

# DO THE PSALMS SPEAK TODAY?

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In today's spiritual climate in the west might the Book of Psalms become a key entry point to the gospel of God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ? This paper is an attempt to answer that question.

Certain features of the contemporary spiritual climate in many modern societies indicate that, in seeking to impact today's sacred landscape, the Psalms face two challenges. The first is the threat that the process of secularisation will ultimately marginalise religion to the extent that it will cease to play any public role in society. The other is the phenomenon known as the 'subjective turn' which manifests itself in the growing number of people who are investigating various forms of spirituality in a search for meaning and identity. I now take a brief look at each of these phenomena in turn.

## SECULARISATION

Over the past sixty years there has been a steep decline in Europe and Australasia in traditional Christian practices. For example, in England, Scotland and Wales, taken together, church attendance fell by one-third between 1980 and 2005.<sup>1</sup> A similar trend is discernible in western Europe.<sup>2</sup> The decline is most notable among young adults.<sup>3</sup>

Sociologists attribute this decline to the secularisation of western societies.<sup>4</sup> Steve Bruce, professor of sociology in the University of

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<sup>1</sup> P. Brierley (ed.), *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 4* (London, 2003b), Table 2.24. Cf. P. Brierley and F. Macdonald, *Prospects for Scotland: From a Census of the Churches in 1984* (London/Edinburgh, 1985); P. Brierley and F. Macdonald, *Prospects for Scotland 2000: Trends and Tables the 1994 Scottish Church Census* (Edinburgh/London, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> G. Davie, *Europe—The Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> P. Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out: What the English Church Survey Reveals* (London: Christian Research, 2000), 94-5; cf. P. Brierley, *Turning the Tide: The Challenge Ahead—Report of the 2002 Scottish Church Census* (London/Edinburgh: Christian Research, 2003a); G. Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates* (Oxford, 2000), 77.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. D. Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (Oxford, 1978); S. Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford, 1996a).

Aberdeen, contends with great vigour that the process of secularisation will inevitably lead to the marginalisation, if not the disappearance, of the Christian churches. However, not all researchers agree that secularisation inevitably leads to the demise of religion. They cite the United States as an example of a highly secularised society where churches and other places of worship continue to be still relatively well attended, despite an overall downward trend in membership especially in mainline churches.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in Europe some studies suggest that religion is not so much dying as assuming new shapes as it gives way to 'spirituality'.<sup>6</sup> There are also evidences of a similar trend in the United States in the non-churchgoing population.<sup>7</sup> The *European Values Study* has found evidence that across western Europe in the 1990s belief in God, confidence in the church, and the proportion of people claiming to gain comfort from religion all increased.<sup>8</sup> Such signs of persistent religiosity have prompted Grace Davie of the University of Exeter to postulate that a 'common religion' exists among a large segment of the European population who may no longer wish to 'belong' to religious institutions, nevertheless desire to affirm some sort of faith in the supernatural.

#### THE 'SUBJECTIVE TURN'

Alongside this 'common religion' that portrays a distant affiliation with Christian churches, there is an increasing proportion of people aged 45 and over are turning to alternative forms of spirituality which are often grouped under the catch-all title of 'New Age.' Paul Heelas of the University of Lancaster describes this trend as 'self-religion' because, in his view, it reflects the 'subjective turn' that some discern to be the defining

<sup>5</sup> R. Gill, *The Myth of the Empty Church* (London, 1993), 9; W.C. Roof and W. McKinney, 'American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future' in T.E. Dowdy and P.H. McNamara (eds.), *Religion: North American Style* (New Brunswick, 1997), 68.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford, 1994); Davie, 2000; D. Hay and K. Hunt, 'Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church: A Report on the Findings of the Adults' Spirituality Project at the University of Nottingham', 2000; G. Lynch, *After Religion: 'Generation X' and the Search for Meaning* (London, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> R. Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (London, 1998); W.C. Roof, *Generation of Seekers* (Berkeley, 1994) and *Spiritual Marketplace* (Princeton, 1999); S.M. Hoover, 'Religion, Media and Identity: Theory and Method in Audience Research on Religion and Media' in J.P. Mitchell and S. Marriage (eds.), *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture* (London, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. L. Halman, *The European Values Study: A Third Wave* (Tilburgh, 2001).

cultural development in contemporary western culture.<sup>9</sup> In this 'subjective turn' people turn away from external authorities towards the autonomous self. One's unique subjective life becomes the only seat of authority as the autonomous self acts on the basis of intuition, inner promptings, the promotion of its own wellbeing, or in the response to another person's need, etc. Heelas and his co-researcher Linda Woodhead detect in the growth of such alternative spiritualise evidence of 'a tectonic shift in the sacred landscape that will prove even more significant than the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century'.<sup>10</sup>

The New Age movement is not the only context of contemporary alternative spiritualities. Tom Beaudoin, a North American Catholic analyst of religious trends, has published a study of the way North American young adults – popularly known as 'Generation X' - interact with music videos in order to search for meaning and transcendence. Beaudoin detects in Generation X popular culture 'four main religious themes that represent strands of a lived theology'. These themes are: (1) a deep suspicion of religious institutions; (2) an emphasis on the sacred nature of human experience; (3) the setting of suffering in a religious context; and (4) an exploration of faith and ambiguity. Fundamental to Beaudoin's interpretation of GenX culture are two assumptions. First, that young adults find interacting with popular culture to be a source of meaning. Second, that for them 'meaning-making' is a 'spiritual' exercise.<sup>11</sup> The first assumption represents a consensus in contemporary North American media studies, and the second is shared by many current studies on religion and media.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, these studies indicate that western churches are fulfilling their ministry in the face of two significant socio-religious trends. On the one hand, there is the secularisation of society which is attempting to

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor's analysis of contemporary culture perceives it as being characterised by a 'massive subjective turn' towards 'a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths'. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 26.

<sup>10</sup> P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford, 2005), 2.

<sup>11</sup> T. Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (London, 2002), 42.

<sup>12</sup> S.M. Hoover and K. Lundby (eds.), *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (London, 1997a) and 'Introduction: Setting the Agenda' in Hoover and Lundby, 1997b; S.M. Hoover and L.S. Clark, *Practicing Religion in the Age of Media: Explorations in Media, Religion and Culture* (New York, 2002); Mitchell and Marriage, 2003; S.M. Hoover, L. Scholfield Clark and D.F. Alters (eds.), *Media, Home and Family* (London, 2004).

marginalise religious practice by shunting it into the private sphere. On the other, there is a process of sacralisation which, in part at least, may be a reaction against the spiritual vacuum produced by secularisation, and in which new spiritualities of seeking are replacing the older and more traditional spiritualities of belonging.

#### NEW AUDIENCE FOR THE PSALMS?

In my recent doctoral research among Edinburgh University students aged 18-35, I set out to explore whether the Book of Psalms might hold some appeal for those engaged in this 'new spirituality of seeking'<sup>13</sup> and thus provide a doorway into the Bible as a whole. I invited a small and non-random sample of Edinburgh University students to undertake a daily meditative 'Psalm Journey' over a period of three weeks. Most of these respondents were on or beyond the fringe of the churches, but all expressed a degree of commitment to and involvement in exploring spirituality.

The contemporary spiritual search presents both a problem and an opportunity for the churches. The problem is that many of the new seekers pass the churches by, dismissing them as unspiritual and rationalist. The opportunity is that a growing number of people in our modern societies, dissatisfied with 'the acids of modernity,' are looking for a spiritual perspective that will enable them to find meaning and purpose in life. I set out to explore whether this contemporary spiritual search might constitute a promising new audience for the Psalms of the Bible. Do these Psalms, which Eugene Peterson – the North American writer on spiritual theology - reminds us, have been the fundamental form of spiritual exercise practised by the church for two thousand years, offer a spiritual gold mine for today's generation of seekers to explore and exploit? The potential of the Psalms can be expressed borrowing the metaphor used by Ambrose, the fourth century bishop of Milan. He called the Psalms a 'gymnasium,' which suggests that in these ancient poems spiritual seekers can find sacred health and fitness. The question I sought to answer is: Will today's spiritual seekers work the mine? Will they visit the gymnasium for daily workouts?

Reference to Ambrose illustrates Prothero's claim that the Psalms have provided 'the breviary and the viaticum of humanity' over many generations.<sup>14</sup> The long history of the Psalms as a spiritual resource commends them to a generation searching for spiritual roots. The Christian tradition

<sup>13</sup> Wuthnow, *op. cit.* 4.

<sup>14</sup> R.E. Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life* (London, 1904), 2.

goes back to our Lord himself who interpreted his calling and destiny in terms of the Psalms. It further expresses itself in St Paul's Letter to the Colossians where he exhorts his audience to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God with gratitude in their hearts (Col. 3.16). The practice was commended by Athanasius, the fourth century bishop of Alexandria who wrote:

I believe that the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of our thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter.<sup>15</sup>

The liturgical and devotional use of the Psalms was revived by Calvin in the sixteenth century. The introduction to his Commentary on the Psalms contains these words:

What various and resplendent riches are contained in this treasury, it were difficult to describe .... I have been wont to call this book, not inappropriately an anatomy of all parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.<sup>16</sup>

In our own time the North American Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann has declared that in the Psalms 'we enter into the prayer and song of common humanity.'<sup>17</sup> This claim is authenticated by many. For example, Dorothy Day, an early twentieth century protagonist for women's rights in the USA, testifies to the comfort she found in the Psalms while confined in jail for picketing the White House on behalf of women's suffrage. 'My heart swelled with joy and thankfulness for the Psalms' she writes. Another example is Brian Keenan, the Irish writer who was held hostage in Beirut, Lebanon, by a movement known as Islamic Jihad from April 1986 to August 1990. For most of this time Keenan was blindfolded and held in small, very dark rooms with no light. He was fed once a day with food being slid under the door. He tells us in his book *An Evil Cradling*: 'I found great solace in reading the Psalms. The anguished suffering mind that had created them and had cried out to God in his suffering reflected much of our own condition. Exhausted with profound questions and never finding an answer, we took relief in devotional moments.'

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<sup>15</sup> Gregg, *op. cit.* 126.

<sup>16</sup> J. Calvin, J. King (tr.), *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids, 1979b), xxxvii.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN, 1982), 16.

My earlier brief survey of the contemporary sacred landscape in the western world prompts the question: Will the secularization theory or the subjectivization thesis, or a combination of both, bring this three thousand year tradition of psalmic spirituality to an end? Projecting into the future the trends of the past fifty years may well prompt many to give an affirmative answer. On the other hand, we must take into account that trends are not necessarily prophetic, as is well illustrated by Peter Berger's forecast made to the *New York Times* in 1968 that by AD 2000 'religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture.'<sup>18</sup> Moreover, a *theological* view of the future goes beyond extrapolating from past and present trends. Jürgen Moltmann distinguishes between a sociological and theological approach. The future that is calculable by extrapolation and projection he calls *futurum*, the future that will be. He contrasts *futurum* with a second concept which he designates *adventus*, the future that comes.<sup>19</sup> Moltmann's concept of *adventus* is grounded on his theology of hope which rests on the fundamental insight of the Old Testament regarding promise and fulfilment.<sup>20</sup>

This fundamental insight finds expression in the Psalms as well as in the Prophets. Brueggemann reminds us that 'Israel's liturgy is regularly a voicing of God's alternative future that stands over against every present.'<sup>21</sup> For this reason alone it is surely appropriate to test the potential of the Psalms to challenge and possibly reverse the trends of secularist irreligion and of selfist religiosity. Trends in society are, of course, important, and are to be analysed for indications of God's purposes (cf. 1 Chronicles 12.32), but Moltmann implies that such analysis ought to be tempered by an expectation of the future, under a sovereign God, bringing something radically new which is not already contained in the present.

<sup>18</sup> Todd Johnson, 'World Christian Trends 2005', [http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/page\\_print.php](http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/page_print.php), downloaded 18/11/2005.

<sup>19</sup> J. Moltmann. *The Experiment Hope*. Ed. and tr. M.D. Meeks. (London, 1975), 52-53. J. Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*. Tr. M. Kohl. (London, 1979), 29-30. cf R. Bauckham. *Moltman: Messianic Theology in the Making*. (Basingstoke 1987), 43.

<sup>20</sup> J. Moltmann. *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. Tr. J.W. Leitch. (London, 1967), 78.

<sup>21</sup> W. Brueggemann, P.D. Miller (ed.), *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure and Theme* (Minneapolis, 1992), 53.

## ANCIENT PSALMISTS AND POSTMODERN SEEKERS

For this reason we need not be discouraged by the fact that the psalms reflect an ancient epistemology and ontology of Iron-age Israelites that differs markedly from the epistemology and ontology of those who constitute today's 'generation of seekers' in the West. Indeed, the history of Christian missions suggests that such clashes are not insurmountable, for there are many examples from different eras of the message of the Psalms (and of other parts of the Bible) speaking meaningfully and convincingly to audiences who initially thought and lived within very different frames of discourse<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, alongside this acknowledgement of the different universes of discourse inhabited by the psalmists on the one hand and contemporary 'seekers' on the other, two pieces of data from a pilot research project I conducted in preparation for my main project suggest there is an overlap between these two worlds. First, a majority of the participants in the pilot project affirmed the usefulness of the Bible in exploring spirituality; second, during the focus group discussions on the usefulness of the Bible in exploring spirituality, the psalms were spontaneously suggested as having special potential. Admittedly this evidence comes from a relatively small sample; nevertheless it points to a possible correlation between ancient psalmists and postmodern seekers.

This potential correlation raises some fascinating questions:

1. How far does the robust psalmic spirituality that holds God to account – even urging him to 'Wake up!' (Ps. 59.5) – attract those engaged in what Beaudoin<sup>23</sup> describes as the irreverent spiritual quest of Generation X?
2. How far does the dialogue between the ego and the self found in certain psalms (Pss. 42.5, 11; 43.5; 103.1, 22; 104.1; 146.1) resonate with those who speak the *lingua franca* of the New Age which Heelas<sup>24</sup> describes as self-spirituality?
3. If, as Calvin claims, the psalms vividly reveal the 'anatomy of all the parts of the [human] soul', to what extent do they resonate with those who are intent on exploring the inner self as a site where spiritual realities may be constructed?

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*. (Harmsworth, Baltimore: Ringwood, 1964).

<sup>23</sup> Beaudoin, xiii.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. (Oxford: Blackwell/Cambridge: Massachusetts, 1996, 18.

4. How far does the subversive attitude in the psalms to the dominant culture discerned by Brueggemann attract devotees of counter-cultural spirituality?<sup>25</sup>
5. How far does the plea in some psalms for healing (e.g. Ps. 38.3-10) resonate with those attracted by the therapeutic emphases in contemporary spirituality?<sup>26</sup>

I raise these questions not to attempt to answer them in this paper, but to suggest that the fact such questions can be asked presents a *prima facie* case for anticipating that the Psalms can indeed speak today.

Such questions informed my preparation of the 'popular hermeneutics' that were given to Psalm Journey participants along with the text of the psalms. The aim of these brief 'helps' was to build bridges between ancient text and contemporary audience context. Each popular hermeneutic offered some simple questions that the audience might put to the psalm in view as a self-stimulus to enter the text and to relate it to their own experience and situation. But on no occasion did the popular hermeneutic attempt to exegete the text. This was in accordance with the Bible Society tradition of providing readers' helps which encourage engagement with the text, but refrain from attempting to say what the text means<sup>27</sup>. I borrowed my terminology from Gerard Loughlin<sup>28</sup> who writes of the desirability of finding a 'minimal hermeneutic that allows the text to speak for itself'. In addition to questions designed to prompt a fusing of the horizon of the text with the horizon of the readers or users, I provided some brief annotations containing cultural information that was available to the original users of the text, but which is generally unavailable to today's users. Examples are brief explanations of terms like 'the wicked,' 'enemies,' 'Zion,' and the provision of some cross-references.

Moving from the theoretical potential of the Psalms to what they actually accomplished in the Psalm Journey, I now wish to highlight the impact made by the Journey on my respondents, and also what this may imply concerning the potential of the Psalms to become a gateway to the wider canon of Scripture. Before doing this I need to stress that my study was not longitudinal and that it focused on only six psalms. Therefore,

<sup>25</sup> Heelas, *op. cit.*, 54-8.

<sup>26</sup> Heelas, *op. cit.*, 116, 147; Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 25-7.

<sup>27</sup> P. Ellingworth, *Study Bibles: United Bible Societies Guidelines for Study Bibles*. Unpublished paper. (Reading, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> Gerald Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 77.



what follows is a brief account of the initial impact made by selected psalms over a three-week period on a small and somewhat elite sample of respondents. The findings suggest that the Psalms have a significant potential to impact today's generation of spiritual seekers in five distinct but inter-related ways.

#### REFOCUSING HUMAN SPIRITUALITY.

First, the Psalms demonstrate a potential to refocus our spirituality. We have already noted that much of today's spirituality is focused on the autonomous self. Spiritual meaning and power for many of today's seekers is sought not from on high, but from within. Meaning and enlightenment are sought in the self rather than in the soul. Eugene Peterson<sup>29</sup> argues that much contemporary spirituality 'has become widely secularised in our present culture and consequently reduced to mean simply "vitality" or "centered energy" or "hidden springs of exuberance" or "an aliveness that comes from within." Peterson<sup>30</sup> contends that 'in our current culture "soul" has given way to "self" as the term of choice to designate who and what we are. Self is the soul minus God.' In passing it might be helpfully noted that Eugene Peterson sees the focus on the self as constituting a problem in the church as well as in alternative spiritualities. He claims that the self has become the hub of much Christian spirituality even when a traditional theistic framework is retained. 'Our culture,' he writes, 'presents us with forms of prayer that are mostly self-expression .... Such prayer is dominated by a sense of self. But prayer, mature prayer is dominated by a sense of God. Prayer rescues us from a preoccupation with ourselves and pulls us into adoration and pilgrimage to God'<sup>31</sup>.

The question I want to address here is: Can the Psalms move the focus on this spiritual search from the self to the soul? Is it realistic for Peterson to claim that 'The Psalms are the cemetery in which our Lord the Spirit leads us to get out of ourselves, to rescue our prayers from self-absorption and set us on the way to God-responsiveness'<sup>32</sup>?

The Psalm Journey provides some evidence to substantiate Peterson's claim. Although there were no 'Damascus road' experiences, several respondents showed signs of moving towards the transcendental spirituality of the psalmists, although, as far as I am aware, none of these left behind

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<sup>29</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*. (London: Colorado Springs, 2005), 29.

<sup>30</sup> Peterson, *op. cit.* 37.

<sup>31</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 102-103.

<sup>32</sup> Peterson *op. cit.*, 104.

a 'subjective-life' approach. Evidence of this move from the self towards the soul is found in respondents' journals and in the decision of some (unprompted by me) to attend church. One of those who attended church (and later a 'Christianity Explored' course) had a Hindu upbringing and was influenced by Rama Krishna; he had no previous first hand experience of Christianity. Although it would be unwise to interpret these moves towards a psalmic spirituality as more than 'early shoots,' they indicate that the churches might profitably explore further creative ways of using the Psalms that would facilitate these ancient songs becoming for the growing contemporary audience of spiritual seekers a cemetery of the self and an incubator of the soul. The fact that all respondents indicated that they enjoyed doing the Psalm Journey leads me into the second potential impact of the Psalms today.

#### SANCTIFYING HUMAN EMOTIONS.

Secondly the Psalms have potential to sanctify our emotions. In their very thought-provoking book entitled *The Cry of the Soul: How our Emotions reveal our deepest questions about God*<sup>33</sup>, Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III demonstrate repeatedly that the Psalms are full of human emotion. Allender is President and professor of counselling at Seattle's Mars Hill Graduate School, while Longman serves as professor of biblical studies at Westmont College in Santa Barbara.

Both of these scholars have been strongly influenced by their Presbyterian theological education and have a high commitment to expressing their faith in intellectual terms. John A. Mackay reminds us that 'Presbyterianism, more perhaps than any other Protestant confession, has emphasized the importance of loving God with the mind'<sup>34</sup>. It is not surprising, therefore, that in these writers opinion emotions seems to be one of the least reliable forces. Nevertheless in this book they argue that our emotions are one of the strongest influences that guide our lives<sup>35</sup>. 'Emotion,' they write 'links our internal and external worlds.' They contend 'a failure to feel leaves us barren and distant from God and others. We often seem caught between extremes of feeling too much or not enough'<sup>36</sup>.

Allender and Longman argue that the Psalms help us to explore our emotions so that we come to know God more fully. 'Every emotion, though

<sup>33</sup> Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III, *The Cry of the Soul: How our emotions reveal our deepest questions about God*. (Colorado Springs, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> John McKay, *The Presbyterian Way of Life*, (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ, 1960), 37

<sup>35</sup> McKay, *op. cit.* 21.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

horizontally provoked, nevertheless reflects something about the vertical dimension: our relationship with God<sup>37</sup>. They go on: 'Far more important than the way in which emotions reveal the movement of the heart is the way in which our most difficult emotions – anger, fear, jealousy, despair, contempt, and shame – uniquely reveal something about the heart of God. Our positive emotions, of course – joy, peace, pleasure, and others – have equal potential to teach us about the nature of God. But the darker struggles with emotion can point us to a priceless glimpse of God's character through scriptural revelation of God's own emotions'<sup>38</sup>.

Regarding such darker struggles, most Psalm Journey respondents found it particularly difficult to handle the psalmist's anger in Psalm 55 where it is expressed itself in a desire for vengeance. The psalmist, as you will recall, has been betrayed by someone he had regarded as 'my equal, my companion, my familiar friend' (v 13), prompting the poet to long that his betrayer might meet a swift and premature death. Suddenly switching from singular to plural – a rhetorical device which, according to Dahood,<sup>39</sup> is not uncommon in imprecations – the psalmist prays with impassioned language: 'Let death come upon them; let them go down alive to Sheol; for evil is in their homes and in their hearts' (v 15).

Participants in the Psalm Journey are not by any means alone in finding such a vengeful reaction to an enemy unsettling, and, indeed, numerous commentators take the poet of Psalm 55 to task. George A F Knight, for example, in the popular *Daily Study Bible* commentary on the Psalms dismisses the psalmist's vengeance in Psalm 55 as a 'terrible misunderstanding of the plan and purpose of God for his children in this world which he has created.'<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, it is such yearnings for vengeance that prompts Walter Brueggemann to say 'The Psalms do "tell it as it is" with us' who live in a world divided by ethno-religious hatred and revenge.<sup>41</sup>

Although the respondents were critical of the vindictiveness of the psalmist, several used the psalm to explore and evaluate their own anger. In particular one female respondent was so moved by what she saw in Psalm 55 that she shared with the group the intense pain she had felt when her former boyfriend broke off their relationship. She made the following entry in her journal after her first meditation on the psalm:

<sup>37</sup> Allender and Longman, *op. cit.* 13-14.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>39</sup> M. Dahood, *Psalms. Vol. 1.* Anchor Bible 16. (Garden City, 1970).

<sup>40</sup> George A. F. Knight, *Daily Study Bible, vol. 1,* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1983), 257.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary.* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 58.

The psalm is in many ways an image of my former relationship. Together we built a city with strong walls made of love, but often we did not pay any attention to it, preoccupied as we were with the strife and violation of covenants that took place in the marketplace. We expected total loyalty from each other, and when felt let down we both wanted revenge and wished that some higher power would teach the other a lesson he or I would not forget. And in wanting revenge, the violation of the covenant was mutual and only the beginning of a vicious circle of despair.

This lady was not alone in finding that Psalm 55 provided a vehicle through which one could express personal anger, suggesting that Walter Brueggemann has good reason to underline the positive value of the cursing psalms. For him these psalms are a spiritual asset, not a liability. ‘Willy nilly,’ he says, ‘we are vengeful creatures. Thus these harsh psalms must be fully embraced as our own so that our rage and indignation may be fully owned, expressed and yielded to the mercy of God.’<sup>42</sup> A psalm of vengeance, Brueggemann maintains ‘is not action. It is words, a flight of passion in imagination’.<sup>43</sup> Brueggemann goes further, contending that in these psalms ‘vengeance is not simply a psychological but a theological matter’ in that through them the vengeance is referred to God.<sup>44</sup> ‘And when vengeance is entrusted to God, the speaker is relatively free from its power.’ Brueggemann concedes the dissonance between the cursing psalms and the Sermon on the Mount, but suggests that this is in fact a creative tension. ‘In the Gospel,’ he acknowledges, ‘Christians know “a more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31). But,’ he goes on, ‘it is not the first way. My hunch is that there is a way beyond the psalms of vengeance, but it is a way through them and not around them.’<sup>45</sup>

Reflections by my respondents on the vengeance of Psalm 55 were both positive and negative, but overall they can be interpreted as an openness to Brueggemann’s claim that such texts can provide a stepping stone towards the ‘more excellent way.’ From the emotion of anger I now turn to the experience of suffering.

#### ILLUMINATING HUMAN SUFFERING.

Third, the Psalms have potential to illuminate our suffering. I selected Psalm 22 in the hope that it would resonate with the strong interest expressed by my audience in resolving pain. The desirability of resolving

<sup>42</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 1982: 68.

<sup>43</sup> Brueggemann, *op. cit.*, 58-59.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

suffering was one of the six main audience values identified in my pilot study, and the experience of pain, both physical and mental, is regarded as a characteristic of Generation X.<sup>46</sup> Tom Beaudoin's exploration of GenX spirituality provides many examples from popular music and art forms of GenX fascination with pain. In incorporating this focus I was, of course, aware that suffering plays a central role in Christianity, with Christians of all confessions consistently affirming that suffering can be redemptive.

Interestingly, Psalm 22 evoked the largest proportion (two-thirds) of audience internalisation of the text, an internalisation reflecting a general embrace of suffering as well as stimulating empathy with four different types of personal suffering: homelessness, low self-esteem, ostracism, and stress.

Beaudoin's study is published in his book *Virtual Faith* (2002) and is based on a review and analysis of pop culture, rather than on qualitative audience research. Beaudoin, himself an Xer, identifies two reasons why a concern with suffering distinguishes Xers from their parents' 'boomer' generation. The first is sociological:

When a generation bears the weight of many failures – including AIDS, divorce, abuse, poor schools, recessions, youth poverty, teen suicide, outrageous educational and living expenses, failure of governmental and religious institutions, national debt, high taxes, environmental devastation, drugs, parents that need to be parented, violence, unstable economic security, premature loss of childhood – how can suffering not be an important part of one's identity.<sup>47</sup>

Beaudoin's second reason for the GenX preoccupation with suffering is philosophical. Generation X, he maintains, is 'overwhelmed by diversities of all sorts' that characterise 'this postmodern moment.' He goes on: 'In our contemporary situation it seems that everything we do and are is culturally "made" and not innately "given." In this moment of profound ambiguity, suffering is what unites Xers not only with each other but also with other generations'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> I have regarded Generation X to be composed of those born between 1963 and 1983, that is, those who were in their 20's and 30's when my study began in 2003. This date span is two years later than the original cohort proposed by Howe and Strauss (1993); it begins two years earlier than the smaller cohort proposed by Barna (1994) and followed by Brierley (2001), but ends in the same year.

<sup>47</sup> Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 104. cf. 111.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

If these are the reasons for his generation's suffering and dysfunction, what are the expressions of such suffering? Beaudoin's reply is that the suffering he and his peers experience 'expresses itself in psychological and spiritual crises of meaning. Clothing styles and music videos suggest feelings of rage, with the videos expressing this in apocalyptic images. Despair is common and occasionally leaps overboard into nihilism'.<sup>49</sup> Such suffering, he contends, sparks spirituality because 'suffering is a sort of "boundary experience" that forces us to confront questions about our own human limits.' When human beings suffer they want to know why, for how long, and who or what is responsible. 'If you ask that question broadly enough,' he says, 'you wonder about God and religious experience, whether it is in emotional, resentful, dismissive, ironic, debased, or intellectual ways'.<sup>50</sup> Beaudoin concludes that 'in and of itself, suffering makes Xers at least pseudoreligious'.<sup>51</sup>

There is much in Beaudoin's description of Xer spirituality that resonates with the way my respondents' description of their experience. Both they and he are conscious of a spiritual crisis of meaning. The longing of respondents for 'connection beyond the immediate' and their awareness of a 'personal pursuit of meaning or of place and of enlightenment' echoes Beaudoin's claim that the Generation X pop culture protest against suffering is symptomatic of the despair of human beings of finding any meaning for suffering in themselves.<sup>52</sup>

In the light of GenX preoccupation with suffering it is surely not insignificant that the most common poetic genre found in the Psalms is lament – another feature of the Psalter that, I think, highlights the great potential of the Psalms to attract today's spiritual seekers. After suffering, doubt is a motive of many psalmic laments. This also makes the Psalms intimately accessible to today's seekers.

#### SACRALISING HUMAN DOUBT.

Fourth, the Psalms have potential to sacralise our doubts. One of the texts selected was Psalm 74. The reason was that I thought that its theme – a lament on the destruction / desecration of the Jerusalem temple – provided an appropriate text to explore my audience's suspicion of institutions. Psalm 74 recalls with deep pathos what Brueggemann identifies as 'the focal, exemplar case in which Yahweh failed in defense of Yahweh's own

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 98.

dynasty, temple, city, and people'.<sup>53</sup> The psalm is an anguished tribute to the power of Israel's faith in Yahweh to survive despite the traumatic loss of the nation's most sacred institution. In addition, the text raises fundamental questions about divine sovereignty in human history. Interestingly it was these questions more than the survival of Israel's faith that caught the attention of respondents.

Participants in the Psalm Journey were not slow to identify modern instances of religious violence that parallel the desecration of the temple. But in their meditation on this psalm it was theodicy – the justice of God – that becomes the burning issue. 'How can you still believe in God taking care of you when he leaves you alone in your darkest hours?' asked a female correspondent not yet quoted. The respondent of Hindu background resonates with the psalmist's plea that God should cease being a spectator of the disaster that had befallen his flock. Similar concerns about God's care and reliability were raised by several respondents while meditating on other psalms.

On the other hand, my Hindu respondent makes the point that Psalm 74 legitimates asking God hard questions, and thereby implies an openness to viewing such psalms of complaint as expressions of faith. In other words, he implies that lament psalms provide us with a means of finding what Robert Davidson calls 'the courage to doubt.' The language of lament, Claus Westermann reminds us, is juridical.<sup>54</sup> The complaints he says are 'accusations of God, not condemnations. They are appeals in order to bring about change.' Westermann suggests that the key is to take psalms of lament and psalms of praise together because 'polar thinking is so characteristic of Old Testament theology'.<sup>55</sup> Lament, he says, is the right side of the vocabulary of faith which can be appreciated only in tandem with praise, the left side. This suggests that faith and doubt are not necessarily opposites. They can coexist as they did in the father of the demon-possessed boy in the Gospels who cried out to Jesus: 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!' (Mark 9.24). Doubt ought not to be confused with scepticism or nihilism. In the Psalms the expression of doubt is a religious exercise as psalmists, on their own behalf and on that of the community, bring their doubts to God. This sacralisation of doubt in the psalms is surely a challenge to us to expand the content of our public prayers so that they become vehicles that will carry contemporary doubt-

<sup>53</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: testimony, dispute, advocacy*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 321.

<sup>54</sup> C. Westermann. 'The Complaint Against God'. Tr. A. Siedlecki 1998. In T. Linafelt and T.K. Beal. *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*. (Minneapolis, 1998), 239.

<sup>55</sup> C. Westermann, *op. cit.*, 241.

ers to the throne of grace. This, of course, is only one of many challenges presented by the Psalms. Another is the way they prompt us to explore the rest of Scripture – a phenomenon that brings me to the final characteristic of the Psalms potential to impact contemporary spirituality.

#### ENLARGING HUMAN HORIZONS.

Fifth, the Psalms have potential to enlarge our horizons. Some days after the conclusion of the Psalm Journey I interviewed each respondent individually concerning their experience with the six psalms. All – apart from one exception and one ‘don’t know’ – indicated that following the Psalm Journey they believed that they were more likely to explore other psalms and other parts of the Bible than they had been before setting out on the Journey. Some had already begun doing so. In order to encourage such a transition, in preparing the minimal hermeneutics for the six psalms, I attempted to set these psalms in the wider context of Scripture by providing ‘inter-textual readings’ in the form of references to other biblical passages that had a relationship with the psalm. For example, in relation to Psalm 126 I provided narrative references to the Babylonian exile, and I gave Matthew 27 as an inter-textual reading for Psalm 22, pointing out that Jesus quoted the first verse of the psalm while on the cross.

In his book *Selling Worship*, Pete Ward of Kings College, London, contends that worship songs in charismatic services become for participants ‘narratives of encounter’ with God.<sup>56</sup> Ward maintains that, as such, these worship songs have a different dynamic from traditional hymn-singing which, he says, serve to bond the congregation together, to create points of transition in the service and to provide a means of response in the liturgy. Many of the songs in the Book of Psalms, while fulfilling all of these purposes attributed by Ward to traditional hymn-singing, are undoubtedly also narratives of encounter. Today’s users are challenged to enter into these ancient narratives and find in them their own personal story.

My respondents sought to do this. Some were able to enter the six poetic narratives more fully than others. One, a masters student, initially found it difficult to relate to Psalm 22 because its liturgical overtones awoke in him very negative memories of his Catholic school upbringing, creating what he describes as ‘a lot of baggage’ between him and the text. But persevering in his meditation by concentrating not so much on the words as on ‘the tone of the psalm,’ he came to appreciate the ‘strength

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<sup>56</sup> Pete Ward, *Selling worship: how what we sing has changed the church*. (Bletchley: Paternoster Press, 2005), 198



and power' of the psalm's mood. So much so that he shared with the group how he had repeated the psalm on behalf of a student friend who was going through a particularly hard time. Others also were able to engage spiritually with the psalms indicated that interacting with the Psalms in a meditative way had increased the likelihood that they would go on and explore others books of the Bible.

One of my convictions arising out of the Psalm Journey is that if people interested in spirituality interact meditatively with the psalms and make the discovery that these ancient poems can become contemporary personal and group narratives of encounter, they will overcome postmodern suspicions of the Bible as a metanarrative and seriously consider being drawn into the drama of salvation and ultimately find meaning and purpose in a biblical worldview.

## CONCLUSION

The Book of Psalms presents us with an effective missional tool that will help us reach today's generation of seekers who regard the churches as boring and irrelevant. By encouraging users to adopt a meditative reading of the psalms and by stimulating their imagination to explore the text we will help them (a) to refocus their spirituality from the self to the soul; (b) to sanctify their emotions so that even the darkest feelings draw them nearer to God; (c) to illuminate their suffering by learning to lament in the presence of God; (d) to sacralise their doubts by bringing these to God; and (e) to enlarge their horizons though discovering in the psalms narratives of personal encounter and gateways to God's master story. These findings illustrate the ongoing appeal of the Psalms and support Brueggemann's claim that contemporary spiritual seekers can find in these ancient prayer songs a portal to the wider biblical story.