – as a vital apologetic exercise, as a challenge to the internal analytic clarification of the Christian faith, and as a commitment to pragmatic, justice-seeking ends.¹⁴

Note the explicit mention of the dynamic between modernism and postmodernism – albeit in terms of *interaction* instead of *oscillation* – as a vital aspect of her theological method. A second example is to be found in the work of Dutch liberal theologian and philosopher Rick Benjamins, who, in his book *Boven is onder ons* (2022), tries to return to God after the distinctly postmodern ‘death of God’, without succumbing to naïve, idolatrous conceptions of God. He tries to understand God in a distinctively metamodern way, arguing for the relevance and importance of God in our post-Christian, postmodern, and post-secular world.¹⁵ These are just two examples.¹⁶ In its most basic form, the introduction of the new overarching framework of metamodern theology will be helpful as a hermeneutical tool. Moreover, however, it will allow both publishing and aspiring scholars the possibility to focus and specify their research, publications, debates, symposia, etc.

In the second sense (2), systematic theology is ‘in crisis’ in the sense that postmodernism did compel renewed reflection, among other things, on the aim and structure of metanarratives and of ‘systematicity’ as such. The Lyotardian *incredulity towards metanarratives* posed a fundamental challenge to systematic theology, which has always been defined by the aim to develop and present well-organized and coherent systems, in which central Christian doctrines (on God, on the Trinity, on the Church, etc.) converge. From a postmodern perspective, three interconnected problems characterize systematic theology: (1) its ‘onto-theological’ tendency, (2) its ‘totalizing’ nature, and (3) its principally ‘male’ character. The *onto-theological* critique consists of the claim “that systematic theology falsely, and idolatrously, turns God into an object of human knowledge,” by understanding Him as *a* being among other beings (instead of e.g. *Being itself*, or *the source of being*); the *totalitarian* critique consists of the idea that systematic theology, by advocating a complete or total vision of Christian doctrines, is “necessarily suppressive of the voices and perspectives of marginalized people[,]” and in that sense ‘violent’; the *feminist* critique consists of the claim that systematic theology is inherently “‘phallogentric’, that is, ordered according to the ‘symbolic’, ‘male’ mode of thinking which seeks to clarify, control, and master (...) [and which is] thereby repressive of creative materials culturally associated with ‘femininity’.”¹⁷ These are the fundamental critiques which inform metamodern theology, preventing it from a naïve return to ‘universal’ metanarratives. Metamodern theology is ultimately a reconstructive venture, characterized on the one side by the optimistic – one would almost say: Babylonian, hubristic – *constructivism* of modernism, in the shape of an enthusiastic appeal to a metanarrative, but on the other side it is informed and corrected by the ironic *deconstruction* of postmodernism, in the shape of incorporating these critiques.

¹⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 17–18.

¹⁵ Rick Benjamins, *Boven Is Onder Ons* (Middelburg: Uitgeverij Skandalon, 2022), 11.

¹⁶ In ch. III, multiple other examples will be given.

¹⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 42.

Under the header of ‘postmodern theology’ (which, analogous to metamodern theology, comes in many different guises), postmodern critiques have been addressed by theologians over the last decades, but more often than not, this happened at the cost of either giving up ‘God’ (as has e.g. been said about the work of deconstruction theologians), or of weakening the postmodern critiques; theologically ‘appropriating’ them and depriving them of their radical implications. To the extent that theology is in itself always already a recourse to a metanarrative, radical postmodernism and (systematic) theology exclude each other.¹⁸ There is no place for God in true postmodernism – that was exactly the point: God (and everything/-one that tried to take His place) is dead. Importantly, that is not to say that there is nothing to be learned from the critical intuitions of postmodernism.¹⁹ It merely goes to show, however, that as soon as postmodern critiques are ‘implemented’ within theology, one is in fact already exchanging radical postmodernism for metamodern theology. The mere innovation of calling it ‘metamodern theology’ will be beneficial for theological developments in our ‘post-postmodern’ era. First of all because it would simply be a more accurate description of *what is really going on in the name of* postmodern theology, but also, on top of that, because awareness of the meaning of ‘metamodern theology’ will provide impetus to propel theological endeavors forward. As such, metamodern theology will prove to be the answer to the postmodern challenges to systematic theology.

In the third sense (3), systematic theology is ‘in crisis’ in the sense that it always is. The continual development of the world perpetually presents theologians with new perspectives and challenges. Theology is always in dialogue with ‘the times’, and this applies just as much to systematic theology as to other theological disciplines. Its vital interconnection with other theological fields obliges systematic theologians to continuously reinvent the discipline. Metamodernism emerged as a descriptive discourse for the sake of understanding, interpreting, and analyzing the current structure of feeling. It is, importantly, a *bottom-up* concept, i.e. the result of analytical interpretation of what is already going on in contemporary society and by extension in academia. As such, it is a description of the backdrop against which theology takes place. If it is indeed a vital aspect of systematic theology to continuously relate to the contemporary age, and if the discursive concept of metamodernism indeed provides a framework for a thorough analysis of our age, systematic theologians should at the very least offer a small amount of professional attention to it. To investigate whether it could provide valuable insights for the development of theology. And also the other way around, to see whether or not theology could be of value for the development of this framework (not to speak of theology’s value for the world and its people). It is as Michel Clasquin-Johnson writes:

If we are indeed moving into a metamodern world, then religion and the academic study of religion will be both part of that move and be affected by it. With luck, religion will not need to be dragged in there against its will, and Religious Studies and Theology will be there to document and analy[z]e

¹⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 6th edition (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 64.

¹⁹ The contrary has obviously been proven by postmodernism-inspired strands of theology (such as feminist theology, black theology, etc.).

the development, hopefully with an increased awareness of themselves as part of an overarching academic study of religion.²⁰

My aim is to do just that: documenting and analyzing the development from within. One might object that my assumptions are not self-evident. Why would systematic theology have to relate to something as fleeting as our contemporary age? (Should it not, on the contrary, cultivate a certain distance to the present-day world, in order to conserve the treasure of the *mysterium fidei*?) And, secondly, is it even true that metamodernism is a valuable framework for the analysis of our age?

To the first objection, I would like to respond by stating that theology cannot be separated from the times in which it is practiced, for the simple reason that the theologians who practice it, are themselves a product of their times. Relating to the times is an essential element of systematic theology – even (and perhaps especially) if one is determined to maintain a distance between theology and culture – since awareness of these external influences can (aside from safeguarding the academic integrity of the discipline) inspire thorough critiques. That is why systematic theologians are intrinsically obliged to relate to the times in their academic endeavors, before even having started to consider other factors, such as religious incitements (like Psalm 105: *give thanks to the Lord! Call upon His name; make known His deeds among the peoples*, or Jesus' commandment in Matthew 28 to *go therefore and make disciples of all the nations*).²¹ Moreover, *to relate to* does not mean *to affirm uncritically*. On the contrary, active investigation allows for a critical attitude towards developments (which could, if left unnoticed, unintentionally turn out to be problematic). Regarding the second objection, I would simply like to side with the authors to be presented in chapter I, who have endorsed metamodernism as a valuable framework to understand and analyze our times. I can merely hope that the line of thought presented in this thesis will convince the reader of the idea that metamodernism provides a good description of our current *Zeitgeist*.

And so, the esoteric relevance of this thesis (as explained in these three points) ultimately intersects with its exoteric relevance, which consists of the fact that conceptualizing metamodern theology will inspire new forms of dialogue – between, among others, *Zeitgeist*-aware theologians, contemporary churchgoers, secular spiritualists, spiritual seekers and abiding agnostics. Advocating a metanarrative for the inspiration of a good, fulfilling and meaningful life is precisely what theology (in some shape or form) has been concerned with for ages. Part of this task is to continually be sensitive to the signs of the times, for the sake of presenting this narrative in a way that is comprehensible to contemporary people. Of course, for the time being, these relevance claims are hypothetical – aren't all statements until proof is provided? This thesis will serve as an initial attempt to introduce the metamodern theological paradigm. After that however, it will have to prove its merits inside the ruthless arena of scholarly discourse.

QUESTION

The central point of this thesis is to argue for the relevance of metamodern theology as a new paradigm for systematic theology. This will take the shape of a 'conceptual dialogue' between systematic theology

²⁰ Michel Clasquin-Johnson, 'Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism', *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* Vol. 73, no. 3 (2017): 10, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4491>.

²¹ Psalm 105:1, Matthew 28:19 (NKJV)

and metamodernism theory (ch. I), for the sake of showing what the paradigm of metamodern systematic theology entails, both abstractly (ch. II) and concretely (ch. III). The general research question which informs this endeavor sounds:

How can we understand the metamodern structure of feeling as the key to a new paradigm for systematic theology?

This all-too-general research question falls apart into three underlying questions, corresponding to the three chapters of this thesis:

1. **What is metamodernism and how does it (potentially) intersect with theology?**
2. **What are the elemental properties of metamodern theology?**
3. **What does this novel paradigm signify *in concreto* for systematic theology?**

METHODOLOGY

When it comes to methodology, the discussion of these questions contains a descriptive and normative dimension. Unsurprisingly, the descriptive dimension takes shape in literary research, and it deals with the ‘what’ of the matter, i.e. what a dialogue between metamodernism and theology looks like. The normative dimension takes shape in argumentative reasoning, and deals with the ‘why’ of the matter, i.e. why it is important to discuss the points of intersection between metamodernism and theology. *D’où parlez vous?* Well, it is my personal conviction that a dialogue between metamodern theory and the discipline of systematic theology is an inspiring, promising, and even necessary step for theology. Hence, this is the argument I will present in this thesis, with the aim of rendering intelligible why I would invite everyone to embrace the idea of metamodern theology with me, provided that we do so, as Protestant theologian Pavol Bargár puts it, “critically, yet affirmatively.”²²

STRUCTURE

In this thesis, I will (1) establish a conceptual dialogue between metamodern theory and the ventures of systematic theology. This allows for (2) the formulation of the elemental properties of metamodern theology, which, in turn, can be used for (3) an exploration of the concrete implications of this novel paradigm for systematic theology, both now and in the future. As such, this thesis consists of three chapters: in ‘I. Metamodernism and Theology’, I will explain metamodernism and its possible points of intersection with systematic theology, in order to explore the idea of a conceptual dialogue between metamodernism and theology. In ‘II. Metamodern Systematic Theology’, I will employ the findings of the previous chapter to establish the basic elemental properties of metamodern theology; to craft what I call ‘the metamodern theological lens’. Chapter ‘III. *Coda: Metamodern Theology in concreto*’ is dedicated to a metamodern anthology of the intellectual landscape of systematic theology, both now and in the future, and to a reflection on the implications of the novel paradigm for the public relevance of the discipline.

²² Pavol Bargár, ‘The Modern, the Postmodern, and... the Metamodern? Reflections on a Transforming Sensibility from the Perspective of Theological Anthropology’, *Transformation* 38 (2021): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378820976944>.

I. METAMODERNISM AND THEOLOGY

This thesis departs from the premise that *we are living in a metamodern world*. That is to say: the world as we know it today, the world we live in and even the world that ‘lives in us’ (the varying sensibilities and feelings that shape our experiences), can adequately be described and interpreted as being *metamodern*. But what does that mean, exactly? Superficially speaking, *metamodernism* is the term which is used to describe a period in time which succeeds *postmodernism* as the dominant intellectual stance in scholarly and societal discourse. Unfortunately however, though not entirely incorrect, this description immediately falls short.

First of all, as has become “somewhat of a commonplace” in scholarly work on postmodernism,²³ it is important to note that it is impossible to unequivocally define overarching designatory terms such as postmodernism and metamodernism. There are no clear boundaries to be identified on historical, geographical, epistemological or any other kind of other grounds. The *Zeitgeist* can never completely be grasped [which doesn’t mean on the other hand that there are no patterns to be discerned – as I will show in this chapter]. Secondly, while metamodernism is obviously fundamentally different from modernism and postmodernism, it is, as the name suggests, at the same time very much related to these respective predecessors, in the sense that it *historically* emerged (either directly or indirectly) on their shoulders, it is *epistemologically* associated with both of them, and it is *ontologically* to be understood as located in-between.²⁴ As a result, it is far from clear what *metamodernism* is, and, crucially, what it could mean within the theological context which interests us here.

That is, in fact, the main focus of this chapter. By discussing what metamodernism is from a distinctly theological perspective, as I set out to do here, it will subsequently become clear on what points it (potentially) intersects with systematical theological endeavors. Thus, the subquestion to be discussed in this chapter is:

What is metamodernism and how does it (potentially) intersect with theology?

Providing an answer to this question functions as the initiation of the conceptual dialogue – an initial bringing-together – of metamodern theory and systematic theology. The current chapter consists of three parts. I will start off by (I.I) explaining metamodernism, based on the major publications following the 2010 Vermeulen and Van den Akker-article. Secondly, the main part of this chapter (I.II) is dedicated to a discussion of the existing literature on metamodernism in relation to religion and theology, in order to make clear what the potential points of intersection are. Finally, I will briefly discuss (I.III) three distinct discourses that, in my opinion, can be understood as interconnected components of the framework of metamodern theology, displaying specific metamodern theological features.

²³ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, 4.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 2.

I.1 AN EMERGING SENSIBILITY (IN THEORY)

In this paragraph, I will explain metamodernism as a conceptual structure which consists of three dimensions: it is (1) a general, contemporary *structure of feeling*, (2) a *heuristic label* for the interpretation of this structure of feeling, and (3) a descriptive framework which can *prescriptively* inform and shape scholarly reflection.

Around the turn of the millennium the idea that the days of postmodernism were definitely over gained traction. “Let’s just say it: it’s over. (...) The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on – as do those of modernism”.²⁵ In the decade that followed, multiple proposals were done to describe the ‘post-postmodern’ sensibility,²⁶ since it had become obvious – in arts, politics, economics, religion and academia – that a new discourse was on the rise. With the publication of *Notes on Metamodernism* (2010), cultural scholar Timotheus Vermeulen and philosopher Robin van den Akker proposed the term *metamodernism*.²⁷ As they put it in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism* (2017), the first full-length book on metamodernism:

“Postmodernism is dead, but something altogether weirder has taken its place.” Thus, what is needed is a new language to put into words this altogether weirder reality and its still stranger cultural landscape. (...) For us, this language is metamodernism. There, we’ve said it. Admittedly, the hubris of delineating a historical moment and describing a social situation in terms of yet another ‘-ism’ opens us up for Homeric laughter at best and fierce scorn at worst.²⁸

Careful not to fall prey to this hubris, but rather to present the idea of metamodernism as a structured attempt to start a focused discussion, Vermeulen and Van den Akker take care to introduce the concept as “an invitation for debate rather than an extending of a dogma.”²⁹ This allowed scholars [and that includes me in this thesis] to take up this notion and develop it further, since such an overarching ‘structure of feeling’ expands beyond; it permeates all corners of academia and society. But what is the structure of metamodernism that Vermeulen and Van den Akker originally proposed?

Starting with two caveats, which are to be kept in mind throughout this endeavor: (1) metamodernism is not a clear, uniform structure, and (2) ‘the’ metamodern doesn’t exist. First of all,

²⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernity*, p. 165-166, 181, cited from: Vermeulen and Van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, 2.

²⁶ Some of the proposed alternatives, as described by Vermeulen and Van den Akker, are: hypermodernism, digimodernism, pseudomodernism, automodernism and altermodernism. However, as the authors argue, all of these options fall short to a larger or lesser extent when it comes to describing the new discourse that arose, see: Vermeulen and Van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, 3.

²⁷ “Whatever ends up as the historical label for that zeitgeist to future cultural historians may well be known by none of these terms. For our current purposes, however, metamodernism will serve as the verbal placeholder for this emerging zeitgeist.” Clasquin-Johnson, ‘Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism’, 2.

²⁸ Opening quote: Searle, Adrian. 2009. ‘The Richest and Most Generous Tate Triennial Yet’. *The Guardian*. 3 February 2009. Accessed 13 May 2012, via <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/feb/02/altermodern-tate-triennial?intcmp=239>. Cited from: Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen, eds., *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 3.

²⁹ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, 2.

metamodernism is not, strictly speaking, a structure with clear boundaries, because it is not a philosophy, nor a movement, nor a normative program of some sorts:

To say that something is a philosophy is to suggest that it is a system of thought. This implies that it is closed, that it has boundaries. It also implies that there is a logic to it. (...) It is not a system of thought, nor is it a movement or a trope. For us, it is a structure of feeling. When we say that metamodernism is a structure of feeling, we intend to say (...) that it is a sensibility that is widespread enough to be called structural (...), yet that cannot be reduced to one particular strategy.³⁰

In other words: *'the' metamodern does not exist*. It is similar to postmodernism (and modernism) in this regard, since "there is no one such thing as 'the' postmodern. After all, 'the' postmodern is merely the 'catchphrase' for a multiplicity of contradictory tendencies."³¹

Metamodernism is an umbrella term, used to describe and interpret a plurality of different strategies and discourses.³² At the same time, however, these share a similar sensibility, similar patterns of reasoning, interpretation and methodology, which justifies speaking about it in terms of a "structure of feeling".

[A] structure of feeling is a sentiment, or rather still a sensibility that everyone shares, that everyone is aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down. (...) [I]t is that element of culture that circumscribes it but nonetheless cannot be traced back to any one of its individual ingredients. It can be ascribed, instead, to the particular experience of time or place. Subsequently, the dominant structure of feeling (...) of one period or generation – ironic, anxious – may differ radically from that of another – sincere, hopeful. (...) It is present in movements and styles and other phenomena without being reducible to any of them in particular.³³

Vermeulen and Van den Akker describe the metamodern structure of feeling as "the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment."³⁴ As such, it becomes obvious that metamodernism hinges on a certain interpretation of *the tension of post/modernism*, as I describe it. In their words: "[t]he metamodern is constituted by the tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all."³⁵ Within this tension of post/modernism, modernism is defined as a stance of *enthusiasm* with regard to utopism, (linear) progress, grand narratives, Reason, functionalism, formal purism, and so on; postmodernism, on the other hand, as a stance of *irony* and opposition to modernism, "encompassing nihilism, sarcasm, and the distrust and

³⁰ Five years after the original publications, the authors felt obliged to clarify their intentions in a blogpost, in response to frequent misinterpretations, see: Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker, 'Misunderstandings and Clarifications', *Notes on Metamodernism* (blog), 6 March 2015, accessed on 21-12-2023, via <https://www.metamodernism.com/2015/06/03/misunderstandings-and-clarifications/>.

³¹ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', 4.

³² For example, Vermeulen and Van den Akker sum up: "the new sincerity, quirky, freak folk, New Romanticism, new materialism, speculative realism, to name just a few." Vermeulen and Van den Akker, 'Misunderstandings and Clarifications'.

³³ They ascribe this definition to the way Raymond Williams conceptualized it in *A Preface to Film* (1954). Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen, *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, 7–8.

³⁴ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', 2.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 6.

deconstruction of grand narratives, the singular and the truth.”³⁶ Metamodernism is shaped by “oscillation”, a “pendulum” swinging between these poles, or actually an infinite amount of poles (since neither modernism nor postmodernism is in itself an unequivocal unity).

It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm.³⁷

Thus, metamodernism is not some sort of Hegelian synthesis in which the tension of post/modernism is *aufgehoben* for the sake of a singular *identity*. On the contrary, it is a meta-structure in which *difference* is encompassed without being dissolved. The meaning of *meta* (Greek-English Lexicon: ‘with’, ‘between’ or ‘beyond’) gradually becomes clear: “metamodernism should be situated epistemologically *with* (post) modernism, ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism.”³⁸ That is to say: epistemologically, the same assumptions, aims, and methodologies of post/modernism are taken over (with the seismic difference that *both* sides are now incorporated); ontologically, metamodernism negotiates the contradictory views of post/modernism when it comes to the (history of the) world and what constitutes it (leading to paradoxical attitudes as ‘informed naïveté’, ‘sincere irony’ and ‘pragmatic idealism’); historically, metamodernism is the ‘successor’ of post/modernism.

In sum, metamodernism is “a heuristic label to come to terms with a range of aesthetic and cultural predilections, (...) a notion to periodise these preferences (...) to come to terms with today’s condition”.³⁹ Metamodernism (as a heuristic label) is a tool, an instrument, allowing for structured yet open-ended research. It is, metaphorically speaking, a specifically crafted lens which helps us focus. The metamodern lens consists of the tension of post/modernism, and is strongly shaped by these two structures of feeling. Neither of these structures is in itself better or worse: analogous to the well-known Kuhnian *paradigms*, or perhaps more accurately Foucaultian *épistèmes*, each structure of feeling merely represents “a discourse that gives meaning to our experience, such as what is good and what is bad in the first place.”⁴⁰ The goal of conceptualizing these sensibilities is to describe the influences which shape the profound realm in which people (including scholars and scientists) make sense of the world and themselves.⁴¹

³⁶ Ibidem, 4.

³⁷ Ibidem, 5–6.

³⁸ Ibidem, 2.

³⁹ Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen, *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, 5.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 11.

⁴¹ “[O]ur aim is to be descriptive rather than prescriptive,” clarify Vermeulen and Van den Akker, “and our use of the term is born of our attempts to articulate developments in aesthetics, culture, politics and economics that we consider can no longer be understood simply, i.e. exclusively, in terms of the postmodern.” See: Vermeulen and Van den Akker, ‘Misunderstandings and Clarifications’. The authors extensively discuss these historical developments in: Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen, *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, 11–12. “[T]his shift from postmodernism to metamodernism should be situated in the 2000s, (...) in

More recently, philosopher Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm published *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (2021), attempting to provide a more systematic, matured framework. His project is rooted in the conviction that scholarly research has reached a dead end in postmodernism, since the only remaining viable kinds of scholarship, in his eyes, are continuous deconstruction and irrelevant microscopic case studies: “I think this kind of work is valuable, but it is simply not enough. After something has been destroyed, something new must be built, and for something new to be built, a movement is necessary. That movement, I hope, is metamodernism.”⁴² Without going into too much detail on his (rather technical) theorization, three elements are important for our purposes.

First of all, the book represents the first major theoretical work on metamodernism beyond the borders of specific disciplines, substantiating the fact that the heuristic label is applicable to other fields – in our case systematic theology.⁴³ Like Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s account, metamodernism is conceptualized predominantly against the background of postmodernism, which Storm defines with five characteristics: “1) antirealism; 2) an emphasis on endings, which has often included disciplinary autocritique; 3) an extreme version of the linguistic turn that characterizes the world in terms of texts; 4) a broad climate of skepticism; and 5) ethical relativism (sometimes called ‘ethical nihilism’).”⁴⁴ These characteristics describe different ways in which scholars addressed the excesses of modernism, and – to be sure – that’s an important merit of postmodernism. However, owing to its reactionary and revolutionary nature, postmodernism did not manage to steer clear of excesses either, and that’s where it gets problematic, according to Storm:

The decay of master narratives has led to a near-universal distrust of universals, while deepening particularity seems to promise nothing but further disintegration. We scholars need a better model that rejects both modernist essentialism and postmodernist skepticism; a way that is beyond both hyperspecialization and obscurantism; a way that is neither purely inward-gazing nor outward-assimilating, that can sustain the necessary tension in which self and other function in interdependent relationships.⁴⁵

which its various preconditions – gradually set in place in preceding decades – all emerged, converged and coagulated. It was in the 2000s, after all, that the millennial generation came of age; the maturity and availability of digital technologies and renewable technologies reached a critical threshold; the BRICs rose to geopolitical prominence; the era of ‘facile fossils’ and fantasies of nuclear abundance gave way to ‘extreme oil’ and dreams of fracking-induced energy independence; the so-called fourth wave of terrorism hit Western shores; the Iraq War destabilised the region and bankrupted the US treasury and war chest; ‘Project Europe’ got de-railed with the Dutch and French ‘no’ to the European Constitution; immigration policies and multicultural ideals backlashed in the midst of a revival of nationalist populism; US hegemony declined; the Arab Spring toppled many a dictator that had long served as a puppet for foreign vested interests; bad debts became, finally and inevitably, as much a problem for the Global North as it always has been for the Global South; and the financial crises inaugurated yet another round of neoliberalisation (this time by means of austerity measures of all sorts), exposing and deepening the institutionalised drive towards financial instability, economic inequality, labour precarity and ecological disaster.”

⁴² Storm, *Metamodernism. The Future of Theory*, x.

⁴³ Storm’s book is a philosophical work – philosophy of science, to be exact – but it proposes a general definition of metamodernism which applies to all possible disciplines.

⁴⁴ Storm, *Metamodernism. The Future of Theory*, 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 2–3.

As becomes obvious in the above, Storm does not conceptualize metamodernism as a neutral descriptive framework. On the contrary, he presents it (among other things) as a normative solution to get out of the stalemate induced by post/modernism. “If the project is successful, the very terms ‘postmodernism’ and ‘modernism’ will have been unmasked, their hostilities rendered moot, (...) [T]he work as a whole aspires to be a cure for modernism and postmodernism alike.”⁴⁶ As a result, in opposition to Vermeulen and Van den Akker, Storm regards metamodernism as an ‘overcoming’ of post/modernism.⁴⁷

This is the second element of importance to our endeavor, for it exemplifies how metamodernism as a descriptive framework can, *pace* Vermeulen and Van den Akker, be advocated prescriptively.⁴⁸ Storm conceptualizes *the historical step beyond* as an integration of the epistemology of both modernism and postmodernism. In a sense, post/modernism is to be overcome by playing it off against itself.

Postmodern doubt can be made to doubt itself, and when cleansed of its negative dogmatism and lingering longing for lost certainties it can show us the way toward humble, emancipatory knowledge. Anti-foundationalism can become a new foundation. Postmodern cynicism and moral outrage can be transmuted into positive ends – Revolutionary Happiness and multispecies flourishing. Irony and despair can become fierce joy and hope. Beyond anti-essentialism is not a new essentialism, but a world of becoming. Rather than defending the master categories from criticism, we can grant and build on those criticisms.⁴⁹

In other words, the tension of post/modernism contains the possibility for a hopeful future. Here, the next element of importance becomes apparent. For thirdly, Storm puts specific emphasis on one of the defining characteristics of metamodernism, which is the return (albeit a cautious one) to metanarratives.⁵⁰ This is one of the most obvious areas where metamodernism and systematic theology intersect. According to Storm (and Vermeulen and Van den Akker as well), metamodernism acknowledges the resurgence of the importance of metanarratives, or more accurately: the fact that with postmodernism, we (and philosophers in particular) purposefully denounced metanarratives, and that we (and philosophers in particular) have recently started to come back from this idea.

[I]n [Lyotard's] moment, as today, metanarratives were far from vanishing. Even when philosophers rejected master narratives, non-philosophers still expounded plenty of master narratives. Narratives of progress, secularization, democratization, enlightenment, and the like were retold by politicians, filmmakers, tech entrepreneurs, psychologists, and even many scholars. Much of the postmodern canon was even rooted in its own pessimistic grand narratives about the fallenness of Being, colonialism, the death of God, or disenchantment.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Ibidem, 25.

⁴⁷ “Claiming that metamodern culture oscillates between modernist and postmodernist modes would be adding further obscurity on top of two already overly general periodizations.” Ibidem, 17–18.

⁴⁸ Analogous to the way Storm employs metamodernism, it is my contention within the context of metamodern theology that metamodernism as a heuristic label (which is descriptive in itself) should be given more attention and be incorporated into systematic theological endeavors (which is a normative statement).

⁴⁹ Storm, *Metamodernism. The Future of Theory*, 4–5.

⁵⁰ Seth Abramson, ‘Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism’, 27 April 2015, accessed 21-12-2023, via https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ten-key-principles-in-met_b_7143202.

⁵¹ Storm, *Metamodernism. The Future of Theory*, 12–13.

As such, following the general idea that postmodern nihilism is not a particularly fruitful mindset for living, academia has allowed space again for the idea that metanarratives are a relevant and indispensable part of the (human experience of the) world, hence deserving scholarly attention.⁵² However, as postmodernism teaches us, we should be careful not to dive into a new system of sorts too eagerly, for it might be systematicity itself which inherently carries the latent danger of excess and violence.⁵³ We must overcome modernism and postmodernism by incorporating their merits whilst learning from their excesses. It leads Storm to conceptualize metamodernism as “a system for an era of anti-system,” paradoxically:

with two significant qualifications: (1) It is a system premised on its own incompleteness. In a way, it is a *non-system system* based on an examination of the places in which certain systems have typically broken down, and rooted in a radicalization of skepticism that embraces its own finitude and eventually obsolescence. (...) And (2) it is an *anti-universalist universalism* because it posits not homogeneity or stability, but the ubiquity of diversity, heterogeneity, and change.⁵⁴

This is the *non-system system* called metamodernism; a heuristic tool which can simultaneously serve as the solution to the impasse caused by the excesses of post/modernism, and which provides theologians with the possibility to discover unexplored paths.⁵⁵

This leads us, finally, to the main features of the metamodern sensibility, some of which have been alluded to above. Even though it is principally impossible to compose an exhaustive list of well-defined characteristics – remember that metamodernism itself isn't comprehensively definable – it is relevant to sketch a general picture. In 2015, Seth Abramson (professor, attorney, author and columnist) comprised two lists of “basic principles of metamodernism”,⁵⁶ which were later taken up by scholars, and as such incorporated into academic reflections on the topic.⁵⁷ According to Abramson, these are the basic principles of metamodernism:

- A negotiation between modernism and postmodernism
- [Embracing] paradox
- [Embracing] juxtaposition

⁵² Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion describes this era beyond postmodernist nihilism as “the period of the death of the death of God.” In: Richard Kearney, *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God* (New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2016), 194.

⁵³ “Insofar as postmodernism is itself primarily a negation of the preceding mode of modernism, metamodernism must negate postmodernism in turn without merely returning to the previous system,” Storm states. It would be foolish to reengage in modernist enthusiasm uncritically (again). Storm, *Metamodernism. The Future of Theory*, 18.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 20.

⁵⁵ Storm himself playfully alludes to a divine dimension when speaking about ‘multiple subjectivities’, i.e. pluralistic identities – another key characteristic of metamodernism: “Perhaps a god’s eye view comes not from a singular vision but from many eyes.” *Ibidem*, 20.

⁵⁶ In addition to “Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism”: ‘Seth Abramson, ‘Five More Basic Principles of Metamodernism’, 14 May 2015, Accessed 21-12-2023, via https://www.huffpost.com/entry/five-more-basic-principle_b_7269446.

⁵⁷ See e.g.: Clasquin-Johnson, ‘Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism’.

- A collapse of distances [between self and others, and between self and society]
- Multiple subjectivities
- Dialogue over dialectics
- Reconstruction instead of deconstruction
- Collaboration
- Interdisciplinarity
- Simultaneity and generative ambiguity
- Returning, albeit cautiously, to metanarratives
- Engagement instead of [opinionated] exhibitionism
- Effect as well as affect
- Walllessness and borderlessness
- Flexible intertextuality⁵⁸

Abramson explains these features substantively, but for our purposes it suffices to identify that this overview sketches the following picture: *metamodernism is a sensibility that is characterized by the pragmatic overcoming of differences* [paradox, juxtaposition, dialectics, deconstruction, ambiguity, etc.] *for the sake of establishing connections* [dialogue, collaboration, interdisciplinarity] *in an environment of meaning* [metanarratives, reconstruction, engagement]. Importantly, ‘pragmatic overcoming of post/modernism for the sake of meaning’ does not mean that differences are dissolved into complete unity – that would be a foolish (in fact modernist) naivety. The postmodernist preoccupation with difference taught us above all that complete unity is like a fever dream; terrifying, violent and ultimately unreal. This insight carries not a disregard, but actually a precondition for true connection: without a certain amount of polarization – at least two separate poles – there is ‘nothing’ to be connected to ‘each other’, no connection to be established or maintained, for there is no ‘other’ in true unity.

In summary, I have presented metamodernism as (1) a general, contemporary *structure of feeling*, (2) a *heuristic label* for the interpretation of this structure, and (3) a descriptive framework which can (and, as I argue together with Storm: should) *prescriptively* guide scholarly reflection.⁵⁹ Let us now explore the most important earlier attempts that have been undertaken to discern intersections between metamodern theory and theology.

I. II IN DIALOGUE WITH THEOLOGY

Next, I will discuss existing literature on metamodernism in relation to religion and theology. Over the course of this paragraph, it will appear that: the metamodern cocktail of (a) a *return to metanarratives* and (b) its principal dynamic of *oscillatory overcoming*, is central to the idea of metamodern theology, complemented by three interconnected metamodern theological characteristics: (1) ambiguous transcendence, (2) dialogical reality, and (3) pluralistic identity.

⁵⁸ In a different order, rearranged by me (for the sake of clarity), from: Abramson, ‘Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism’; Abramson, ‘Five More Basic Principles of Metamodernism’.

⁵⁹ As summarized by Abramson himself: “[w]hile metamodernism is not a movement or a manifesto for living, it is nevertheless possible for individuals, groups, and even social and political structures to come to be informed by metamodern principles.” When it comes to theologians, I assert that this would be an inspiring, promising and perhaps even necessary encounter. Abramson, ‘Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism’.

In *Towards a metamodern academic study of religion and a more religiously informed metamodernism* (2017) – the first peer-reviewed article on metamodernism in relation to theology – professor of religious studies Michel Clasquin-Johnson explores the possible intersections between metamodern theory and the study of religions.⁶⁰ In the article, Clasquin-Johnson systematically discusses the “new approach” of metamodernism and the “new possibilities” it provides for religious studies, based on ten of Abramson’s basic principles of metamodernism.⁶¹ His discussion is primarily oriented toward religious studies instead of theology, but the article is nonetheless relevant to our endeavor on three points.

First of all, Clasquin-Johnson discusses *the return to metanarratives* as a potential point of encounter between metamodernism and religion. When it comes to the space that has appeared again for metanarratives to inform and inspire the coming decades, he asks: “[c]ould religion be among such metanarratives?” Importantly, his answer is not an unequivocal ‘yes’, but a more hesitant “certainly religion could be one source of the metanarratives that would inform, however temporarily and contingently, the creation of cautious new metanarratives.”⁶² Here, Clasquin-Johnson presents us with an observation, in the shape of a prediction, which must be taken into account especially by the religious enthusiast, to temper the idea that metamodernism will simply serve “as a triumphant moment to reinsert Christian theology as the dominant (only?) answer to the problems of modernity.”⁶³ According to Clasquin-Johnson: “[a] new form of religiosity will evolve that oscillates between (or simultaneously adheres to) deep reserves of traditional spirituality and radical personal freedom,”⁶⁴ for that radical personal freedom is probably here to stay. Most contemporary religious believers do not relate to their faith as if it were an all-encompassing coat (including dogmas, spirituality, ritual practices, etc.) which either has to be worn in its entirety, or not at all. Rather, whether or not one adheres to a specific religious community, the majority of people nowadays design their own ‘coat’, combining different sources of inspiration. As a result, in the context of metamodernism, “religion would never be the only metanarrative in play, always a bitter pill for the religious believer to swallow.”⁶⁵

Secondly, with regard to the cautious return to metanarratives, it seems like the metamodern sensibility reflects elements of *the premodern era*, as Clasquin-Johnson points out. “Religion as we know it today reflects a premodern, Axial Age mindset (or arguably an even earlier one), and much of today’s contemporary events regarding religion reflects those traditions that have yet to make their peace with modernism.”⁶⁶ Moving beyond post/modernism, informed by the lessons and excesses of both, scholars (including theologians) have started to re-appreciate the complexity of premodern thought, in

⁶⁰ Clasquin-Johnson, ‘Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism’.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 1, 9.

⁶² *Ibidem*, 8.

⁶³ Kathryn Reklis, ‘Can Theology Be Postsecular? Aesthetics and Non-Triumphantist Theology’, *The Journal of Religion* 98, no. 3 (2018): 377, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26544186>.

⁶⁴ Clasquin-Johnson, ‘Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism’, 10.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 8.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 9.

opposition to the Enlightenment-narrative which declared all eras before the modern one to be times of simple, naïve enchantment.⁶⁷ As Clasquin Johnson observes:

metamodernism comes surprisingly close to the traditional exegetical rules from the major religions, none of which ever followed the modernist project of literalism. Origen, for example, laid down that besides a literal reading of a piece of scripture, one also needed: “three further senses, or levels of meaning, each of which was in a broad sense allegorical: the ‘moral’ or ‘tropological’ (from which one learned rules of conduct), the ‘allegorical’ proper (from which one learned articles of faith), and the ‘anagogical’ (from which one learned of the invisible realities of heaven).”⁶⁸

So, in a certain sense, metamodernism reflects the premodern era, even though – importantly – this does not mean that metamodernism signifies a return to premodern times, nor that religion represents metamodernism *avant la lettre*. Rather, “[i]t shows that there is a potential affinity between metamodernism and religion, one that could be explored and embraced by participants of both”.⁶⁹

Thirdly, Clasquin-Johnson highlights *the metamodern tension* between irony and sincerity, the embracement of paradox and juxtaposition, and a subsequent willingness to enter into the domain of ambiguity for the sake of faith, as quintessential elements of the (contemporary) “religious impulse”.⁷⁰ To the religious person, the scientific dimension of the world is not the only dimension of truth. ‘Scientific facts’ and ‘truth’ can definitely coincide in one sense, but in another sense, there is a space beyond (*meta*) or in between the two in which it is possible that scientific facts are not fundamentally true, and especially vice versa: “as an often-cited but possibly apocryphal story has it, Ashanti storytellers preface their performance with ‘I am going to tell you a story. It is a lie. But not everything in it is false’.”⁷¹ Such a paradox reflects the dynamic of *metamodern oscillation*. Clasquin-Johnson exemplifies:

The person who sincerely believes in the creation story presented in the book of Genesis also knows for a fact that the dinosaurs were killed off by a giant comet 75 million years ago. The person who knows perfectly well that the wafer of bread was created in a bakery down the road out of flour, yeast and water also knows that it is the body of Christ. (...) To the metamodernist, however, the fact that there is a paradox does not mean that one is wrong and the other right, or that one has to be relegated to a mere ‘subjective truth’.⁷²

In the eyes of the religious person, the religious dimension might even (and probably does) house a truth that is more fundamental than scientific truth. A truth which is experienced and acknowledged, therefore, not as ‘merely subjective’, but rather as even more ‘true’ than the ‘objective truth’ of science.⁷³

⁶⁷ Enlightenment-propaganda which obscured scholarly reflection for quite some time, with regard to the complexity and ingenuity of ancient (classic, patristic) and medieval (scholastic, mystic) thought.

⁶⁸ Quote from: J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism’ and the Word of God*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1958), 101. Cited from: Clasquin-Johnson, ‘Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism’, 4.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 9.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, 9.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, 5.

⁷² *Ibidem*, 4.

⁷³ This ties into the postmodern intuition that science is oftentimes neither as ‘objective’, nor as ‘universally true’ as we once believed (in the modern era).

One of the remarkable elements of Clasquin-Johnson's article is the fact that it is partly inspired by non-scholarly, online sources.⁷⁴ He cites, for example, the internet essay *[Re]construction: Metamodern 'Transcendence' and the Return of Myth* (2014) by Brendan Dempsey (writer, poet and author of the 'Metamodern Spirituality Series'), who was one of the first to explore the potential affinity between metamodernism and theology.⁷⁵ In his essay, Dempsey discusses *the return of transcendence*, albeit in an ambiguous manner, as part of the return of metanarratives. In our metamodern age, he asserts, "myth and grand narratives are receiving a second look and, from a oncehomed focus on contingency and context, interests in the 'timeless' and 'universal' are again finding energetic expression."⁷⁶ This observation is rooted in a particular account of secularization, which blames modernity for the fact that "transcendence and grand narratives of faith lost their value or stronghold within contemporary society"; a development which was subsequently radicalized in postmodernism, "which eschewed not just religious truth but all notions of transcendent truths, all grand narratives, archetypes, and paradigmatic models for living", with "total immanence" as a result.⁷⁷ The emergence of metamodernism must be understood as a reaction "not only against a discredited notion of transcendence [modernism] but also against the unfulfilling shallowness [total immanence] and existential disorientation caused by post-modern surface."⁷⁸

That being said, the type of transcendence that 'returns' with metamodernism is not identical to the one that was declared dead in postmodernity: "precisely because one knows this transcendence cannot be unequivocally asserted (indeed, quite the contrary), its entertainment as an idea is of an essentially different sort than (pre)modern naiveté. It is indeed an 'informed naiveté'[.], a sense of transcendence arising *out of* and ultimately held in check by the acknowledged immanent frame."⁷⁹ Initially, this switch of priorities seems to be a fundamental challenge to theologians, who generally regard the transcendent as primary. At closer inspection, however, one cannot help but notice that this attitude is, in a sense, reconcilable with the task of theology: to be 'creative and exploratory' with regard to the mystery of faith which is the core of theology; to be aware of one's 'immanent' position in the

⁷⁴ "To investigate metamodernism, we have to delve into the world of online articles, tweets, blog posts and podcasts." He consciously incorporates these sources into this initial exploration, because metamodernism is, in a sense, a bottom-up movement; moving from contemporary culture to academia. Clasquin-Johnson, 'Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism', 2.

⁷⁵ Brendan Dempsey, '[Re]Construction: Metamodern "Transcendence" and the Return of Myth - Notes on Metamodernism', *Notes on Metamodernism* (blog), 22 October 2015. Accessed 15-12-2023, via <https://www.metamodernism.com/2014/10/21/reconstruction-metamodern-transcendence-and-the-return-of-myth/>.

⁷⁶ Ibidem.

⁷⁷ Ibidem.

⁷⁸ This observation reflects Clasquin-Johnson's remark that metamodern religiosity is, in a certain sense, similar to premodern religion, given that in this context, space is opening up again for transcendence, *pace* post/modernism: "some of this generation are daring to imagine transcendence again. There is a revival of the mythic; sublimity, narrative, depth, meaning, and reorientation are once again being sought out and can be seen within metamodern artforms." Ibidem.

⁷⁹ Contrary to premodern times, in metamodernism it is not understood to be the case that the transcendent brought forth the immanent world, but the other way around: the immanent world is the foundation upon which the transcendent rests. Ibidem.

constellation of the universe (with God at its head); to be cautious never to ‘affirm or reject *decidedly*’ a particular grand narrative of transcendence; and to come to terms with the fundamental ambiguity which ‘veils’ the personal encounter with God – as the cloud on Mount Sinai when Moses received the commandments.⁸⁰ It is only with the advent of modernity, when we arguably lured ourselves into the idea that we could contemplatively reach universal knowledge (a ‘God’s eye view’, so to speak), and when we simultaneously started to lose sight of these (what we could call) ‘apophatic intuitions’, that the transcendent-immanent dichotomy started to be problematic.⁸¹

Another, more recently published internet essay advances the subject matter toward the idea that a move beyond this dichotomy is needed. In *Re-Enchant the World: Moving Towards a Metamodern Theology* (2023), Noah Maier develops his account of *metamodern theology*, on the basis of a similar apophatic sensibility.⁸² While this essay is neither formally published nor peer-reviewed, it presents three relevant elements of metamodern theology – worthy of our attention. Continuing firstly on the above-introduced topic of apophasis and transcendence, Maier integrates these elements into a metamodern conception of God, which “encapsulates both the personal, providing moral and relational scaffolding, and the impersonal, representing an all-encompassing, cosmic reality.”⁸³ Maier consciously employs the paradoxical sensibility which characterizes metamodernism, to devise a complex conception of God, which:

integrates both immanence – being embedded within the world and its unfolding – and transcendence – existing beyond the world’s limitations. This may be best understood through the apophatic and kataphatic traditions, where God is known both through negation and through affirmation. Such a framework rejuvenates the concept of God, portraying it neither as an objective entity subject to empirical validation nor as a mere illusion to be discarded, but as a multidimensional construct that harmonizes immanence and transcendence.⁸⁴

Note the use of the word ‘harmonize’: God is not the One in Whom all differences are dissolved into unity, rather: in Him, fundamental differences – paradoxes and juxtaposition to our minds – are

⁸⁰ As Dempsey sees it, “[t]heology’ becomes a creative and exploratory act, done for the sensation of the thing itself within in the realm of immanence. The most successful metamodern mythopoeia are compelling; indeed, they create an almost convincing sense of transcendence. (...) metamodern mythopoeia never *decidedly* affirms or rejects the idea of the grand narratives of faith and transcendence. Indeed, it is precisely this ambiguity which allows for transcendent experience in the first place: metamodern faith must presume a kind of atheism if one is to have the freedom to create ‘God’. But this fragile theism that metamodern religious conceptions generate never settles on a fixed perspective.” Ibidem.

⁸¹ Theology always requires at least a minimal amount of *apophasis*, we could say, in line with the thought of philosophers (of religion) like Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and John Caputo.

⁸² Maier is the first to coin *metamodern theology* as such. “Christian theology accepted the rationalist premise, relegating pre-Enlightenment ideas like embodied knowledge and ineffable spiritual encounters to the dustbin. It did so in part because Enlightenment thinking offered some groundwork for exploring the universal, but this modernist confidence excluded many realms of knowledge that we now hold dear. Only recently have the spiritual ideas of the (mostly) cloistered mysticists re-emerged.” Noah Maier, ‘Re-Enchant the World: Moving Towards a Metamodern Theology’, Development Department, 11 September 2023. Accessed 20-12-2023, via <https://www.developmentdepartment.org/re-enchant-the-world-moving-towards-a-metamodern-theology/>.

⁸³ Ibidem.

⁸⁴ Ibidem.

brought into harmony. This reflects the pragmatic, metamodern approach to differences, in which “sincerity pairs with irony, faith coexists with doubt, and absolutism emerges with relativism, all in a dynamic dance that enriches both interpretation and lived experience.”⁸⁵ Theologically speaking, this principle of ambiguity – a dynamic dance – can be identified in, and applied to, different areas of study; from a doctrine of God (as discussed above), to Trinitarian thought, to theological anthropology, to liturgy, etc.⁸⁶ Thus, generally speaking, the first element which Maier presents us with, is a central *oscillatory dynamic* which, in a sense, lies at the core both of metamodernism and of theology, and which forms a nucleus where contrasting and paradoxical views or frameworks are harmonized.

Secondly, Maier highlights the importance of *dialogue* as one of the basic principles of metamodernism. Abramson (and Clasquin-Johnson in his wake) asserted that metamodernism is characterized by a preference for dialogue over the dialectical method favored by postmodern thought.⁸⁷ Maier presents dialogue as a multifaceted principle. Methodologically, dialogical engagement is proposed as the (re)constructive alternative to dialectical deconstruction.⁸⁸ As such, dialogue functions as a methodological tool for the overcoming of the stalemate of post/modernism. Yet it simultaneously serves as a fundamental theological principle, since dialogue lies at the core of the oscillatory dynamic which can be employed in the development of the different dogmatic treatises of systematic theology. When it comes to the context of the *doctrine of God*, for example, Maier raises an interesting suggestion:

I suggest we envision God as a “dialogical reality” – finding a self-referential loop of action and participation that encompasses both individual and communal narratives, empirical findings, and spiritual epiphanies. It is a perpetual state of surrender and divine encounter that's not fixed but continually evolving. If God is a 'dialogical reality,' then faith becomes an ongoing dialogue rather than a monologue of assent or denial. Within this conceptual space, God serves as a participatory nexus where personal and collective stories, empirical data, and mystical insights coalesce. God is both wholly other and intimately close, the ground of being and beyond all being.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Ibidem.

⁸⁶ Maier exemplifies: “This oscillatory approach extends into cognitive and emotional realms, positioning rational thought and intuitive emotion not as adversaries, but as complementary instruments for comprehension and decisionmaking. One might imagine, for example, a prayer life of oscillation between the ‘knowing’ of discursive thought, and the ‘unknowing’ of contemplative insight. It engages in a dialectical synthesis that harmonizes the virtues of these contrasting frameworks.” Ibidem.

⁸⁷ Where the ‘dialectical’ thinking of the postmodernists assumed that every situation involves just two primary opposing forces - which do battle until one emerges victorious and the other is destroyed - dialogic thinking rejects the idea that there is no middle ground or means of negotiation between different positions.” Abramson, ‘Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism’.

⁸⁸ “Unlike modernism or postmodernism, which aim to ‘resolve’ the complexities of pluralism through singular truths or relativistic perspectives, metamodernism focuses on dialogical engagement. It offers awe and curiosity instead of solutions and advice. It cultivates ‘third spaces’ that weave elements of conflicting viewpoints together. In this context, contradictions aren't eliminated but rather compartmentalized, permitted to coexist across diverse existential arenas. (...) Rooted in open, dialogical interaction, metamodernism creates a milieu where these divergent viewpoints can engage, thereby facilitating the emergence of ‘synthetic views’ that amalgamate aspects of opposing perspectives.” Maier, ‘Re-Enchant the World’.

⁸⁹ Ibidem.

As becomes obvious from the above, the focus on dialogical *engagement* over dialectical *exhibitionism* invites and summons believers (and non-believers) to enter and participate in the continually evolving space of ongoing dialogue.⁹⁰ For it is only upon entering the realm of God as a dialogical reality that we can encounter the divine and be transformed into a communion with it.⁹¹

Thirdly, Maier prescribes an open attitude for theologians and believers, since dialogue implies a fundamental *pluralism*. True dialogue demands at least two perspectives, and since even our relation to the fundamental reality of God is 'dialogical', theology ought to cultivate a certain degree of openness towards other (expressions of) realities as well.⁹² Embracing pluralism, crucially, does not mean that every perspective must be embraced uncritically. As Maier realizes himself, "we must have a filter – a means of discerning wisdom from mere opinion. That's where the wisdom of liturgy and discernment comes in, serving as a refining fire for the collective soul's insights. The discernment mechanisms must be in place to avoid the cacophony of unfettered democracy."⁹³ That being said, it is important to realize that liturgy and discernment are, importantly, not individual but communal affairs (also rooted in dialogue).⁹⁴ From this (practical) perspective, metamodern theology is promised to be a constructive foundation for existential and spiritual growth:

[O]pposing viewpoints are no longer stressful but are seen as opportunities for deeper understanding. The integration of rationality and spirituality provides a more fulfilling and comprehensive understanding of reality. The metamodern framework's acknowledgment of irony alongside sincerity enables individuals to approach life's challenges with a certain emotional depth. The ability to "hold" opposing emotional states (such as hope and despair) in oscillation leads to greater spiritual resilience.⁹⁵

Maier clearly presents metamodern theology as both a descriptive and a prescriptive approach. The path towards metamodern theology, according to him, "offers a nuanced path forward, beyond the limitations of prior paradigms. It encourages a rich, eclectic blend of practices and rituals that draw from diverse traditions. In doing so, it offers a compelling narrative that reconciles the fragmented terrains of human experience with the ineffable grandeur of the divine."⁹⁶

Closing the ranks for now is the first scholar to address the potential affinity between metamodernism and systematic theology in particular: cultural theologian Pavol Bargár. In *The Modern, the Postmodern*,

⁹⁰ "Too often, meaning-making processes in contemporary society revolve around staking out a position and defending it – and being seen publicly so staking and defending – rather than engaging an issue collaboratively with an eye toward enacting positive change (however subtle and gradual)." Abramson, 'Five More Basic Principles of Metamodernism'.

⁹¹ Which echo's elements of Augustine's famous *credo ut intelligam* (believe in order to understand), and *fidens quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) in its wake.

⁹² Towards "diverse spiritual viewpoints and expressions," towards tradition and rituality, and towards "scientific paradigms, like cosmology or quantum mechanics, as potential pathways for contemplating the divine." Maier, 'Re-Enchant the World'.

⁹³ Ibidem.

⁹⁴ Ibidem.

⁹⁵ Ibidem.

⁹⁶ Ibidem.

and... the Metamodern? Reflections on a Transforming Sensibility from the Perspective of Theological Anthropology (2021) he explores the new possibilities of metamodern theory for theology. According to Bargár, the potential affinity between metamodernism and theology allows us “to explore how Christians can respond and contribute to this ongoing transformation in the human interpretation of reality.”⁹⁷ Limiting ourselves only to the observations with the highest relevance, for now, Bargár’s article is important for two reasons.

First of all, he summarizes the principal characteristics of metamodernism which affirm the potential affinity to theology, allowing us to concisely wrap-up this paragraph. According to Bárgar, the anchor point for the affinity between metamodernism and theology is “the careful reconsideration of ‘metanarratives’”.⁹⁸ Following from that, the most important characteristics of metamodernism for theology are (1) “the renewed sense of transcendence”;⁹⁹ (2) the oscillatory attitude of ‘informed naivety’, with the principle of dialogue at its core (as Maier argued) – an attitude which is “hopeful about human life characterised by commitment, purpose and vision, in the face of the brokenness of the world”;¹⁰⁰ and (3) the vital importance of pluralism, i.e. “multiple subjectivities and identities.”¹⁰¹ These are the principal ingredients for the metamodern theological paradigm, which organically leads me to the second important observation: it is Bargár who coins the idea of metamodernism specifically *as a paradigm* for theology, by stating that “this momentum should be viewed by Christians as a ‘paradigm shift’ that they are to embrace critically, yet affirmatively.”¹⁰²

With this conclusion, to which I submit with Bargár, we have reached the end of this paragraph, in which I have introduced the main points of intersection between metamodern theory and theology – a *return to metanarratives*, a principal dynamic of *oscillatory overcoming* (of the tension of post/modernism), an *ambiguous* attitude towards *transcendence*, a *dialogical* understanding of *reality*, and finally, a critical awareness of *pluralistic identities*. Before continuing with the elemental properties of metamodern theology, however, it is important to demonstrate briefly that metamodern theology actually encompasses different (and diverging) discourses and strategies.

I.III RELATED DISCOURSES: THE RELIGIOUS TURN

Analogous to the way Vermeulen and Van den Akker introduced metamodernism as a structure of feeling which informs and shapes different discourses, a variety of other, more established discourses are relevant to the notion of metamodern theology.¹⁰³ Limiting myself to three examples, these are *post-*

⁹⁷ Bargár, ‘The Modern, the Postmodern, and... the Metamodern? Reflections on a Transforming Sensibility from the Perspective of Theological Anthropology’, 3.

⁹⁸ Ibidem, 5.

⁹⁹ Ibidem, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, 9–10.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, 10.

¹⁰² Ibidem, 3.

¹⁰³ Vermeulen and Van den Akker themselves mention a list of alternative concepts which are relevant to (and part of) metamodernism: “the new sincerity, quirky, freak folk, New Romanticism, new materialism, speculative realism, to name just a few,” yet these are less relevant to the specific exploration of metamodern theology. Vermeulen and Van den Akker, ‘Misunderstandings and Clarifications’.

secularism, re-enchantment and anatheism.¹⁰⁴ Without elaborating on these discourses exhaustively – that exceeds our current scope – I will briefly discuss their affinity with metamodern theology.

Post-secularism is associated most importantly with the work of philosophers like Charles Taylor (*A Secular Age* (2007)), Jürgen Habermas (*Notes on Post-Secular Society* (2008)), and Peter Berger (*Desecularization of the World* (1999)).¹⁰⁵ The concept is popularly understood literally, as the definition of an era beyond a (historically prior) ‘secular age’ in society, but in scholarly literature the concept is actually employed in two distinct ways.¹⁰⁶ The first definition indeed describes *a resurgence or revival of spiritual and religious life*. Importantly, this resurgence is not to be confused with a naïve return to premodern religiosity, but rather a shift of direction towards unexplored areas of spirituality.¹⁰⁷ The second definition, on the contrary, asserts that *we have never been secular*: combined with the fact that secularity has (globally speaking) been a rather exceptional, specifically Western development,¹⁰⁸ the importance of religion and spirituality as important elements of serious scholarly analysis has only temporarily been relegated to the background – a mistake which has in the meantime been corrected.¹⁰⁹ “Which world has changed – the ‘real’ one or the scholarly one? To some degree, (...) the answer is ‘both.’”¹¹⁰ And for our purposes, it doesn’t really matter. For the result is that the discourse on post-secularism is characterized by (1) a focus on the resurgence (or persistence) of religious beliefs in the contemporary world.¹¹¹ As such, post-secularism substantiates certain characteristics of metamodern theology: the return to metanarratives, the revaluation of transcendence, and the reemerging willingness to enter into dialogue with different (religious) traditions. In line with that, post-secular theory is characterized by (2) an ethico-normative emphasis on dialogue and co-existence between religion and secularity, which reflects the metamodern emphasis on dialogue and pluralism.¹¹²

¹⁰⁴ For the sake of brevity; but by no means because metamodern theology doesn’t extend to other discourses – on the contrary!

¹⁰⁵ Examples of publications on post-secularism focused specifically religion include: Bryan Turner S., ‘Religion in a Post-Secular Society’, in *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Bryan Turner S. (West Sussex, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010); Ingolf Dalferth U., ‘Post-Secular Society: Christianity and the Dialectics of the Secular’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (June 2010): 317–45; Philip Gorski S. et al., eds., *The Post-Secular in Question. Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

¹⁰⁶ In fact, additional definitions could be mentioned – most notably, a definition of post-secularity that is closer to the concept of *apatheism*: the idea that secularism is the standard in today’s society, as a result of which people have become indifferent toward religion, making it unnecessary to refer to it as ‘secular’. However, this definition isn’t commonly used by the authors mentioned above – addressing it further lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

¹⁰⁷ A development which is sometimes described as the spiritual-but-not-religious impulse. Linda C. Ceriello was the first to establish a link between the spiritual-but-not-religious impulse and metamodernism, see: Linda C. Ceriello, ‘Towards a Metamodern Reading of Spiritual but Not Religious Mysticism’, in *Being Spiritual but Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)*, by William B. Parsons, 1st edition (London, New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁰⁸ Turner, ‘Religion in a Post-Secular Society’, 651.

¹⁰⁹ Gorski et al., *The Post-Secular in Question. Religion in Contemporary Society*, 6.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 2.

¹¹¹ Turner, ‘Religion in a Post-Secular Society’, 160.

¹¹² Given the similarities, it is unsurprising that the driving force behind post-secularity mirrors the tension of post/modernism: “a desire in the humanities and social sciences to take seriously aspects of human experience

Re-enchantment is inherently tied up to metamodern theology, as becomes obvious through its abundant appearance in literature on metamodernism.¹¹³ The concept itself refers to Max Weber's seminal *disenchantment of the world*, which he used to describe the post-enlightenment rationalization and secularization of the Western world.¹¹⁴ Re-enchantment, however, started to appear only over the last two to three decades, and it has grown rapidly in popularity ever since.¹¹⁵ The first element of relevance for our purposes, is (1) the emphasis on developments like re-mythologization and re-sacralization (e.g. of nature).¹¹⁶ It substantiates the idea of a return to religiosity by emphasizing the resurging attention for sensations like "wonder, reverence, and delight, and also the idea of a sense of the wider sacramentality of things."¹¹⁷ In line with that, a second element is (2) the focus on the renewed (practical and intellectual) importance of spirituality, from a pluralistic perspective.¹¹⁸ This element is reflects the metamodern emphasis on dialogue and pluralism, which is rooted in the idea that:

God is a community of persons (ground of reality is plural): humans are embodied beings and conditioned by the situation (plurality of perspectives); and the many religions of the world attest to the varied ways that God has established bonds with people (plurality of divine manifestations). (...) Religious traditions are mutually enriched as they come to better appreciate the divine mystery through a process of cross-fertilization and dialogue.¹¹⁹

In general, the discourse on re-enchantment inspires "a fresh look at ambivalence, mystery, excess and aporia,"¹²⁰ which reflects the ambiguous and paradoxical sensibility of metamodern theology. Re-enchantment takes central stage in a perceived *renaissance* of certain ancient apprehensions (no longer discredited by post/modernism today), for example "that childlikeness can be the way to maturity, that the powers of fantasy can be a conduit for knowledge, that the artifice of ritual can make space for real spiritual presence," theologically speaking, apprehensions which are rooted "in the Christian virtue of faith, which operates in an eschatological tension between presence and absence, between a kingdom that is now and a kingdom that is not yet."¹²¹

that are precluded both by modern rationality and liberal subjectivity and also by the hermeneutics of suspicion that critique the modern rational subject [postmodernism]." See: Reklis, 'Can Theology Be Postsecular?', 379.

¹¹³ In the title of Maier's essay, e.g. the two concepts are combined. See: Maier, 'Re-Enchant the World'.

¹¹⁴ Max Weber, *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, trans. Damion Searls (New York: NYRB Classics, 2020).

¹¹⁵ Publications include: Gordon Graham, *The Re-Enchantment of the World. Art versus Religion*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); James Elkins and David Morgan, eds., *Re-Enchantment. The Art Seminar*. (New York: Routledge, 2009); Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, eds., *The Re-Enchantment of the World. Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009). For some (exceptional) earlier works, see: Thomas Moore, *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996); Nicholas Gane, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory: Rationalization versus Re-Enchantment* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002).

¹¹⁶ "Religion is once again part of the imagination of the west and the real is being 'remythologized' in its wake." Craig A. Baron, 'Christian Theology and the Reenchantment of the World', *CrossCurrents* 56, no. 4 (2007): 116–17.

¹¹⁷ Patrick Sherry, 'Disenchantment, Re-Enchantment, and Enchantment' Vol. 25, no. 3 (July 2009): 383.

¹¹⁸ Baron, 'Christian Theology and the Reenchantment of the World', 121.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 121.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*, 116.

¹²¹ Jason Crawford, 'The Trouble with Re-Enchantment', *Los Angeles Review of Books* (blog), 7 September 2020. Accessed 09-04-2024, via <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-trouble-with-re-enchantment>.

Finally, *anatheism* – coined in 2010 by Catholic philosopher Richard Kearney – is used to describe a strand of philosophical theology which is beyond [*ana*-] theism, but not [*an*-] atheism.¹²² In metamodern terms, it can thus be understood as a discourse that is both beyond modernism (in this context: universal theism) and beyond postmodernism (here: nihilistic atheism). Having emerged at the border between theology and philosophy, anatheism is to be understood as a response to the atheistic masters of suspicion and to ‘death of God’-theology, critically curbing these influences for the sake of renewed reflection on God, specifically in light of the death of God. In the words of Jean-Luc Marion: “we find ourselves in the midst of the modern period of (...) the death of the death of God.”¹²³ The main proponents of this line of thought, apart from Kearney and Marion themselves, are John Caputo, Gianni Vattimo and Michael J. Scanlon, among others.¹²⁴ These authors have been pursuing new understandings and interpretations of the divine for our current cultural context, based on the idea that “what is at issue with the death of God is not God but our understanding of God.”¹²⁵ While the discourse on anatheism is itself very heterogenous, some general elements of importance for our purposes can be distilled: (1) *returning* to ‘God’ whilst incorporating postmodern critiques, 2) an *ambiguous* attitude towards the post/modern juxtaposition between immanence and *transcendence*, and 3) a strong emphasis on the importance of an *apophatic* dimension to faith – a reaction against the alleged cataphatic tendencies of the classical theological tradition. As it appears, these elements show a multitude of similarities with the features that have been established as the main points of intersection between metamodernism and theology, which will be the redefined for the constitution of the elemental properties of metamodern theology.

That is, in fact, the task of the next chapter, to which we’ll now turn.

¹²² Richard Kearney, *Anatheism. Returning to God after God*, Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture (New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹²³ Marion in Kearney, *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, 176.

¹²⁴ Main works on religion after the death of God: John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God. A Theology of the Event*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington, IN, U.S.A.: Indiana University Press, 2006); John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God* (New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2007); John D. Caputo, *On Religion*, Second Edition (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019); Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, Second Edition, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be. A Hermeneutics of Religion*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington, IN, U.S.A.: Indiana University Press, 2001); Kearney, *Anatheism. Returning to God after God*; Kearney, *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*.

¹²⁵ Kearney, *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, 177.

II. METAMODERN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Recall the opening statement of the *ouverture*: the age of metamodern theology has arrived. In this chapter, I will explicate what that means. I will employ the findings of the previous chapter to establish the elemental properties of metamodern theology. Evidently, this marks a move beyond the existent, above-discussed literature – but that is, after all, the merit of this thesis. That being said, however, it must be noted beforehand that this *move beyond* does not denote a plunge into completely unknown waters, as I will try to make clear throughout the chapter. Rather, the development I put forward consists of a new way to interpret and integrate preceding observations, reflections and ideas.

As has become clear over the previous chapter, five conceptual features are central to the idea of metamodern theology. These observations can be understood as two basic principles and three fundamental characteristics. The principles are, on the one hand, (a) *a return to metanarratives*, which is the primary point of intersection between metamodernism and theology, and, on the other, (b) *oscillatory overcoming*, which describes the core dynamic at the heart of this intersection. These principles, in turn, lie at the basis of three interconnected characteristics of metamodern theology: (1) *ambiguous transcendence*, (2) *dialogical reality*, and (3) *pluralistic identity*. Up to this point, however, these features are insufficiently developed. Hence, the aim of this chapter is to develop these features into the elemental properties of metamodern theology, in response to the underlying subquestion:

What are the elemental properties of metamodern theology?

The first and major part of this chapter (II.I) is dedicated to the task of developing the properties that have thus far been introduced (as features). I will craft – what I call – the ‘metamodern theological lens’, based on the above-described features, which will come to be redefined as the principles of (a) *repetition* and (b) *vibrancy* (combined: *vibrant repetition*) and the characteristics of (1) *resonance*, (2) *dialogicality* and (3) *community*. The redefinition of these features is done for the sake of conceptual integration and clarity,¹²⁶ as well as to prepare for the concretization of metamodern theology in chapter III. Secondly (II.II), I will discuss the potential contributions of theology to metamodernism, to explain how the influence between metamodernism and theology may actually work both ways – as a conceptual *dialogue*. Finally (II.III), I will elaborate on the idea of metamodern theology as *a new paradigm* for systematic theology, to elucidate the theoretical implications of this notion.

¹²⁶ As Clasquin-Johnson realizes: “An academic study of religion based on metamodernism would ultimately not even employ the word ‘paradox’, so completely integrated would be the paradoxical view of life.” Clasquin-Johnson, ‘Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism’, 5.

II.I RELATED CHARACTERISTICS: THE METAMODERN LENS

In this paragraph, I will develop the conceptual features (of ch. I) into an integrated framework of interconnected properties. Each of the previous observations will be transformed (deepened and broadened) into a fundamental concept. With the formation of these concepts, the elemental properties of metamodern systematic theology are established. The metamodern theological lens, which thus consists of these elemental properties, is intended to function as a general guideline for metamodern systematic theology. Importantly, the idea of metamodernism as a new paradigm for theology cannot be reduced entirely to this framework, nor does each and every possible ‘shape’ of metamodern theology correspond to it entirely, since (as has been noted before) metamodern theology isn’t reducible to one particular strategy, methodology or discourse – it comes in many different ‘shapes’.

However, just like metamodern theory in general provides overarching insights into “a sensibility that is widespread enough to be called structural,”¹²⁷ the metamodern theological lens provides insights into the structural elements of the contemporary religious intuition. As such, the lens informs a theologian’s perception of Scripture, tradition and theological discourse, but also of religious and spiritual experience in contemporary culture. Simultaneously, by providing the conceptual framework, the lens allows the theologian to enter into dialogue with this contemporary structure of feeling, which (again) influences theological perception, which (again) opens up new possibilities for dialogue, etc.¹²⁸ Ultimately, this is what it signifies to regard metamodernism as a new paradigm for systematic theology (as I will explicate in II.III). But let us focus first on the elemental properties of metamodern theology.

REPETITION AND VIBRANCY

Beginning with the basic principles of metamodern theology, which are based on (a) the core incentive for metamodern theology, i.e. *the return to metanarratives*, and (b) the core dynamic of metamodernism, i.e. *oscillatory overcoming*. As I will argue here, when developed and conceptualized in a specific manner, these elements can be employed as the basic principle(s) of theological endeavors. They are the fundamental building blocks, both of metamodernism and of metamodern theology, and, as such, they lie at the base of all other characteristics.¹²⁹ Given their principal status, I refer to them as *principle(s)*. I will refine ‘the return to metanarratives’ as *the principle of repetition*, and the core dynamic of ‘oscillatory overcoming’ will be refined as *the principle of vibrancy*. Both principles are multilayered structures with three dimensions of significance.

The principle of *repetition* denotes, first of all, recurrence. The cautious return to metanarratives signifies a recurrence of earlier structures of feeling, in which metanarratives played a vital role. Of course, as we have seen, metamodern metanarratives are not identical to enchanted premodern metanarratives, or naïve modern alternatives, but they are metanarratives nonetheless. As the

¹²⁷ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, ‘Misunderstandings and Clarifications’.

¹²⁸ *Voici*, the hermeneutic circle!

¹²⁹ That is to say, all other characteristics (as I will describe them below, and as they might be described elsewhere in the future) are radically shaped by these elements.

resurgence of spirituality in contemporary shows, the development away from postmodernism is characterized by a repeating of older narrative structures, in which the *meta* – the transcendent – has a place. This is precisely where theology steps in, insofar it advocates such a ‘transcendent’ metanarrative. Secondly, the principle of repetition denotes the action of repeating older ideas, practices and narratives. Essentially, this is what theologians have been concerned with for centuries, given that the (re-)interpretation of Scripture and tradition has been theology’s primary occupation. In a sense, theology consists of repeating what has already been said or written, albeit whilst continuously developing and inventing new ways of doing so, resulting in new insights (into that which is continuously repeated). The recurrence of the importance of metanarratives invites theologians to do precisely that: to repeat what they have been doing for centuries, i.e. to advocate the metanarrative of faith [and to develop new ways of doing so, which is exactly what I am concerned with in this thesis]. Thirdly, in an etymologically playful fashion, repetition denotes the act of ‘re-petitioning’. That is to say: *to petition anew*, in this context: to make an appeal to ‘God’ again. This definition ties into the previous two dimensions of the principle of repetition, given that (1) the recurrence of the importance of metanarratives can be defined as a re-petition to a meaningful superior structure, and (2) the repeated advocacy of faith, as a central theological task, is characterized principally by appealing to God.

As such, it has become clear how the principle of repetition – in its three dimensions: recurrence, repeating, and re-petitioning – defines the intersection between a metamodern return to metanarratives and the theological task of repeatedly advocating faith as a meaningful appeal to God. It is important to emphasize that the principle of repetition does not denote the identical repetition of what has already been written or said; on the contrary! It is rather a matter of evolving repetition, since if one wants to express the same thing at a different time or place, it must be expressed differently.

Here, the principle of *vibrancy* comes in, for this is what *breaths life* into the principle of repetition. To begin: etymologically, vibrancy is derived from Latin *vibrare*, which can be translated as ‘quivering’, or ‘shaking to and fro’. As such, it resembles the dynamic of metamodern oscillation: “by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. (...) it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles.”¹³⁰ This oscillation is theologically reflected e.g. in the idea that no true difference can exist in God (for God is One), despite the fact that, in some aspects, He is inherently paradoxical (for God is simultaneously Three, to mention one of the key examples). The only answer to rationally keep the innumerable poles of these paradoxes together, is ‘pragmatic’ oscillation, *vibrare*. Even though this unresolvable tension might appear rationally unsatisfactory to some, it is exactly such a tension – the heart of the mystery of faith – which is traditionally understood as the source of life. Secondly, then, vibrancy denotes the state of being high-spirited, full of life.¹³¹ Just like oscillation is the driving force which breaths life into metamodern theory, vibrance is the impetus behind theology’s preoccupation with Christ as the source of life, both fully human and divine. Just like the metamodern return to metanarratives hinges on oscillatory

¹³⁰ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, ‘Misunderstandings and Clarifications’, 6.

¹³¹ According to the Cambridge Dictionary (online), accessed 24-4-2024, via: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/vibrancy>

overcoming of the tension of post/modernism, the metanarrative of faith (as advocated by theologians) is characterized by the (repeated reference to the) vitality – the tensile vibrance – of Christ. Following from that, finally, in a more aesthetical fashion, vibrancy denotes colorful brightness and musical strength and resonance.¹³² The importance of this dimension lies in the fact that vibrancy is not merely a verbal, intellectual concept, but rather an *embodied* principle, rooted in existence – in the actuality of life – and thus experienced and lived through various faculties, including the senses. Within the context of the metamodern return to metanarratives, this dimension of vibrant sensoriality can be discerned in the rising popularity of all kinds of specific embodied spiritual and ritual practices, oftentimes inspired by Eastern spirituality.¹³³ Theologically speaking, it points towards liturgy as an (arguably increasingly) important domain of vibrancy. Within the context of metamodern theology, this becomes apparent for example in the increased demand for experience-oriented liturgical settings, either in distinctly traditional, or rather in ‘fashionable’, twenty-first-century styles.

As such, it has become clear how the principle of vibrancy – in its three dimensions: *vibrare*, liveliness, and sensoriality – defines the intersection between the metamodern dynamic of oscillatory overcoming and the theological task of advocating a vibrant and rich account of faith. Additionally, the relation between the principles of repetition (as the core occupation) and of vibrancy (as the core dynamic) has been addressed, leading us to the integrated conclusion that *vibrant repetition* lies at the heart of metamodern theology. Having established the basic principle(s) of metamodern theology as such, let us now turn to its fundamental characteristics.

RESONANCE, DIALOGICALITY AND COMMUNITY

The first characteristic, that of *resonance* (cf. the third dimension of the principle of vibrancy), is based on the tension between immanence and transcendence, which isn't dissolved but rather harmonized in metamodern theology. As discussed in chapter I, the metamodern sensibility marks a move beyond the hard dichotomy between (pre)modern transcendence and postmodern immanence, based on the notion that the complexity of reality cannot simply be brought back to either one of these models.

A metamodern conception of God integrates both immanence – being embedded within the world and its unfolding – and transcendence – existing beyond the world's limitations. (...) Such a framework rejuvenates the concept of God, portraying it neither as an objective entity subject to empirical validation nor as a mere illusion to be discarded, but as a multidimensional construct that harmonizes immanence and transcendence.¹³⁴

Throughout the centuries, as exemplified e.g. by the cataphatic and apophatic traditions, theologians have always been preoccupied and challenged by the question of the relation between the transcendent (realm of God) and the immanent (realm of creation), in which Christ is usually presented as the embodied interconnection between the two realms. What characterizes the metamodern attitude toward this topic most significantly, is the continuous suspension of a definitive solution (by oscillating back and forth, thus preserving the tension), inspired by the realization that a conclusive closure of this

¹³² Ibidem.

¹³³ E.g. meditation, incense, yoga, psychedelics, etc.

¹³⁴ Maier, ‘Re-Enchant the World’.

case lies beyond the reach of our human cognitive and intellectual abilities. One would need to be (at least partly) a divine human being – let’s say it: Christ-like – to get to grips with this mystery.

The characteristic of resonance is defined, firstly, by this preserved tension; the vibrancy of the harmonization of immanence and transcendence in the divine (in Father, Son and Spirit, since each of these transcendent *hypostases* manifests itself immanently). From the perspective of physics, resonance denotes the co-vibration (of an object, material or system) induced by an external oscillatory force. Converted into theological terms, we could say that resonance is what happens when the external, transcendent ‘force’ of God starts to manifest itself within the realm of immanence; it appears to us as oscillation, as an externally induced ‘co-vibration’ between the two realms. Whereas this seems to be, again, primarily a conceptual definition (as it can indeed be understood, since ‘oscillation’ functions as a conceptual term here), such a vibrant encounter between the transcendent and the immanent can equally as well, when it occurs, be experienced as an existential event; embodied trembling, i.e. physical resonance.¹³⁵

In line with that, secondly, resonance can be understood with sociologist Hartmut Rosa as a deep, full, and reverberating experience in relationship to the world.¹³⁶ According to Rosa, who explicitly embeds this concept in the context of embodied, lived experience and the existential question of happiness and the good life, resonance is what happens when we encounter something which “evades our grasp”, which lies beyond the domain of our control.¹³⁷ Resonance is defined as the ungraspable reality of what happens in an event or experience which deeply affects and transforms the subject, which evokes an active (sometimes even physical) response, and which is ultimately uncontrollable, meaning that “it can neither be *forced* nor *prevented* with absolute certainty.”¹³⁸ The only thing that can be done is to actively cultivate receptivity, acknowledging that “[r]esponsivity or capacity for resonance is, in a way, the *essence* not only of human existence, but of all possible manners of relating to the world.”¹³⁹ In this notion, again, it can be discerned that resonance is what happens at the point of encounter between the two realms, when the transcendent reveals itself within the immanent. As such, it resonates with the theological task of advocating faith, as an existential orientation toward the revelation of the transcendent within the realm of immanence.

Finally, resonance could etymologically be interpreted as ‘re-sounding’, from Latin *re-* (‘again’) + *sonare* (‘to sound’). In this dimension it aligns with the principle of repetition, significantly within the context of the return to metanarratives (including the return to transcendence, as opposed to postmodern immanence). With the importance of metanarratives and transcendence on the rise,

¹³⁵ A dimension which has been documented abundantly throughout literature on divine revelation, with Paul’s *metanoia* as one of the most famous examples. That being said, the divine encounter isn’t necessarily always an event of trembling and perplexity (God can also show himself in a gentle whisper, as he did to Moses), but often-times it is (note that God’s revelations to Moses, in fact, went hand in hand with fire (at the burning bush), thunder (at Mount Sinai), storm and earthquakes).

¹³⁶ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

¹³⁷ Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, trans. James C. Wagner, 1st Edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), vii.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*, 31–37.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*, 31.

theologians increasingly have a stage to re-enunciate the message of faith. In this regard, resonance signifies the ‘re-sounding’ of an ancient metanarrative, but in an innovative manner (i.e. vibrant repetition). An obvious element of this endeavor can be to point toward the other dimensions of resonance, for example by taking up the notion of ‘thin places’.¹⁴⁰ As such, the three dimensions of the characteristic of resonance – co-vibration, existential encounter, and ‘re-sounding’ – have become clear, as well as its relation to the basic principle(s) of vibrant repetition.

The second characteristic, that of *dialogicality*, is based on the importance of dialogue in metamodern theology. As discussed in chapter I, for example, dialogue does not only signify a (re)constructive methodology, it can also ‘apply’ to the reality of God.

I suggest we envision God as a "dialogical reality" – finding a self-referential loop of action and participation that encompasses both individual and communal narratives, empirical findings, and spiritual epiphanies. It is a perpetual state of surrender and divine encounter (...). God is both wholly other and intimately close, the ground of being and beyond all being. This nexus is the fertile (living) ground where the soul's spark can flourish and interact with the Divine. God is a verb, the ineffable force that we can only know through unknowing, the very ground of being itself.¹⁴¹

Importantly, as I understand it, this is not some sort of scholastic statement about God’s ontological essence, but an experiential description of the reality of the relationship with God, as a personal entity with Whom to enter into dialogue – Whom we encounter as a dynamic, dialogical reality.¹⁴²

First of all, dialogicality signifies the quality of being dialogical, i.e. relational, on a fundamental level.¹⁴³ Conceptually speaking, it can be understood against the background of the metamodern dynamic of oscillatory overcoming, as part of the principle of vibrancy, for the dynamic of oscillation (between different perspectives) is an abstract form of dialogue. When redefined as a conceptual negotiation between at least two different ‘poles’ which results in transformation into a new perspective, it becomes apparent that this oscillatory dynamic is intrinsically dialogical.¹⁴⁴ As such, being constitutive to the principle of vibrancy, theology’s task of vibrant repetition is deeply marked by dialogue. In practice, this signifies that dialogue is the principal mode in which reality is disclosed.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ A ‘thin place’ is a setting (usually in nature or in religious settings) in which the border between the transcendent and the immanent is experienced as being very thin, as a result of which people feel very close to heaven, the universe, Being, or the whole.

¹⁴¹ Maier, ‘Re-Enchant the World’.

¹⁴² (The desire for) dialogical engagement with God plays a big role throughout the tradition. Augustine’s *Confessiones* serves as a prime example, given the ‘dialogical structure within which Augustine’s confessions take place.

¹⁴³ Apart from the dimensions I will discuss here, for the sake of it, ‘dialogicality’ could be understood as ‘dialogue + reality = dialogic-ality’.

¹⁴⁴ At least in a Gadamerian definition of dialogue, in which dialogue consists of the mutual encounter between two diverging points of view, resulting in a transformation into communion (upon which I will elaborate in the next paragraph): “dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Revised edition (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 371.

¹⁴⁵ This can take the shape either of ‘vertical’ dialogues, e.g. between God and Church, Christ and society, or Spirit and individual, to name a few examples; or of ‘horizontal’ dialogues, e.g. interreligious dialogue, secular-religious dialogue, or ‘dialogue’ with nature.

Dialogue transforms people into a communion, as such disclosing a dialogical reality which can ultimately be traced back to God.

In line with that, secondly, dialogicality can signify a general capacity to relate to otherness and, importantly, to make sense of the world and existence by relating to this realm.¹⁴⁶ Theologically speaking, this ties into the idea that the revelation of the transcendent in the immanent realm effectuates a meaningful encounter with the uncontrollable. Along the lines of the dialogical thought of authors like Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, it can be argued that sense or meaning arises exclusively in relation to alterity. It is only in relation to the Other that anything at all can be meaningful, given that meaning(fulness) is inseparably intertwined with relationality. The 'Other' signifies simultaneously the concrete other (person) and the abstract domain of that which is beyond our grasp, i.e. 'otherness'.¹⁴⁷ Interpreted theologically, the idea rises that in God, and more specifically in Christ *as human and divine*, these domains coincide. Consequently, in a sense, God is (not only the One, but also) the ultimate or absolute Other, as the source of vitality.¹⁴⁸ Dialogicality, then, points us toward (the mystery of) alterity, which is inherently tied up to (the mystery of) faith, as a crucial element of maintaining a relationship with God; the (mysterious) source of all meaning. This notion reflects the metamodern sensibility in the sense that dialogue, collaboration and interdisciplinarity – each incorporating the importance of relating to alterity – are emphasized as distinguishing features for the metamodern return to metanarratives and transcendence.

This ties into the third dimension of dialogicality, which concerns the idea that dialogue serves as “the basis of human development and functioning.”¹⁴⁹ In other words: dialogue moves us forward. From a metamodern perspective, the project of modernism ‘derailed’ due to its devotion to universality (leaving no space for the Other), and postmodernism fell short due to its devotion to particularity (leaving no space for the One). Both sensibilities lacked the space for dialogue, for in dialogue, we need ‘one another’ – the One and the Other.¹⁵⁰ In the context of metamodern theology, this insight can be implemented by acknowledging that dialogue ameliorates our relationship to the Other – again, both the concrete other as well as the realm of otherness, or God as the ultimate Other. In line with the

¹⁴⁶ For a basic definition of dialogicality, see: Piotr Oleś and Małgorzata Puchalska-Wasył, ‘Between Nature and Culture: Dialogicality as a Basic Human Feature’, *Studies in the Psychology of Language and Communication* 10 (1 January 2010): 179.

¹⁴⁷ In Levinas’ thought, this otherness does not denote a radical alienation which would *a priori* prevent the possibility of connection (even though his thought is at times criticized on this point). On the contrary, it denotes the precondition for relationality, connection or dialogue, since these things require a certain amount of polarization. In a state of unity – without difference – no connection can be established or maintained, since nothing remains to be connected to something else; everything is assimilated into the whole. Likewise, sense or meaning always arises relationally; nothing is meaningful in itself, something always makes sense *to someone*.

¹⁴⁸ To be sure, Levinas himself doesn’t go as far as to identify the Other with God directly, but he does conceptualize them as inseparably intertwined: “The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God. (...) The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, 20th ed. (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2007), 78–79.

¹⁴⁹ Oleś and Puchalska-Wasył, ‘Between Nature and Culture’, 179.

¹⁵⁰ Here, it becomes visible that in God as a dialogical reality ‘God as One’ and ‘God as the Other’ coincide.

principle of repetition, however, this must not be understood as a linear improvement (as in a teleological account of sequentially ‘improving faith’), but rather as in a cyclical model of repeated beginning. In a fallen world, faith consists of the repeated task of entering into dialogue with the Other, before falling back towards oneself and starting all over again.¹⁵¹ Still, insofar this dialogue repeatedly reveals traces of true engagement with the Other (in the shape of meaningful events), this endless task houses infinitely more meaning than the solipsistic, Sisyphean alternative. And thus, it is up to metamodern theology to repeatedly (and vibrantly, not to forget!) engage in that task. As such, the three dimensions of dialogicality – dialogical reality, relating to otherness, and repeated beginning – have become clear, as well as its relation to the basic principle(s) of vibrant repetition.

The third characteristic of metamodern theology, that of *community*, is based on the importance of pluralism and multiple subjectivities, i.e. the co-existence and co-operation of diverging identities, both *between* and *within* individuals.¹⁵² Metamodern theology contemplates a vibrant communion, where different people *unite* without being assimilated into complete *unity*. A communion with God and neighbor simultaneously.

This metamodern outlook allows for diverse spiritual viewpoints and expressions to coexist. (...) Within this framework, collective wisdom emerges from community engagement, highlighting the significance of dialogic practices in enhancing our shared experience of the divine. This is why a metamodern conception of God is inclined to embrace democratic theologies that regard spiritual wisdom as arising not solely from an ecclesiastical elite, but from the collective experiential insights of the entire community.¹⁵³

As such, faith becomes an inherently dialogical practice, which introduces a believer into a pluralistic community of pursuers of spiritual wisdom – Zeitgeist-aware theologians, contemporary churchgoers, secular spiritualists, spiritual seekers, abiding agnostics, *etc.*

The first dimension of community concerns the idea of having a particular interest in common, in this case accumulating wisdom for the sake of relating to the divine. It could be argued that a community is *per definition* characterized by a pluralistic identity, given that the term ‘community’ contains both the notion of a common *identity*, but also the *pluralism* of different participants (with pluralistic identities). That being said, advocating pluralism does not mean that every ‘participant’ is right – there is a difference between wisdom and mere opinion – nor does it imply radical relativism. “That’s where the wisdom of liturgy and discernment comes in, serving as a refining fire for the

¹⁵¹ The Augustinian distinction between *caritas* (love of God and one’s neighbour) and *cupiditas* (love of oneself) underpins this dynamic.

¹⁵² Between individuals (pluralism): “In a world in which we are constantly being influenced by innumerable forces (...) metamodernism literalizes this experience by encouraging us to consciously join our efforts and perspectives with those of others.” Within individuals (multiple subjectivities): “Metamodernism embraces, instead, the notion of multiple subjectivities: the idea that not only do we all find ourselves in numberless subjective categories all at once, but that we even temporarily occupy and share subjectivities with others who might seem very different from us.” Abramson, ‘Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism’; Clasquin-Johnson, ‘Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism’, 6–7.

¹⁵³ Maier, ‘Re-Enchant the World’.

collective soul's insights (...) to avoid the cacophony of unfettered democracy."¹⁵⁴ The remedy against the cacophony of unfettered democracy is *listening*. Listening – a middle ground between hearing (as a potential respondent) and obeying (as a follower) – is the means for attaining wisdom, and as such the principle which upholds the community, ultimately aimed towards discerning the dialogical reality called God – the ultimate concern.

Continuing in the direction of ultimate concern, the second dimension of community concerns the celebration of the Eucharist as the ultimate communion with Christ and all of humankind. In line with the theological task of vibrant repetition, the Eucharist functions as a way to repeatedly bring this element of communion to life, to be experienced again and again as an embodied, physical event. Here, the important role of liturgy is acknowledged again. This can be associated with the metamodern sensibility in the renewed appreciation for embodied spirituality, e.g. in the shape of rituals and sacramentality. In the Eucharist, participants are reminded of Christ's sacrifice, which brought together the transcendent and the immanent, the vertical and horizontal, the eternal and the temporal; Christ, Who personifies and embodies the 'unity' in the community with God and neighbor. He is the unifying Truth within the notion of community as a pluralistic identity. As such, the physical, embodied aspect of communion, which extends to the idea that community is situated within concrete existence (hence not in some sort of unsubstantial spiritual realm), becomes apparent.

Finally, community is etymologically derived from Latin *communis*, meaning 'common', 'public', 'general'. As such, it furthermore denotes that the truth of faith – the encounter with the divine, the transcendent – is principally available for everyone, i.e. public. "[I]f Christ's truth is relevant to all, then it must be reasonably communicable in all possible publics, discourses and narratives."¹⁵⁵ Everyone has the capacity to understand it. That being said, the wide variety of personalities, identities and capacities between people result in a myriad of different ways of relating to the truth of faith. The community functions as the locus where everyone can develop a personal relationship to God, yet simultaneously as the place where these relationships come together. It is up to theologians to remain aware of the fact that different people relate to God differently (hence, in line with the principle of repetition, to repeatedly develop novel perspectives or different spiritual 'languages'), but at the same time, to continuously cultivate interconnections between these diverging sensibilities (e.g. through shared language and practices), given the shared aim of communion. As such, the three dimensions of the characteristic of community – pluralistic identity, embodied communion, and multifaceted commonality – have become clear, as well as its relation to the basic principle(s) of vibrant repetition.

With that, the conceptual framework of the elemental properties of metamodern theology has been established. These interconnected properties can serve as heuristic notions for contemplative and theoretical – but also practical – theology. Before providing examples of concrete application of this metamodern theological lens (which will be the task of ch. III), it is important (II.II) to discuss how metamodern theology could 'talk back' to metamodernism – for the sake of *dialogue* – and (II.III) to explicate what it means to advocate metamodern theology as a new *paradigm* for systematic theology.

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁵ Hübenthal and Alpers, *T&T Clark Handbook of Public Theology*, 5.

II. II IN DIALOGUE WITH METAMODERNISM

Up to this point, the ‘dialogue’ between metamodernism and theology has been a one-way affair [as is understandable with regard to our overall research question]. That being said, it can be argued that this must be a reciprocal relation: a true *dialogue*.¹⁵⁶ As has implicitly become obvious in the discussion of the characteristics of metamodernism, the discipline of theology might very well have something to contribute to metamodernism. In this paragraph, I will briefly discuss three possibilities for contribution to metamodernism, in its three-dimensional significance (as explained in ch. I).

Firstly, in the dimension of metamodernism *as a structure of feeling*, metamodern theology can inspire ‘the metamodern subject’ in relating to the realm of transcendence – both theoretically and practically, both cognitively and existentially – which (arguably) is a fundamental psychological necessity for human beings. The theological tradition can be circumscribed as an incredibly extensive collection of insights into the relationship with transcendence (in the shape of ‘God’), both on an intellectual and a concrete level. Theologians have always – in a myriad of different ways, from different perspectives, but always in some sense guided by a commitment to the truth of Christ – been investigating and advocating a metanarrative, that of faith in God. As a result, theology has something to offer in a time of return to metanarratives, not only possibly in terms of content – the metanarrative of Christian faith – but also just in terms of structure: on relating to the transcendent (the *meta*) and acknowledging the interconnection between the cognitive (intellectual) and affective (existential) dimensions of this relationship. One important element of potential contribution could be the revitalization of the notion of *imagination*, which has lost a lot of ground with the disenchantment of the world. As Bargár describes the notion and its potentiality:

An ultimately elusive concept, the imagination can perhaps best be described as a complex faculty that engages one’s whole person, including physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual dimensions as well as one’s history and experience with the aim of producing meaning with regard to the reality one lives in. The imagination can be viewed as a kind of mediator that brings human faculties as well as experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions together in the quest of making meaning of reality. (...) First, the imagination helps appropriate one’s tradition faithfully, yet creatively. Second, it celebrates diversity, thus providing a viable alternative for responsible life in the polis. And finally, it engenders hope that has the potential to bridge the dichotomy of ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ in one’s pursuits of transcendence.¹⁵⁷

In other words, imagination brings a wide variety of different elements together,¹⁵⁸ since it plays an important role in relating to the transcendent. The latter inherently requires a certain amount of

¹⁵⁶ As is done e.g. by Clasquin-Johnson and Bargár, see: Clasquin-Johnson, ‘Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism’; Bargár, ‘The Modern, the Postmodern, and... the Metamodern? Reflections on a Transforming Sensibility from the Perspective of Theological Anthropology’, 11.

¹⁵⁷ Bargár, ‘The Modern, the Postmodern, and... the Metamodern? Reflections on a Transforming Sensibility from the Perspective of Theological Anthropology’, 11.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. the basic properties of metamodern theology - tradition, creativity, diversity, dichotomy. Imagination aids in the theological task of vibrant repetition, and it plays a vital role in the concretization of resonance, dialogicality and community.

'metaphorical' imagination, in the sense that it signifies, in a certain way, a progression beyond the immanent, beyond the obvious – into the realm of 'the beyond'. Consequently, theologians, building on their formation and experience in religious life, could aid in cultivating imagination.

In line with that, secondly, metamodern theology can contribute to metamodernism as *a heuristic label for the interpretation of the metamodern structure of feeling*, through the observation of contemporary attitudes toward transcendence, tradition and metanarratives. Theologians are – by occupation (e.g. in pastoral practice) – occupied with the intimate realm of existential life-orientation and -inspiration in the personal lives of different individuals, where the contemporary structure of feeling manifests itself concretely. As such, theology can inform metamodern theory on the manner in which contemporary subjects relate to religion and spirituality, by describing developments in religious sensibilities. One important element of potential contribution is the notion of *earnest hopefulness*.¹⁵⁹

Being one of the hallmarks of modernism, optimism believes in progress and constant advancement of the state of the world, thus effectively buttressing the status quo and disabling transformation. On the contrary, hope takes seriously the facts about the reality we live in. And yet, it insists that life has meaning, that it is worthy of living. For Christians, hope has its foundations in the gospel story of God acknowledging the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth in the act of his resurrection.¹⁶⁰

From a metamodern perspective of informed naivety, 'cheap' messages of unbridled optimism are rejected due to their existential alienation from reality. The 'metamodern subject' demands a certain amount of earnestness or honesty, some sort of acknowledgement of the difficulties of existence and problems in the world. In other words, the credibility of a metanarrative depends on its *existential verifiability*. In the notion of hope, including its (extensive) hermeneutical tradition, theologians can find a rich concept which intersects beautifully with this attitude of informed naivety, given that hope contains both the acknowledgment of the unruliness of reality, as well as a dimension of promise, expectation and meaningfulness. Consequently, theological insights into the dynamic of hope can, apart from providing a possible answer to existential experiences of hopelessness, contribute to an increased understanding of the metamodern sensibility.

Finally, in the dimension of metamodernism as *a prescriptive framework aimed at overcoming the excesses of post/modernism*, metamodern theology can inspire metamodern theory in the sense of the courage to address the excesses of post/modernism in a normative way. In addition to the descriptions above, theologians have always to a larger or lesser extent been occupied with developing critiques on the dominant structure of feeling in a particular timeframe. Even though, concretely, this has led to a wide variety of different possible attitudes (ranging from enthusiastic approval to radical rejection of culture), this occupation has prompted theologians first and foremost to become experts at

¹⁵⁹ This element contains an inherent tension with the above-mentioned element of imagination. They keep each other in balance, in the sense that earnest hopefulness safeguards that imagination won't turn into naïve, enchanted madness.

¹⁶⁰ Bargár, 'The Modern, the Postmodern, and... the Metamodern? Reflections on a Transforming Sensibility from the Perspective of Theological Anthropology', 9.

scrutinizing structures of feeling in a conscious and critical manner. In practice, this has two important implications.

First of all, when it comes to the idea of metamodernism as a way of overcoming post/modernism, theologians will be able to provide good rationales for moving beyond post/modernism, based on critical analysis, inspired by the normative framework in which faith in God – the truth of Christ – is the highest good. Such a normative approach can, insofar as it is executed thoroughly, bring to light the shortcomings of particular structures of feeling, which is useful in the context of addressing the excesses of post/modernism. That being said, secondly, theologians will undoubtedly exhibit the same critical attitude in relation to metamodernism as our current structure of feeling. One important point of theological critique, for example, could be the lack of *commitment* in the metamodern sensibility – a characteristic which can be derived from the core principle of oscillation, which is in this case interpreted as: endlessly floating around (between metanarratives) without ever committing to a single orientation. Theologically speaking, it could be argued that this attitude clashes with the only truly indispensable condition for the revelation of faith, i.e. a commitment to belief in Christ. When true commitment is lacking, the argument goes, a meaningful relationship is impossible. Normative judgements about the validity of this critique aside, this goes to show the type of normative scrutinization theologians are capable of. As such, it exemplifies the critical attitude of theology as a potential contribution to metamodernism.

Last but not least, it goes without saying that the above-discussed point of critique is by no means challenging the approach or relevance of this thesis. On the contrary, exploring possible points of intersection between metamodernism and theology must be understood precisely as an example of the task of engaging with the dominant structure of feeling in a particular timeframe. At most, it goes to emphasize the importance of embracing these insights in a critical fashion.

II.III AN EMERGING PARADIGM (IN THEOLOGY)

Even though metamodernism as a ‘structure of feeling’ is definitely closer in definition to a Foucauldian *épistème* than to a Kuhnian *paradigm* (in the sense that it describes a structural sensibility which covers a wide variety of different methodologies, disciplines and discourses), I still decided to use the term ‘paradigm’ in the specific context of metamodern theology, for three particular reasons. First of all, Kuhn’s notion of paradigm concerns the dominant epistemological collection of theories and ideas of singular scientific disciplines specifically (as opposed to the broader, discipline- and science-transcending notion of *épistème*).¹⁶¹ Debates about the scientificity of the humanities aside, the term paradigm is thus more appropriate when speaking about the dominant sensibility within a specific discipline.¹⁶² Secondly, precisely by consciously de- and prescribing metamodernism as the current dominant sensibility, this endeavor ties into the conscious character of Kuhnian paradigms (as

¹⁶¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second Edition, Enlarged (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), viii.

¹⁶² Paulo Pirozelli, ‘The Grounds of Knowledge: A Comparison Between Kuhn’s Paradigms and Foucault’s Epistemes’, *Kriterion: Revista de Filosofia* 62 (4 June 2021): 283–84, <https://doi.org/10.1590/0100-512X2021n14813pp>.

opposed to the unconscious character *épistèmes*).¹⁶³ That is to say, when describing a sensibility to which one can consciously relate, the term ‘paradigm’ is better suited. In line with that, thirdly, Kuhnian paradigms consist of specified, distinct and clear sets of theories, methodologies and thought patterns (to determine what constitutes legitimate knowledge), which are evidently known to and recognized by practitioners – scientists and scholars – (as opposed to the all-encompassing and elusive ‘structures’ of *épistèmes*).¹⁶⁴ Within the context of providing distinct concepts and principles to describe a particular structure of feeling, as I have set out to do in this thesis, the term ‘paradigm’ thus seemed more apt.

In his seminal *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Thomas Kuhn introduced the notion of a *paradigm shift* to describe the transformation of the dominant epistemological constellations and conditions within a scientific discipline.¹⁶⁵ What is accepted as legitimate knowledge – what makes sense – within one particular paradigm, is (likely) rejected in the next, since “the frontiers of meaningfulness” are transformed in a paradigm shift.¹⁶⁶ New paradigms are developed and ultimately embraced when they are *better* than the previous alternatives: for example when they explain and predict phenomena better than before, when they provide more comprehensive or effective solutions to particular problems, or when they are more subjectively attractive to practitioners. Accordingly, with regard to the current context of metamodern systematic theology, the promise is that this new paradigm fits our current cultural logic better, which harbors the potential for both academical and societal acquiescence of theology’s ultimate concern – the truth of faith.

This raises the question to the implications of metamodernism as a new paradigm for systematic theology. How does this new paradigm transform the discipline? To begin, shifting paradigms result in transforming attitudes towards the principal topics of the discipline. In systematic theology, this means first of all that a new paradigm will transform the way in which the basic treatises of systematic theology are conceptualized and how the conditions for knowledge concerning these treatises are constituted. On a more fundamental level, secondly, this means that metamodernism as a new paradigm will transform the understanding of the discipline as a whole, resulting in a different interpretation of the notions of ‘systematicity’ and ‘theology’ (and the significance of their intersection). Even more importantly, in a third sense, a paradigm shift transforms one’s relation to knowledge and understanding as such, which means that, in a new paradigm, theologians will relate differently to the principal sources of theological revelation – Scripture, tradition, experience and reason. As has become obvious in the discussion on metamodernism, this novel paradigm contains features which do indeed influence our relationship to these sources (e.g. the shift of what is seen as ‘reasonable’ between modern, postmodern and metamodern sensibilities). It is my contention that this paradigm has already been shaping the discipline over the last decade and a half, and that future developments will equally be inspired by the principle(s) of repetition and vibrancy, and focused around the characteristics of resonance, dialogicality and community. This brings us to the third and final chapter.

¹⁶³ In Kuhnian paradigm shifts, scientist consciously experiment new approaches for the sake of addressing anomalies that arose in the previous paradigm. *Ibidem*, 286.

¹⁶⁴ Pirozelli, 283.

¹⁶⁵ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 6, 12, 66.

¹⁶⁶ Pirozelli, ‘The Grounds of Knowledge’, 282.

III. CODA: METAMODERN THEOLOGY IN CONCRETO

Music oftentimes features a *coda* towards the end of a piece. Composers add such momentous, pronounced passages for the sake of “working an idea through to its structural conclusions” and to “create a sense of balance,” allowing the listener to reflect and ponder on the main body of a piece; to “take it all in”.¹⁶⁷ With the conceptual integration of the previous chapter, the main body of this thesis has been enunciated. On an abstract level, that is. With the discussion of the principle(s) – *vibrant repetition* – and the characteristics – *resonance*, *dialogicality* and *community* – a heuristic framework of the elemental properties of metamodern theology has been established. However, the notion of this novel paradigm for systematic theology still has to be worked through to its ‘structural conclusions’. What does the lens show us?

Expanding on the preceding reflections on metamodern theology as a paradigm, this chapter is dedicated to an exploration of its concrete manifestation and significance. In that regard, the metamodern theological lens provides a new outlook *on* and *for* (1) the academic discipline of systematic theology itself (ranging across its different perspectives and strategies), and (2) the public relevance of systematic theology. Over the course of this chapter, it will become clear how the metamodern theological paradigm has already been shaping the content and context of systematic theology over the past two decades (following the decline of postmodern sensibilities), and how it might continue to do so in the future. The underlying question is:

What does this novel paradigm signify *in concreto* for systematic theology?

It has to be stressed beforehand that the metamodern theological paradigm does not inexorably converge with a single particular strategy, methodology or strand of academic systematic theology. Rather, being a paradigm, it designates ‘the frontiers of meaningfulness’, i.e. what types of methodology and knowledge are accepted as legitimate and significant across the varying domains of the discipline. Thus, *in concreto*, metamodern theology accommodates diverging, and sometimes even contradictory ‘types’ of theology.

The first and major part of this chapter is dedicated to (III.I) an anthology of contemporary systematic theology, for the sake of showing how the metamodern framework manifests itself in practice, and subsequently to (III.II) a reflection on how this might shape the future. The selection of literature is based on major publications of the last two decades on what could be described as the broader systematic study of the *doctrine of God* (prioritizing the inclusion of a wide range of perspectives over strict adherence to the traditional, ‘modernist’ frontiers of this treatise). Evidently, it is not my aim here to present comprehensive ‘metamodern readings’ of these works, but rather to eclectically point out the presence and importance of metamodern theological intuitions in their structure. In the final paragraph (III.III), then, before moving to the conclusion of this thesis, I will wrap up this composition with a reflection on the implications of the new paradigm for the public relevance of the discipline.

¹⁶⁷ Charles Burkhart, ‘The Phrase Rhythm of Chopin’s A-flat Major Mazurka, Op. 59, No. 2’ in *Engaging Music: Essays in Music Analysis* by Deborah Stein, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 12.

III.1.A NEW OUTLOOK ON SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

From a metamodern perspective, in general, contemporary systematic theology seems to be in a remarkable state of recovery (from the past phase of postmodern challenges). Evangelical Lutheran minister and scholar Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen elaborates:

[T]here is no denying the seemingly insurmountable problems associated with talk about God following the Enlightenment and especially the advent of postmodernism. Although belief and faith have not disappeared in the beginning of the third millennium, traditional confidence in the reliability – often even in the meaningfulness – of Christian talk about God is seriously shaken. If any discourse is highly suspect, it is certainly talk about God.¹⁶⁸

In the postmodern era, the intellectual landscape around belief, faith and religion has undergone substantial changes, that have transformed systematic theology both in terms of contents and shape. Nowadays, however, this has resulted not in the vanishing of the discipline, but rather in resurgence, revival, resuscitation. Whereas postmodernism predominantly prompted theologians to focus their attention toward particular, perspectivist areas of research, instead of systematic overarching endeavors, today they are “raising their eyes from particular and local discussions to broader fields, longer views,” as Anglican scholar Katherine Sonderegger observes.¹⁶⁹ Thus, ironically, “there is no denying the fact that (...) the doctrine of God, in both philosophical theology and systematic theology, has taken on new relevance.”¹⁷⁰

The heritage of postmodern thought consists mainly of the raised awareness toward “the negative side of the progress” of modernism.¹⁷¹ This is due to a shift of attitude towards “traditional metanarratives”, both when it comes to their *scientific* plausibility, and to the raised *ethical* awareness of how these “grand overarching narratives” have historically been “used in order to dominate or to manipulate others.”¹⁷² As such, postmodernism aided theology in the task of “breaking the bonds of an imprisoning Enlightenment rationalism,” which provided impetus for novel “categories of theological exploration.”¹⁷³ Importantly, as Catholic theologian Francis Schüssler Fiorenza notes, “[t]he theological attempts to appropriate postmodern trends for the understanding of theological method have taken diverse and distinctive paths across diverse Christian traditions.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁸ Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God*, chap. Introduction: God Talk Then and Now.

¹⁶⁹ Sonderegger, ‘Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God. Acquisitions editor Michael Gibson interviews Katherine Sonderegger’

¹⁷⁰ Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God*, chap. Introduction: God Talk Then and Now.

¹⁷¹ Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘Systematic Theology: Task and Methods’, in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2nd ed edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, U.S., 2011), 52–53.

¹⁷² David F. Ford, *Theology. A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 81.

¹⁷³ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 65.

¹⁷⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘Systematic Theology: Task and Methods’, 65. In terms of theological method, this ranges from postliberal (Yale School) and postmetaphysical theology (Marion, Caputo), to deconstructive (Raschke, Caputo) and reconstructive theology (Whitehead, Kearney), to feminist and black theologies (the list is endless), and to Radical Orthodoxy (Milbank, Ward and Pickstock). See: Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

What all of these different approaches share, however, is a characteristically metamodern commitment to methodologies which can best be described as being *beyond post/modern*. From liberal, critical accounts of figures such as English Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley and Baptist, black theologian Willie James Jennings,¹⁷⁵ to more traditional accounts such as that of Anglican scholar Katherine Sonderegger, Dominican priest Aidan Nichols, or even Catholic bishop Robert Barron,¹⁷⁶ they all share the idea that neither modern nor postmodern methodologies are in itself completely sufficient when it comes to speaking (*logos*) about God (*theos*), but that these strategies are nonetheless influential, and must be addressed in speaking about God in our contemporary age. Theologians are envisioning “an alternative third way”,¹⁷⁷ displaying a metamodern, ‘informed naivety’-like attitude toward “systematic work for theology that is genuinely anchored in this day, yet speaks confidently of a Reality that is Universal, Eternal, One.”¹⁷⁸ This simultaneously opens up space – for the first time since the modern era (!) – for conceptual frameworks that mirror or reflect pre-modern sensibilities [an idea upon which I’ll elaborate shortly]. In one of his *Theses for Christian Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, Anglican theologian David F. Ford summarizes the contemporary attitude toward theology concisely as “simultaneously premodern, modern, and postmodern” – a distinctly metamodern attitude.¹⁷⁹

As such, it can be acknowledged with Coakley that “[t]oday, despite – and perhaps partly because of – the manifold objections to its very continuance in postmodern critique, systematic theology is in a remarkable state of regeneration.”¹⁸⁰ Theologians – a lot of them women – are nowadays taking up “properly ambitious” systematic theological endeavors again.¹⁸¹ Thus, we can conclude with Kärkkäinen that “the doctrine of God is alive and well at the beginning of this millennium!”¹⁸² Let us now take a closer look at these novel endeavors, categories and strategies from the perspective developed in the previous chapters, whilst keeping in mind that the metamodern lens represents an overarching framework which spans across diverging, sometimes even “contrasting” trends.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 17–18; Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, Illustrated edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2020).

¹⁷⁶ Sonderegger, ‘Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God. Acquisitions editor Michael Gibson interviews Katherine Sonderegger’; Aidan Nichols, *Chalice of God: A Systematic Theology in Outline* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012), xvi–xvii; Robert Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology: Essays on God, Liturgy, and Evangelization*, E-Book (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), chap. 7. John Henry Newman among the Postmoderns.

¹⁷⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 17–18.

¹⁷⁸ Sonderegger, ‘Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God. Acquisitions editor Michael Gibson interviews Katherine Sonderegger’.

¹⁷⁹ David F. Ford, ‘Epilogue: Twelve Theses for Christian Theology in the Twenty-First Century’, in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction To Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, 3rd edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 761.

¹⁸⁰ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 41.

¹⁸¹ Sonderegger, ‘Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God. Acquisitions editor Michael Gibson interviews Katherine Sonderegger’.

¹⁸² Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God*, chap. Introduction: God Talk Then and Now.

¹⁸³ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘Systematic Theology: Task and Methods’, 66.

VIBRANT REPETITION

Starting with the basic principle of *repetition*, which contains three significant dimensions of concrete implementation. First of all, many theologians acknowledge the recurrence of the importance of tradition, stressing the necessity to be attentive to “the ‘reception history’ of the Scriptures down the centuries,” a history and tradition “stretching back to apostolic times”, as Jesuit priest Gerald O’Collins describes it.¹⁸⁴ According to McGrath, theology has witnessed “the emergence of a ‘theology of retrieval and reappropriation’ across the entire spectrum of Christian thought” in recent years, “as theologians have realized the importance and usefulness of theological dialogue with the past.”¹⁸⁵ In this regard, postmodern thinking has been influential in reversing the modernist aversion to pre-modern sensibilities: “[n]o longer can it be seen as natural to dismiss the premodern as antiquated and irrelevant, or to assume that we have progressed beyond it.”¹⁸⁶ Thus, metamodern theology incorporates modern, post-modern but also premodern intuitions. As philosopher and dogmatic theologian Johannes Hoff points out, with the advent of modernism, the “Pre-modern blend of the sacramental (mystical) and the scientific (rational) dimensions of the divine word” fractured,¹⁸⁷ and the modern distinction between the realm of fact and the realm of value came to dominate our relation to faith.¹⁸⁸ Nowadays, however, with the metamodern reappropriation of premodern sensibilities and the re-enchantment of the world, a realm is opened up anew in which both can come together.¹⁸⁹

This ties into the second dimension of significance, which is the task of repeating the metanarrative of faith in a way that connects with the experience of contemporaries. In this context, looking back does not replace looking forward, as American Anglican theologian Kathryn Tanner asserts.¹⁹⁰ On the contrary – Coakley agrees – we can “re-evaluate” and “re-express” tradition “in ways that meet and answer some of the most difficult challenges that contemporary culture presents.”¹⁹¹ The challenge is “to rediscover the testimony of the Holy Scriptures time after time through the shared liturgical exercise of our perception, imagination, and theoretical contemplation,” analogous to the analogical and

¹⁸⁴ Gerald O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2011), 333.

¹⁸⁵ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, xxiv.

¹⁸⁶ Ford, *Theology*, 14.

¹⁸⁷ Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013), 150.

¹⁸⁸ Hoff, 193.

¹⁸⁹ Not in the sense that we are (or should) actually (be) returning to a premodern structure, but that the paradox of scientific disenchantment and religious enchantment is no longer understood as inherently problematic, hence that a structure which *mirrors* the premodern blend between the ‘scientific’ and the ‘sacramental’ is possible again. This can still take vastly different shapes. Liberal theologians regard this as a solution to overcome the previously perceived tension between the realm of science and that of religion. At the traditional side of the spectrum, however, this line of thought is employed to argue for an uncompromised (anti-‘watered down’) reading of Christ’s divinity, antithetical to liberal perceptions of Christ. See e.g.: Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, chap. 13. Announcing the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Evangelical Task within Contemporary Culture.

¹⁹⁰ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 1st edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ix.

¹⁹¹ For Coakley, this is specified as the tradition of Christian Platonism, see: Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 9. However, the same line of reasoning is employed by others with regard to tradition in the broader sense, including non-Platonist theology, see e.g.: Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God*, chap. 3. From the Medieval to the Modern Quest for God.

spiritual theology of premodern times, yet without forgetting – crucially! – to remind ourselves of the fact that, back then, “the use of the Latin language under the guidance of a male-dominated clerical elite was at the same time a political power tool that called for liberation.”¹⁹² Balancing these intuitions – critical appreciation and appreciative criticism – is what theologians are called to do today, and being able to maintain this balance in a constructive way is precisely the merit of our metamodern framework.

Finally, the principle of repetition consists of re-petitioning an appeal to (the metanarrative of faith in) God. As Kärkkäinen sees it, “a critical, appreciative rereading of Christian tradition – both biblical and historical – is needed. (...) [T]he various traditions of classical theism include more variety, dynamism, and creativity than is often acknowledged.”¹⁹³ Revivifying tradition (and Scripture) in contemporary times requires a mix of developing new ways of speaking, as well as re-enunciating ancient, dusted off jargon. Catholic theologians Frederick C. Bauerschmidt and James J. Buckley summarize it excellently:

Theology is never simply the repetition of dogmas. How could it be, since the beliefs and practice upon which it reflects are woven into the fabric of our lives? At the same time, it is not a private reverie in which we mull over our pet theories about God.¹⁹⁴

What is needed is a continuous dynamic of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* – that beautiful blend of tasks which characterized Vaticanum II. In the words of Barron: taking contemporary culture in whilst adapting and corralling it to make it “ancillary to classical Christianity,” as the “*ressourcement* masters – de Lubac, Balthasar, Ratzinger, [and] Daniélou” attempted to do.¹⁹⁵ Perhaps, in this day and age, that even includes reimagining the discipline in terms of *post-systematic theology*, as Protestant theologian recently Markus Mühling proposed in an ongoing, multi-volume project – I will return to this idea in paragraph III.II.¹⁹⁶

Whereas *ressourcement* predominantly reflects the principle of repetition, *aggiornamento* is inherently tied up with the basic principle of *vibrancy*.¹⁹⁷ First of all, in its etymological dimension (*vibrare*), vibrancy denotes the oscillatory dynamic, which sprouts in the work of many theologians. Some appreciate the inherent contrast between unity and diversity or pluralism as a ‘basic ambiguity’,¹⁹⁸ which can be understood as “the unfolding of the richness and creativity of biblical narratives,

¹⁹² Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, 147.

¹⁹³ Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God*, chap. Epilogue: The Future of God-Talk in the Third Millennium.

¹⁹⁴ Frederick C. Bauerschmidt and James J. Buckley, *Catholic Theology: An Introduction*, 1st edition (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 4.

¹⁹⁵ Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, chap. 8. Biblical Interpretation and Theology: A Meditation on Irenaeus, Modernity, and Vatican II.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Storm’s conceptualization of metamodernism as a *non-system system*. Markus Mühling, *Post-Systematic Theology: Ways of Thinking - a Theological Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill Fink, 2020), 11.

¹⁹⁷ As becomes obvious here, by describing the theological task with the basic principle(s) of *vibrant repetition* – the synthesis of the two basic principles – I have brought the tasks of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* together, based on the conviction that these tasks should, in fact, be fundamentally connected to each other.

¹⁹⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘Systematic Theology: Task and Methods’, 50.

testimonies, and disputes about Yahweh and the Father of Jesus Christ.”¹⁹⁹ Others highlight the “tension” between “the mystery of God and (...) God’s good creation” that is united in Jesus Christ,²⁰⁰ and which reflects “a fundamental tension within our existence” that is taken up in traditional theology through the polarities of “body and soul”, “flesh and spirit”, “human freedom” and “God’s grace”, and in the “already-but-not-yet character of the kingdom and its mysterious growth within human history.”²⁰¹ Philosopher of religion and Anglican priest Graham Ward ascribes the ceaseless appearance of these tensions to the idea that God is love, and that “the economy of love is kenotic.” According to him, the oscillatory dynamic points toward “difference, alterity, and distance” as inherent elements of “the substructure of creation,” hence the continual emergence of paradoxes.²⁰² Notwithstanding the fact that a substantial number of scholars would argue against this emphasis on *difference*,²⁰³ highlighting the *unity* of God instead, almost all contemporary theologians acknowledge the importance of these tensions and seem to agree on the idea that they are vibrant points of interest, pointing toward God.

Secondly, theologians are highlighting the liveliness of (the metanarrative of faith in) God, as opposed to “a ‘bare’ God, stripped of biblical concreteness or particularity,” or to “a Deity of ‘abstractness’ and ‘remoteness’ from creation. Exactly not that!” Sonderegger stresses.²⁰⁴ Oftentimes emphasizing the importance of theology in concrete experience, which might be understood as a response to the postmodern devotion to immanence and to critiques against modernist ivory-tower academia, theologians across the entire spectrum of denominations have embraced vibrant conceptuality. This ranges from (Anglican) appeals to “the Living God, the Eternal Fire, Holy and Free,”²⁰⁵ to (Pentecostal) preoccupations with the workings of the Holy Spirit, which works “immediately – both instantaneously and directly, without any obvious mediating forms – in exceptional events,”²⁰⁶ and so on. In this context, Mühling’s explanation of the origins of the use of the term ‘system’ in ‘systematic theology’ is exemplary, since he explains that ‘system’ was originally understood in the sense of a *techné*: an art of presentation based on knowledge and for the sake of a fruitful life,” making theology first and foremost “a practical science that is directed to the end of salvation for humans.”²⁰⁷

In line with that, thirdly, it is an indispensable part of the theological task of vibrant repetition to be attentive to the concrete experience of human life; to “continually cross boundaries between theory and practice, sophisticated methods and ordinary understanding, precise technical terms and commonsense meanings,” as Ford puts it, in order “to keep in touch with the realities of what life is like

¹⁹⁹ Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God*, chap. 3. From the Medieval to the Modern Quest for God.

²⁰⁰ Ford, *Theology*, 82.

²⁰¹ Bauerschmidt and Buckley, *Catholic Theology*, 367.

²⁰² Graham Ward, ‘Postmodern Theology’, in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction To Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David Ford and Rachel Muers, 3rd edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 335.

²⁰³ E.g.: Katherine Sonderegger, ed., *Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015).

²⁰⁴ Sonderegger, ‘Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God. Acquisitions editor Michael Gibson interviews Katherine Sonderegger’.

²⁰⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁰⁶ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 274.

²⁰⁷ Mühling, *Post-Systematic Theology*, 3.

for billions of religious people and others who are trying to answer theological questions.”²⁰⁸ Coakley summarizes it concisely:

[T]he task of theology is always, if implicitly, *a recommendation for life*. The vision it sets before one invites ongoing – and sometimes disorienting – response and change, both personal and political, in relation to God.”²⁰⁹

Crucially, this doesn't mean that theologians should proclaim exactly what the people want to hear – at times, a recommendation for life can be 'disorienting' or outright confronting – but it does mean that theologians should be aware of the fact that the vision they set before the people takes the shape (if implicitly) of an invitation to 'ongoing response and change in relation to God'. Here, postmodern thinking can be instructive when it comes to “its mixture of popular and 'high' culture,”²¹⁰ as well as its focus on practices,²¹¹ since these features help cross the boundaries between theology and public.²¹² Inspired by postmodern intuitions and the reopened space for premodern sensibilities, multiple theologians have propagated a re-appreciation of *desire* as a crucial concept for the vitality of theology.²¹³ As Jennings puts it, theological endeavors should be “deeply embedded in a desire to see God change the lives of those around us, healing the sick, delivering the captives, overturning the powers that be, and raising the dead to new life. That desire to see a changed world must be allowed to find its connection to the desire for one another.”²¹⁴ Beyond theological implications and interpretations, this predominantly goes to show the importance of establishing solid connections between theological endeavors and the concrete realm of human life. That is ultimately what vibrant repetition entails.

RESONANCE, DIALOGICALITY AND COMMUNITY

In the previous chapter, I described *resonance*, first of all, as what happens when the external, transcendent 'force' of God starts to manifest itself within the realm of immanence.²¹⁵ The problem of

²⁰⁸ Ford, *Theology*, 14–15.

²⁰⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 18.

²¹⁰ Ford, *Theology*, 14–15.

²¹¹ “Claims about what Catholics believe (...) are inseparable from practices (...). The meaning of our talk and reflection is only made clear in relation to the practices that accompany them, and vice versa.” Bauerschmidt and Buckley, *Catholic Theology*, xvi.

²¹² Again, this highlights “the liturgy as a key locus for theology and Church,” as a vital place of interaction with God, Scripture and tradition. Nichols, *Chalice of God*, xviii. See also: Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, chap. 8. Biblical Interpretation and Theology: A Meditation on Irenaeus, Modernity, and Vatican II.

²¹³ For example, Sarah Coakley employs (the ambivalent interaction between human and divine) desire as the foundation of her *théologie totale*, which includes an analysis of *desire* in Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, see: Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*. And Johannes Hoff, in his narrative of Cusa's theology as an instructive framework for rethinking modernity, states that: “Cusa's use of the biblical concept of love preserves the depth of its meaning, one that simultaneously comprises the connotations of *erotic desire* (ἔρως, *amor*), friendship (φιλία, *amicitia*), and charity (ἀγάπη, *dilectio, caritas*.)” [emph. added]. See: Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, 194.

²¹⁴ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 25.

²¹⁵ In recent years, a number of theological publications on resonance appeared, see e.g.: Niels Henrik Gregersen, ‘Resilient selves: A theology of resonance and secularity’, *Dialog: a Journal of Theology*, (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12568>; Erik Olsman, ‘Resonance in a Theopoetics of Practice in Practical Theology’, *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 26(2), (2022): 311-328. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2021-0031>; Joanna

post/modernism is that it failed “to maintain the two [transcendence and immanence] in productive tension,” systematically underexposing either one of them.²¹⁶ What is needed is a vibrant tension between “the God of blessed intimacy (divine immanence) and the God who, ‘if you comprehend him, is not God’ (divine transcendence).”²¹⁷ It is generally agreed upon by theologians that “the divine and the human” converge in Christ, and, as a result, that “Jesus can be seen as key to the pattern that organizes the whole, even while God’s ways remain beyond our grasp,” as Tanner asserts.²¹⁸ With the resurgence of transcendence in our metamodern structure of feeling, Christ can be appreciated not only as truly human, but also as truly divine – again.²¹⁹

Hence, the times have changed, albeit slightly, since American Evangelical theologian Donald G. Bloesch wrote (in 1995):

A new immanentism is displacing the transcendentalism that has hitherto characterized both Catholic and Protestant theology. The emphasis today is not on the almightiness of God but on his vulnerability. Attention is given to God’s empathy with the world rather than his majesty, his pathos rather than his infinite beatitude. The idea of a suffering God is supplanting the idea of an impassible God, vigorously defended in Christian tradition. God is no longer the infinite supreme being beyond world history but now “the Infinite in the finite” (Schleiermacher). God is no longer a static Infinite but now a dynamic Infinite (...) the mystery of the cosmic process itself.²²⁰

Today, a lot of the qualities of this ‘new immanentism’, which essentially functioned as the postmodern correction of derailed modernist ‘transcendentalism’, continue to be influential, but they are being appropriated anew within more balanced frameworks, in which divine immanence is kept in a productive tension with divine transcendence. The insistence of God as an existential encounter, however, as it has for example been conceptualized by Catholic philosopher John D. Caputo, continues to be unabatedly important, in the sense that it points toward the intersection between the transcendent and the immanent as an event which resonates in the concrete lives of human beings, as the sacred is sensed.²²¹

According to Catholic theologian Paul D. Murray, one particular element of what could be described [in my words] as this theological ‘turn to experience’, is that “Christian spiritual maturity is no longer viewed simply as an esoteric pursuit of the few, but as the normal path.”²²² Consequently,

Tarassenko, ‘Spiritual resonance: polyphony and pneumatology in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s late theology’, *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 9(4), (2023): 1-12. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2023.v9n4.a1>

²¹⁶ Underexposing immanence in modernism and transcendence in postmodernism. John R. Betz, ‘The Analogia Entis as a Standard of Catholic Engagement: Erich Przywara’s Critique of Phenomenology and Dialectical Theology’, *Modern Theology* 35, no. 1 (2019): 91–92, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12462>.

²¹⁷ As in the work of Augustine. Betz, 91–92.

²¹⁸ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, loc. Back Cover.

²¹⁹ As is done by figures such as Robert Barron, see: Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, chap. 13. Announcing the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Evangelical Task within Contemporary Culture.

²²⁰ Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 17–18. Cited from: Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God*, chap. Epilogue: The Future of God-Talk in the Third Millennium.

²²¹ John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

²²² Paul D. Murray, ‘Roman Catholic Theology after Vaticanum II’, in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction To Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David Ford and Rachel Muers, 3rd edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 275.

postmodernism has opened up space “especially [for] the interior individual experiences of believers,”²²³ experiences of being “attuned to God, fruitfully engaged with the divine mystery, and capable of seeing something of value.”²²⁴ As such, resonance is an influential characteristic when it comes to the metamodern theological task of ‘re-sounding’ the metanarrative of faith in God.²²⁵

When it comes to *dialogicality*, secondly, multiple scholars have emphasized the importance of dialogue when it comes to our relation to knowledge and truth, in the words of Schüssler Fiorenza: the “dialogical and communal understanding of truth that emphasizes the significance of communities of discourse.”²²⁶ As Mühling summarizes it: “whereas we abandon totality, we retain and stress relationality. Our concern is therefore a kind of relationality that does not reduce irreducible difference and alterity to unity, but allows them to appear together and remain.”²²⁷ The point is that truth, including the truth of Christ, is something to be ascertained in dialogue: “conversation is necessarily ingredient in the process of coming to truth, precisely because we know only by intuiting the essence of a thing through the successive viewing of a manifold of appearances. It is only in the intersubjective sharing of perspectives that the fullness of truth comes gradually, if asymptotically, into view.”²²⁸ As such, theology is always in dialogue. With Scripture and tradition, but also with philosophy.²²⁹ And of course, ultimately with God, as a personal entity.²³⁰

This intrinsically contains the inevitability of what O’Collins calls “an apophatic awareness [which] always experiences a sense of incompleteness, a feeling that there is ‘something more’, and [which] never loses its sense that what it does not know far surpasses the little truth it may have glimpsed.”²³¹ Then again, this apophatic sensibility does not deny that “God wants to give us the fullness of God’s own life through *the closest possible relationship* with us as that comes to completion in Christ,”²³² nor that God is just a mere person, to speak with Sonderegger: “Almighty God, we say, is both Object and Subject (...) Deity is Mystery: hidden, invisible, transcendent Mystery. The Objectivity of God closes the intellect up in wonder. (...) [Yet] God is also Subject, also Person and alive.”²³³ It merely signifies that “[w]ho God is can never be eclipsed, nor set aside, nor undermined in proper Christian dogmatics.”²³⁴ This is what it means to relate to otherness, in dialogue. And thus, ideally, “[t]heology is practiced

²²³ Also: “The term “spirituality” has gained wide acceptance in the recent past as the preferred way of referring to [these aspects].” McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 93.

²²⁴ O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 340.

²²⁵ In light of the previously discussed re-appreciation of the premodern, one suggestion for this task could be “to cite St. Augustine’s advice to biblical scholars that ‘they should pray in order to understand’.” O’Collins, 341.

²²⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘Systematic Theology: Task and Methods’, 71.

²²⁷ Mühling, *Post-Systematic Theology*, 11.

²²⁸ Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, chap. 7. John Henry Newman among the Postmoderns.

²²⁹ O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 334.

²³⁰ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 91.

²³¹ O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 337.

²³² Emphasis added. Tanner, *Christ the Key*, vii.

²³³ Sonderegger, ‘Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God. Acquisitions editor Michael Gibson interviews Katherine Sonderegger’, xii–xiii.

²³⁴ *Ibidem*.

collegially, in conversation,”²³⁵ for, at the same time, constructive dialogue between informed and qualified theologians prevents us not “to devolve into idle, and finally unproductive, academic chatter.”²³⁶ Dialogicality signifies that we’ll never reach a ‘total’ understanding, yet that at least together we can try, for the sake of developing ways to construct and maintain a personal relationship to God and His mysterious ways.

Finally, the metamodern characteristic of *community* can be discerned in the myriad of different contemporary appraisals of this notion, which has been integral to Christians throughout the centuries. Theology should always take place within a community, be it ecclesial, intellectual, or both.²³⁷ First and foremost, communities consists of a plurality of identities, as opposed to one particular, shared identity. In the words of Kärkkäinen: “[t]here is a plurality of testimonies concerning God and God’s relationship with humans, beginning from the biblical testimonies; rather than suppressing that plurality, we need to listen carefully to the rich symphony of voices.”²³⁸ Following Jennings, we could call these voices ‘fragments’: “God works with these fragments, moving in the spaces between them to form communion with us. The fragments facilitate communion.”²³⁹ At the same time, interactions within communities do create interconnections and commonalities, since “dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were,” as Gadamer reminds us.²⁴⁰ Christian communion is ultimately oriented towards a common, “elusive goal,” which is a “life in a place of communion” with Christ and with each other.²⁴¹ In line with that, pursuing ecumenicity can be regarded as an integral part of a communal approach to theology.²⁴² As Schüssler Fiorenza notes, “[t]he patristic conception is of the church as a *communio* and that we Christians are in communion with each other through our communion with Christ in the Eucharist.”²⁴³

Importantly, this communion is an embodied actuality, brought to live in sacraments, rituality and habits. Rather than by gathering around a specific, dogmatic worldview, communities are shaped by “the exercise of habits”, and above all “the habit of love”, as Hoff reminds us with Cusa: “[t]he habit of love no longer requires the truth-seeking mind to decide about what is true in advance.(...) Instead

²³⁵ Ford, ‘Epilogue: Twelve Theses for Christian Theology in the Twenty-First Century’, 761.

²³⁶ Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, chap. 7. John Henry Newman among the Postmoderns.

²³⁷ According to, among others: Sonderegger, ‘Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God. Acquisitions editor Michael Gibson interviews Katherine Sonderegger’.; Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, chap. 7. John Henry Newman among the Postmoderns. That being said, it is important to elaborate on this notion, however, since it is not always evident what this entails, especially in the context of our Western, individualized societies.

²³⁸ Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God*, chap. Introduction: God Talk Then and Now.

²³⁹ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 37.

²⁴⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 371.

²⁴¹ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 47–48.

²⁴² e.g. by encouraging a “reunion with Constantinople and (...) Christians formed by the patrimony of Anglicanism,” see: Nichols, *Chalice of God*, xviii. Or by reconsidering “the supposed gulf between early ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ views of the Trinity,” see: Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 3–4. Or by tracing our history and tradition “back to apostolic times,” giving “the Church her identity as a community that continues to proclaim ‘the faith that comes to us from the apostles’,” see: O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 333.

²⁴³ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘Systematic Theology: Task and Methods’, 72.

of subjecting the human intellect to the thinking patterns of rational second-order conjectures, the habit of love authorizes it to ‘walk along on its own (...), leaving behind the weakness and blindness which forced it to lean on the walking stick of reason.’²⁴⁴ It is within communities as loci of embodied communion that these habits are cultivated, and simultaneously, that a relationship with a specific social-historical context and external communities is cultivated. This calls theologians “to take into account the plurality of cultures and experiences and the necessity of learning from one another.”²⁴⁵ The core conviction behind this attitude is the idea that the truth of faith is principally available to all. In the words of O’Collins:

This means that Christians, and – specifically – Christian theologians should expect that, in the faith and practice of every human being, Christ and the Spirit will, at some point, have something to say to them. (...) A properly ecumenical spirit involves being always open to learning from all others and to hearing Christ and the Holy Spirit speaking through them. In short, being ecumenical amounts to being open *to God in others*.²⁴⁶

III.II A NEW OUTLOOK FOR SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Having discussed how current theological endeavors have already (to a large extent) been shaped by metamodern intuitions, the question is now raised what the future of the discipline will look like. Of course, we can never know – and God’s ways are mysterious – but a few indicators can be discerned in theologians’ predictions and recommendations for the future of the discipline.

In terms of content, I submit that the above-discussed properties of metamodern theology will continue to be influential supposedly for the duration of ‘the metamodern era’. Schüssler Fiorenza remarks: “[t]he shift that is taking place is a move away from method to *substantial* [concrete] issues and to issues reflecting the *impact* [resonance] that the *concrete* beliefs and *pluralist* views [dialogue] are having on theology.”²⁴⁷ In addressing education, Jennings also mentions multiple properties at once: “to imagine new *conversations* [dialogue] that open up a shared exploration into the *desire* for *communion* [community] that is intended to *vivify* [vitalize] theological education.”²⁴⁸ On the other side of the spectrum, someone like Barron conceptualizes ‘God’, ‘liturgy’ and ‘evangelization’ as the major topics for exploring contemporary Catholic Theology,²⁴⁹ which are admittedly general theological topics, but which nonetheless point to the importance of relating God to the practices of liturgy and to the task of re-enunciating the metanarrative of faith in God [evangelization] – as explicitly discussed above. All in all, in our metamodern era, the time is ripe for theologians to speak out, claiming a spot at the table of public dialogue, without ‘soft-peddalling the resurrection’, or ‘demythologizing’ and ‘domesticating’ it, as Barron suggests.²⁵⁰ Our world might be more open to religious re-enchantment than we thought.²⁵¹

²⁴⁴ Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, 197–98. Citation from Nicholas of Cusa, *De dato patris luminum*, c. 5 n. 119, 6-8.

²⁴⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘Systematic Theology: Task and Methods’, 73.

²⁴⁶ O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 338–39.

²⁴⁷ Emphasis added. Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘Systematic Theology: Task and Methods’, 75.

²⁴⁸ Emphasis added. Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 139.

²⁴⁹ These topics make up the subtitle of: Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*.

²⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, chap. 13. Announcing the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Evangelical Task within Contemporary Culture.

²⁵¹ Dutch theologian Kees van Ekris recently brought up that, to his surprise, he had received the advice from secular people to publicly “cite a passage from the Bible every now and then, to explore how this text which is holy

That is, provided that theologians find ways to connect to this contemporary sensibility. Part of this quest might be to reimagine the shape of the systematic theology, since the postmodern aversion against ‘systematicity’ and meaning-claims is still influential in metamodernism – albeit with a diluted intensity, kept in balance by an ‘informed naivety’-attitude towards metanarratives. In this context, Mühling’s project on *post-systematic theology* might be an inspiring initiative, especially given the fact that his main point is to rethink systematicity according to the idea of crossing the boundaries between theory and practice: theology is a “practical science” characterized by relationality, and practiced “for the sake of a fruitful life” and the “salvation of humans”.²⁵² Letting go of the ‘modernist’ conception of systematicity might also be helpful in overcoming “[m]odern distinctions between apologetics, spirituality, pastoral care, and systematic theology” which, according to McGrath, “were not known to pre-Enlightenment thinkers, who saw these as distinct yet interconnected aspects of theology as a whole.”²⁵³ As I have tried to demonstrate from the very start of this thesis, “systematic theology does not operate in a watertight compartment, isolated from other intellectual developments.”²⁵⁴ It is inherently connected to other (theological) disciplines, beyond the modernist ‘barriers’ which are supposed to delineate it. Then again, at times these borders do indeed incentivize useful frameworks for the demarcation of theological endeavors, implying that theologians should not discard these categories too easily. Discernment is key. And it works like a pendulum – who would have guessed?! – moving back and forward.

III.III A NEW OUTLOOK ON AND FOR PUBLIC RELEVANCE

In general, this thesis is rooted in the conviction that theology must always (if implicitly) be engaged with culture, as becomes obvious for example in the decision to work our way *in* from metamodern theory to systematic theology, based on metamodernism as a description of our current structure of feeling. Crucially, this does not apply only to public theologians or pastoral workers, but to everyone, explicitly including systematic (and dogmatic and fundamental) theologians. As such, this endeavor is itself the result of a development which bears traces of the postmodern focus on the particular and lived experience, and which hasn’t disappeared in metamodernism: the theological “need to inculturate theology in particular settings.”²⁵⁵ O’Collins explains: “In the late twentieth century theological concern became more focused on the need to ‘be local’: (...) [t]heologians need to grapple with the question: how can I express the Christian message through the traditions, symbols, and language(s) that shape my particular culture?”²⁵⁶

Of course, connecting theory to practice has been an element of Christianity and theology from the very beginning, but the increased focus on particular, specific matters of research (as opposed to overarching and general endeavors), combined with the increasing cultural pluralism, has raised the

to you, connects to, and provides a new perspective on, the matter in question.” (my transl.) Kees van Ekris, ‘Kroniek van Kees – December 2023’, IZB, accessed 14-05-2024, via: <https://www.izb.nl/theoloog-des-vaderlands>

²⁵² Mühling, *Post-Systematic Theology*, 3.

²⁵³ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 89.

²⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵⁵ O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 339.

²⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

importance of (and awareness for) this element – up to the point that it is more significant today than in (pre)modern theology. At the same time, in our current world, “[t]he pluralism of the culture,” according to Schüssler Fiorenza, signifies that, “one can no longer expect a synthesis between theology and culture.”²⁵⁷ Theology must be relevant to people, without the expectation (or even hope) of returning to a premodern, explicitly and intrinsically religious, cultural landscape. To be sure, it must be stressed again that the task of cultural engagement – being relevant – does not at all obstruct critical perspectives. It merely calls theologians to consciously be open to dialogical engagement with contemporary culture.

So, what does this public relevance consist of, now and in the future? First of all, the metamodern framework is instructive in addressing and correcting the excesses of modernism. According to Tanner, it is up to theologians “to provide, not so much a theoretical argument for Christianity’s plausibility, as an account of how Christianity could be part of the solution, rather than simply part of the problem, on matters of great human moment that make a life-and-death difference to people, especially the poor and the oppressed.”²⁵⁸ Part of this task is to address, as Ford calls it, “the deepest and most controversial issues of our times – race, gender, colonialism, liberation,”²⁵⁹ and, regarding dialogicality and community, to be sensitive to those “whose voices have not been properly heard in the discourse,” in the words of Kärkkäinen.²⁶⁰ At the same time, the metamodern framework enables theologians to be sensitive to the excesses of postmodernism, such as extreme relativism, particularism and nihilism.²⁶¹ And beyond that, as noted before, the metamodern framework might even enable theologians to identify and address excesses tied up with the metamodern era itself.

In general, the tension of post/modernism – captured within the metamodern framework – urges theology “to be self-critical in its service to God, to humanity, and to nature.”²⁶² This is important for the public relevance of the discipline, since a self-critical stance (or at least a healthy dose of self-awareness) is a critical part of the intuition of contemporary, metamodern subjects. This task extends beyond the service to humanity, and includes the vitality of nature, i.e. creation, which is just as much a deep and controversial issue of our time, in need of being addressed by theologians (as someone like the (eco)feminist theologian Anne M. Clifford reminds us).²⁶³ That being said, importantly, this self-critical vantage point is not a *goal in itself*, and it should not obscure the ultimate concern of theology, which is to proclaim the truth of Christ – “the key to happiness, to full human flourishing.”²⁶⁴ Rather, a self-critical attitude is a *means*, simultaneously protecting us from idolatry, through which to confess

²⁵⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘Systematic Theology: Task and Methods’, 51.

²⁵⁸ Kathryn Tanner, “Shifts in Theology over the Last Quarter Century,” *Modern Theology* 26 (2010): 39–44. Cited from: Schüssler Fiorenza, 75.

²⁵⁹ David Ford and Rachel Muers, eds., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction To Christian Theology Since 1918*, 3rd edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), ix.

²⁶⁰ Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God*, chap. Epilogue: The Future of God-Talk in the Third Millennium.

²⁶¹ Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, chap. 7. John Henry Newman among the Postmoderns.

²⁶² Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘Systematic Theology: Task and Methods’, 54.

²⁶³ Anne M. Clifford, ‘Creation’, in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 274, 250.

²⁶⁴ Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, chap. 13. Announcing the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Evangelical Task within Contemporary Culture.

“the highest of paradoxes,” in the words of Barron: “the image of Jesus pinioned to the cross, in the agonies of death, [as] a picture of true freedom and richest humanism.”²⁶⁵ Ultimately, this is the message of Christian theology to the world. The vibrant metanarrative of faith in God, with Christ at its center, as a vital recommendation for all of life. As such, a new outlook on and for the public relevance of metamodern systematic theology has become clear. I discern a call to continue opening, *in an affirmative but critical manner*, the gates that have been fencing off the bastion of systematic theology.

²⁶⁵ Ibidem.

FINE

CONCLUSION

And so we have come to the end – the musical *fine* succeeding the *coda* – of this initial exploration of metamodernism as a new paradigm for systematic theology. I will concisely summarize the most important contents of this thesis here, thereby providing an answer to the research question:

How can we understand the metamodern structure of feeling as the key to a new paradigm for systematic theology?

This endeavor began by identifying the three dimensions of metamodernism, based on the major publications in metamodern theory: it is (1) the contemporary *structure of feeling*, (2) a *heuristic label* for the interpretation of this structure of feeling, and (3) a descriptive framework which can *prescriptively* inform scholarly reflection. Approached from a distinctly theological perspective, it turned out that five features of the metamodern framework are particularly suited for a dialogue with (systematic) theology. Those are: *the return to metanarratives*, a central dynamic of *oscillatory overcoming*, an *ambiguous* attitude towards *transcendence*, a *dialogical* understanding of *reality*, and, finally, a profound awareness of *pluralistic identities*.

Advancing the significance of these features in a process of conceptual integration, five elemental properties of metamodern theology appeared: the basic principles of *repetition* and *vibrancy* (integrated as *vibrant repetition*), and the fundamental characteristics of *resonance*, *dialogicality* and *community*. Together, the basic principle(s) and the fundamental characteristics constitute the general structure of metamodern theology. This is to say that, on the one side, contemporary systematic theology is already to a large extent informed by this underlying structure, both in terms of shape and of contents (as has been demonstrated by an anthology of major publications in recent systematic theology); and, on the other, that theologians would be well-advised to take this structure into account when it comes to the shape and content of their future endeavors (no matter if it concerns practical/empirical, or theoretical/systematic work). For this structure reveals the paradigm which determines the boundaries of meaningfulness in our time.

In summary, it has become clear that the metamodern structure of feeling contains various distinguishing elements which, in one way or another, intersect with (systematic) theological endeavors, and which are therefore particularly suited for an exploration of a currently emerging paradigm in systematic theology. Over the course of this thesis, this has allowed for a conception of systematic theology which is particularly engaged with other disciplines, as well as (in different shapes and forms, in a critical but affirmative manner) with the contemporary world and the people who constitute it and its culture – in all its plurality. As such, it has become clear why the introduction of metamodern theology as a new paradigm for systematic theology is an inspiring, promising, and perhaps even necessary step for contemporary academic theology, as has been my central thesis. It is *inspiring* in the sense that the metamodern paradigm allows for new manners of interpretation and exploration of the principal sources for (systematic) theologians – Scripture, tradition, reason and experience – thereby inspiring novel perspectives on central Christian doctrines. It is *promising* (beyond the fact that it paints a rather optimistic picture for the future relevance of theology) in the sense that the metamodern

theological paradigm seems to establish a fruitful, new outlook on developments that are currently going on in systematic theology, whilst simultaneously providing, at least potentially, a new impetus for the increased blossoming of the discipline. Finally, it is *perhaps even necessary* in the sense that “[i]f we are indeed moving into a metamodern world, then religion and the academic study of religion will be both part of that move and be affected by it,” obliging theologians to be aware of the metamodern paradigm in their work.²⁶⁶ As such, it has ultimately become clear why it is time for us to face the truth of metamodern theology; to face the Truth of Christ, as theologians have indeed always attempted to do, but to do so in a novel spirit today – the spirit of metamodern theology.

DISCUSSION

Presumably (or, as I presume, undoubtedly) this thesis has given rise to a number of questions and thoughts. Therefore, prior to leaving you – the reader – behind at the bibliography, I deemed it relevant to include a brief discussion of critical notes.

One of the first striking observations is the so-to-speak ‘rhapsodian character’ of this project, both when it comes to the conceptual integration and to its concrete implementation. It is true that I decided to propose a very particular conceptual path, moving *from* metamodern theory *to* theology (but also back again, in II.II), which therefore undeniably shapes my description of systematic theology. Also, the rather broad and overarching approach to this endeavor at times presented the danger of obscuring its concrete dimensions (which are definitely part of the project – let there be no doubt about that (!) – but perhaps a little underexposed). That being said, both of these traits are the result of conscious decisions. As stressed multiple times, it has been my principal aim to establish the idea of metamodern theology as an overarching framework, by presenting an initial exploration of the points of intersection between metamodern theory and systematic theology. Hence, for a project of this size and scope, it is inevitable that not each and every component of the metamodern theological structure is discussed in as much depth as would theoretically be possible.

The merit of this thesis is the establishment of a conceptual dialogue which creates a web of interconnected ideas and perspectives, as opposed to an exhaustive analysis of each of these components in particular. I have tried, of course, to provide as much depth and detail as the instructions concerning the clarity and readability of a project like this allow, but that doesn’t change the fact that multiple components of this exploration could (and perhaps should) be taken up in future endeavors. Additional interpretations of the metamodern sensibility could be employed to formulate additional characteristics (even though I do believe to have highlighted the three fundamental ones). The respective relationships of the discourses of post-secularity, re-enchantment, and atheism to the metamodern theological paradigm should be developed more extensively. Obviously, the metamodern anthology of current systematic theological endeavors should be broadened and deepened, in order to further demonstrate the viability and relevance of the structure. And these are just three examples.

When it comes to the overarching structure of the metamodern theological paradigm in general, it would be interesting to analyze how this framework relates to existing taxonomies e.g. on

²⁶⁶ Clasquin-Johnson, ‘Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism’, 10.

theological method, and on the relationship between theology and culture. It would be interesting to discuss how a metamodern approach to theology would appreciate the difference between *apologetic*, *correlational* and *liberation* approaches to theological method,²⁶⁷ or, as another example, how the distinction between the five strategies of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951) would be assessed from a metamodern theological perspective.²⁶⁸ It is my contention that the metamodern theological paradigm transcends particular methodologies, and hence that it can be discerned as much in an 'apologetic *Christ-and-Culture-in-paradox*'-, as in a 'correlational *Christ-of-Culture*'-approach. Besides, the metamodern theological paradigm might serve to devise new 'taxonomies' – if they can still be called that, then – better equipped for incorporating the ambiguities of theological endeavors into heuristic frameworks. That being said, whilst the way I presented the metamodern theological framework in this thesis principally leaves multiple options open, I have consciously presented it in a way which makes it seem more closely aligned to the rather optimistic, *Christ-transforming-Culture*-like approach of public theologians, rather than to the dismissive, *Christ-against-Culture*-like approach of contemporary strands like Radical Orthodoxy.²⁶⁹

On a different note, it would be interesting to reflect on qualities such as the principal ontology and epistemology behind the metamodern theological paradigm (and to discern whether or not these could indeed be explained in singular terms), for example by addressing Storm's proposals for metamodern *process social ontology*, *hylosemiotics*, and *zetetic knowledge*.²⁷⁰ Yet another point of elaboration would be the implications of the metamodern theological paradigm for each of the central dogmatic treatises of systematic theology – as well as their interconnection. With that, however, we have reached the core occupation of metamodern systematic theology, which is necessarily to be taken up by other theologians, if indeed, they are willing to embrace the idea of metamodern theology.

This brings us to another important note, however, which is the use of the term 'metamodernism'. After all, it remains to be seen whether or not 'metamodern' will turn out to be the best term for the description of our current structure of feeling, and whether or not the metamodern characteristics I used as my starting point will indeed turn out to be the defining characteristics of our time. Only time will tell. I have decided to side with Vermeulen and Van den Akker in the usage of the term 'metamodernism' since it allowed me to establish a conceptual dialogue with metamodern theory, and, as

²⁶⁷ As described approximately by Daniel L. Migliore, in Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3rd edition, E-Book (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2014), chap. Methods of Asking Theological Questions.; Or by Hans Frei (types 2-4) in *Types of Christian Theology*, from: Ford, *Theology*, 24–29. Or by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza in Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Systematic Theology: Task and Methods', 26–49.

²⁶⁸ Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers Inc., 1951).

²⁶⁹ Since I think that the elemental properties of the metamodern theological paradigm tend to advocate a more constructive fashion of engagement with culture. That being said, this doesn't change the fact that, in itself, engagement with contemporary culture can take many, diverging shapes – it is a spectrum; from entirely dismissive (or even hostile) to completely accepting and everything in between. For the opposition between public theology and Radical Orthodoxy, see: Anne Siebesma, 'Public Theology and the Doctrine of God', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Public Theology*, ed. Christoph Hübenal and Christiane Alpers (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2022), 268–70.

²⁷⁰ Storm, *Metamodernism. The Future of Theory*.

mentioned, since I believe that the term ‘metamodernism’ is the most promising competitor.²⁷¹ But it might very well be the case that future historians will describe our current era differently. Even though this is, of course, a literal problem for the idea of ‘metamodern’ theology, I believe the potential damage is limited to semantics. It won’t affect the contents of my argument – the whole project might merely need to be *retitled*.

Yet potentially *restructured* as well, which is the final observation to be addressed: the apparent paradox between advocating metamodern content whilst writing in a very ‘modernist’, systematically structured fashion. Of course, at this point I could simply point toward paradoxality as a distinctive metamodern characteristic, or to the fact that the institutional context of this master’s thesis forces me to obey certain systematic prescriptions, but in that case I would deny myself the possibility to put forward a more profound motivation: besides the fact (1) that well-structured texts are best-suited for demonstrating comprehension and for the clear conveyance of ideas, and (2) that the metamodern sensibility actually incorporates elements of the modern sensibility, which partially justifies the possibility of a ‘modernist’ structure (at least in theory); I decided to present the idea of metamodern theology as a new paradigm for systematic theology in the way I did (one could indeed say in a ‘modernist’ fashion), precisely in order to make it intelligible for those who have been educated through ‘modernist’ methods of theological *Bildung*, which concerns the major part of academic theologians and scholars, as a result of which the ‘modernistic’ language is (still) the one most widely spoken in academia. Certainly, this decision has its drawbacks, and yes, metamodern theology is characterized by distinctly different textual structures,²⁷² but crucially, my approach is entirely consistent with my aim – to provide an initial *exploration* of, hence external *introduction* into, the idea of metamodern systematic theology – and that’s my principal reason to decide upon this approach.

Ultimately, with that out of the way, the time has come to develop and advance new approaches – and I encourage theologians to do just that. I will gladly be part of this myself, but I’m even more keen to discover how others (theologians, philosophers, religious scholars and the like) appreciate and incorporate the fact that *the age of metamodern theology has arrived*.

²⁷¹ For now, ‘metamodernism’ is the best we’ve got. It is as Clasquin-Johnson remarks: “Whatever ends up as the historical label for that zeitgeist to future cultural historians may well be known by none of these terms. For our current purposes, however, metamodernism will serve as the verbal placeholder for this emerging zeitgeist.” We need such a designatory term, since “[i]f we are indeed moving into a metamodern world, then religion and the academic study of religion will be both part of that move and be affected by it.” In other words, it’s important to be aware of the developments that are transforming religion and consequently theology, as they are happening. Clasquin-Johnson, ‘Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism’, 2, 10.

²⁷² Another point of potential future considerations. Here, Sarah Coakley might be good example, for the first (introductory) volume of her *théologie totale* is not structured in a conventional fashion; it is partly shaped by an extensive discussion of the iconographic tradition of Trinitarian thought, and multiple examples are visually included in her book. See: Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*.

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