

# GOD IN GRANITE?

## AESTHETIC-THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE MONUMENTALISATION OF RELIGION<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*In this article an introductory look is taken at the phenomenon of the monumentalisation of religion, particularly in view of its imperial expressions. The history and religious meaning of the Voortrekker Monument, situated outside Pretoria in South Africa, is outlined briefly as a case in point, followed by a number of aesthetic-theological perspectives on the notion of the monumentalisation of religion, using the keywords as lenses. The article concludes with a reflection on an art work by Argentinian born artist/architect Tomás Saraceno, entitled: 'On Space Time Foam'.*

**Key Words:** Remembrance; Time; Space; Movement

### The Monumentalisation of Religion

The erecting of sites of remembrance and/or spaces for ritual and religious reflection has been part and parcel of humanity since the dawn of time. Phenomena such as for example the rock paintings of dancing Khoi-San in Southern Africa, or the depiction of people, animals and symbols in the caves at Lascaux, France, clearly indicate that people felt the need to express their religious experiences concretely, and also to leave traces of these experiences for generations to come. The arrangement of the hundreds of portrayals at Lascaux in the unmistakable form of a place of worship at the very least indicates that religion and aesthetic expressions thereof initially overlapped intimately.<sup>2</sup>

With Otto Bollnow, it could be postulated that “The religious primeval experience ... consists in the experience that a special area develops within the great limitless space, a sacred space which is distinguished by the effectiveness of the numinous.”<sup>3</sup> We find similar examples in the Bible of sites of remembrance and religious encounters, for instance when

<sup>1</sup> This article was a paper delivered at the annual conference of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa, from 21-23 January 2015 in Bloemfontein, on the theme: *The Power of Religion and Religions of Power*. An abbreviated version of the paper was delivered at the Summer School held at Humboldt University in Berlin, from 11 to 14 June 2014, on the theme *Imperial Religions, Theologies, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems*. In collaboration between Humboldt University (Berlin, Germany), Stellenbosch University (South Africa), University of the Western Cape (South Africa), and the University of Kwazulu Natal (South Africa).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. AR García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence. Sketches for a Theology of Art*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, (2003:1-6); cf. also Johan Cilliers, *Dancing with Deity. Re-imagining the Beauty of Worship*. Wellington: Bible Media, 2012:15ff. The well-known circle of rocks at Stonehenge would also be a case in point.

<sup>3</sup> Otto F Bollnow, *Human Space*. Translated by Christine Shuttleworth, edited by Joseph Kohlmaier. London: Hyphen Press, 2011:135.

Jacob uses the stone that served as his pillow during the night to build a miniature ‘rock monument’ after his encounter with God in a dream.<sup>4</sup>

It is, however, not that easy to offer a definition of what a ‘monument’ is in fact, or intends to be. Estelle Maré, a South African author, states in broad strokes that “A monument is a physical object, displayed in public to remind viewers of specific individuals or events ... a memory aid for a specific community or group ... usually erected to celebrate military victories, the grandeur of a living or deceased leader, or as political statements rooted in some current ideology.”<sup>5</sup> Whatever definition we use to describe monuments, it is clear that there has been a standing relationship between monuments and religion from the very beginning.

Monuments more than often have a spiritual character and iconic value, in the sense that they offer a space for the formation or discovery of meaning. Someone such as Peter Berger has argued extensively that religion represents, among other things, the *longing for meaning*, and that one of the ways in which this longing is fulfilled is through the creation of structures that act as signs of, and for, transcendence.<sup>6</sup> These signs, or signals of transcendence should, however, never be seen as evidence of the transcendence – an interpretation of this nature always remains a discernment through faith.<sup>7</sup>

It is obvious that *architecture*, understood in this sense as the aesthetic structuring of spaces that act as conduits for meaning and signals of transcendence, becomes of fundamental importance. In his classic work *Einleitung in die monumentale Theologie*, already published in 1867, the German scholar Ferdinand Piper coined the term ‘monumental theology’ to describe the link between Gothic architecture and theology and to claim more broadly that artistic expressions, inclusive of architecture, are just as important sources for the study of theology as the Biblical and other confessional texts.<sup>8</sup>

According to Piper monuments are therefore witnesses in a material sense, whose existence and particular form act as signs of and for an ideal world – a world from which we come and to which we return. As such, monuments are realities through which the histories of religious self-understandings and world-views become apparent. Piper’s methodology hinges on the perspective that monuments can act as a type of bridge to the ideal world; as a conduit to spiritual realms, offering us a handle on that which in fact cannot be handled, by way of analogies or allegories. He proposed that the spiritual realm can only be compre-

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<sup>4</sup> Gen. 28:18; Cf. also the tabernacle and temple eras, as depiction of Israel’s longing to have a space where God is believed to have dwelled.

<sup>5</sup> Estelle A Maré, *The Aesthetics of Ideology: The Vicissitudes of Monuments*. *S.A. Tydskrif vir Kultuurgeskiedenis* 16 (2) November 2002:16.

<sup>6</sup> Peter L Berger, *Sehnsucht nach Sinn. Glauben in einer Zeit der Leichtgläubigkeit*. Campus-Verlag: Frankfurt am main/New York, 1994:144ff. Berger also refers to the role of notions such as play and humour in the religious search for meaning.

<sup>7</sup> Berger, *Sehnsucht nach Sinn*, 145.

<sup>8</sup> Ferdinand Piper, *Einleitung in die monumentale Theologie. Eine Geschichte der christlichen Kunstarchäologie und Epigraphik*. Mittenwald: Mäander Kunstverlag, 1978:1-8. In Piper’s own words: “Es werden unter Monumenten nicht bloss Kunstdenkmäler, sondern die körperlichen Reste des Altertums, an die sich ein Gedächtnis knüpft, samt den Inschriften verstanden... Überhaupt enthält das Monumentale im Gegensatz gegen die schriftliche und mündliche Überlieferung die Beziehung auf den Stoff und dessen Gestaltung.” Piper, *Einleitung*, iii.

hended in and through a material form, albeit that this form always represents a mere metaphor for transcendence.<sup>9</sup>

Of importance to note here is Piper's contention that many of Christianity's monumental expressions of faith became intertwined with the power of the state after Christianity became the official religion under Constantine. Many churches, for instance, could be interpreted not only as religious shrines, witnessing to encounters with God, but also, and perhaps even predominantly, as quasi-religious depictions of the state's power.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps it could be stated here that *one of the best expressions of imperial religions can be found in monuments*. Monuments offer handles on transcendence, signals for transcendence; but can also act as expressions of power. Patricia Davison speaks about museums (inclusive of certain monuments) as 'mirrors of power'.<sup>11</sup> According to her, they anchor certain perspectives of memory, even acting as 'crystallised memory'.<sup>12</sup> Certain aspects of history are selected according to certain concerns, and "These concerns can seldom be separated from relations of power and cultural dominance. Museums have often been described as places of collective memory, but selective memory may be a more accurate description... The conceptual frameworks that order collections and underpin exhibitions also mirror dominant forms of knowledge."<sup>13</sup>

In short: it would seem that monuments, also those connected to religious motifs, seldom escape the lure of power.<sup>14</sup> The monumentalisation of religion in fact often represents an act of power in itself.<sup>15</sup> Monuments cannot be understood in isolation from their cultural settings; monumental thinking always correlates with culture and the

<sup>9</sup> According to Piper, art, also as expressed in monuments, "... ist im Stande nicht bloss im Gebiet des räumlichen Geschehens dem wahrnehmbaren Dauer zu verleihen, das Vergangene zu vergegenwärtigen; sie reicht auch an das Uebersinnliche und hat die Macht der Ideen." He even speaks of "... der Ausübung der Kunst al seiner Nachahmung Gottes..." Piper, *Einleitung*, 27, 28. It is interesting to note that Ernst Bloch claimed in his classic work on hope that, while the Egyptians' intended to anchor the transcendent from the top to the basis through the structures of their buildings (e.g. the Pyramids), the Gothic approach endeavours to move from earth to heaven, opening up portals to the transcendent. He states: "Egyptian architecture is the aspiration to become like stone, with the crystal of death as intended perfection; Gothic architecture is the aspiration to become like the vine of Christ, with the tree of life as intended perfection." Ernst Bloch, 'The Principle of Hope', Volume 1, *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight. Cambridge, Massachusetts: the MIT Press, 1995:14.

<sup>10</sup> An example in this regard – of which there are many – would be the Marble Church (Frederik's Church) in Copenhagen. The dome shape accentuates the notion of majesty and heavenly exaltation, but it also implements a form of monumental theology or state theology to serve the political powers that were, in this case under the reign of King Frederick. The architecture "incorporates 'monumental theology' in the sense that it embodies ideas about the church, its affiliation with power, governance and kingship. Near to the royal residence Amalienburg, it was the intention to make the church the centre of Fredericktown in honour of the royal family's 300 years' reign... The whole building was a depiction of 'State Theology', heavily criticised by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard." DJ Louw, *Icons: Imaging the Unseen. On Beauty and Healing of Life, Body, and Soul*. Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2014:81.

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Davison, *Museums and the reshaping of memory*. In *Negotiating the Past. The making of memory in South Africa*. Editor Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998:146.

<sup>12</sup> Davison, *Museums and the reshaping of memory*, 146.

<sup>13</sup> Davison, *Museums and the reshaping of memory*, 146-147.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Gerardus van der Leeuw: "Sacred space may also be defined as that locality that becomes a position by the effects of power repeating themselves there, or being repeated by man." Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in essence and manifestation*, translated by JE Turner. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938:446.

<sup>15</sup> Mircea Eliade distinguishes between a "sacred, that is, power-laden, significant space", and a profane space. Mircea Eliade, *The sacred and the profane. The Nature of Religion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959:13.

endeavour to create bases for power in which political aspirations and religious symbols often overlap and even become identical.<sup>16</sup>

### The Voortrekker Monument: A South African Case Study

An interesting case in point would be the Voortrekker Monument, situated outside Pretoria in South Africa. It is the largest monument in Africa, and I obviously cannot do justice to the richness of symbolism of this monument in an article of this nature. Alta Steenkamp, an expert on the monument declares: “As a child I was awestruck by its grandeur and atmosphere of dignity, majesty, and reverence. At that point in my life, the monument represented, for me, sacredness as an experience completely separate from its history and ideology. I thought it was a great building... Even now I believe it is a magical building, laden with mysteries still to be revealed.”<sup>17</sup> According to Gerard Moerdijk, the architect, the Monument “had to remind people for a thousand years or more of the great deeds that had been done.”<sup>18</sup>

The Voortrekker Monument was inaugurated in 1948 (the same year in which the National Party came to power) and basically symbolises and commemorates two events: The Great Trek (1835-1852) that represented the break of the Dutch settlers with British Rule, and the Day of the Covenant (16 December 1938). The Monument stands 40 meters high, with a base of 40 meters by 40 meters, and is reminiscent of certain European monuments such as the *Dôme des Invalides* in France and especially the *Völker-schlachtdenkmal* outside Leipzig, Germany.<sup>19</sup>

The Cenotaph, situated in the centre of the Cenotaph Hall, is the focal point of the monument.<sup>20</sup> It can be viewed from the so-called Hall of Heroes, but also from the dome at the top of the building, from where much of the interior of the whole monument can be seen. Through an opening in this dome a ray of sunlight shines annually, exactly at noon on 16 December, falling onto the centre of the Cenotaph, illuminating the words “*Ons vir jou, Suid-Afrika*” (“*We for Thee, South Africa*”).

The religious overtones are clear: the ray of light symbolises God’s blessing on the lives and endeavours of the Voortrekkers, and commemorates 16 December 1838 as the date of the Battle of Blood River.<sup>21</sup> But there is an even deeper religious meaning given to this illumination by light from above: not only does it represent a vow made by (white) people, as an expression of patriotism; it also expresses the vow of the God of the

<sup>16</sup> An interesting question would be concerning the role of relatively new ‘monuments’ in South Africa, such as for instance the striking statue of Nelson Mandela, standing with outstretched arms in front of the Union Buildings in Pretoria – as an expression of the need for a speedy, monumental legitimisation of the current political dispensation, if not as an expression of the need for conformity to political correctness and fashion.

<sup>17</sup> Alta Steenkamp, A shared spatial symbolism: the Voortrekker Monument, the *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* and Freemasonry. *SAJAH*, ISSN 0258-3542, volume 24, number 1, 2009:150.

<sup>18</sup> Irma Vermeulen, *Man en Monument: Die Lewe en werk van Gerard Moerdijk*. Pretoria: JL van Schaik, 1999:129.

<sup>19</sup> According to some, it also reflects the architect’s fascination with Egyptian structures such as the pyramids. Cf. Vermeulen, *Man en Monument*, 137-138.

<sup>20</sup> It is noteworthy that war monuments often function as political, aesthetic statements, which portray explicit religious overtones, especially in terms of the notion of offering – as expressed here in the notion of a cenotaph. The *Kriegerdenkmal* in Potsdam, Germany, for instance reminds strongly of the Pietà. Cf. Wolfgang Braungart, *Ästhetik der Politik, Ästhetik des Politischen. Ein Versuch in Thesen*. Das Politische als Kommunikation 1. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012:78-79.

<sup>21</sup> This day was commemorated in South Africa before 1994 as the Day of the Vow; currently as Day of Reconciliation.

Voortrekkers, in fact saying “*We (as the Trinitarian God) for thee, South Africa.*”<sup>22</sup> God’s Revelation, i.e. God self, is ingrained in granite.

Obviously the role and perception of the Monument has changed after 1994, with the first democratic elections taking place in South Africa. It now functions basically as a ‘heritage site’, and attracts scores of tourists every year, especially because of its close proximity to Freedom Park, which in turn depicts the struggle against, and victory over, Apartheid. Albert Grundlingh, a South African historian, describes this change of perspective as follows:

The trend away from ritualised ethnic behaviour generally associated with the monument, already discernable in the 1980s, became distinctly pronounced in the 1990s. The monument could no longer function as the holy shrine of Afrikaner nationalism, as Afrikaner nationalism itself has ceased to exist in its earlier form. Now, for the first time, the monument even appears as an object of slight derision. Half-mockingly it is described as a “pop-up toaster”, “a 1940 art deco radio”, or an “Andy Warhol drawing, a somewhat absurd, even kitsch symbol.”<sup>23</sup>

It would indeed seem as if the bulk of Afrikanerdom is currently in a process of fleeing from aspects of its past, from what was previously seen as a semi-religious shrine of nationalism. Some even call the monument a forgotten and lonely giant –almost a derelict relic of apartheid.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this illustrates the irony that the phenomenon of monumentalisation in fact often tends to lead to forgetfulness, because it divests us of the obligation to remember. Monuments can become a sealed-off past, as opposed to a so-called living past. The grandiose pretensions to permanence actually could sabotage the intentions of monumentalisation, dooming it to an archaic, pre-modern status.<sup>25</sup>

For many black South Africans the monument represents an *inversion of symbolism* – “the monument is seen as a signifier of what blacks had to overcome and also as a tribute to the black labour that assisted in building the monument.”<sup>26</sup> The current government in fact seems to have adopted a fairly low-key approach to certain former symbols of Apartheid, with new agreements recently being made between the custodians of the Voortrekker Monument and those of Freedom Park, in an effort to foster reconciliation in South Africa.

This is actually a remarkable turn of events, seeing that the Voortrekker Monument depicts in no uncertain terms the victory of the white Voortrekkers over the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River. During this battle – according to this interpretation – a group of about 470 Voortrekkers and their servants defeated a force of about ten thousand Zulus. Only three Voortrekkers were wounded, and some 3000 Zulu warriors died in the battle. The 64 granite wagons circling the Voortrekker Monument symbolise the exact number of wagons that the Voortrekkers set up in order to ward off the attacks by the Zulu *impis*

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<sup>22</sup> The monument has been criticised inter alia as a mythical expression of a distinct form of religiosity, wherein direct analogies are postulated between biblical events and persons and some of the features of the monument. Cf. Irma Vermeulen, *Man en Monument: Die Lewe en werk van Gerard Moerdijk*. Pretoria: JL van Schaik, 1999:138.

<sup>23</sup> Albert Grundlingh, A Cultural Conundrum? Old Monuments and New Regimes: The Voortrekker Monument as Symbol of Afrikaner Power in a Post-apartheid South Africa. *Radical History Review*, Issue 81, fall 2001:101.

<sup>24</sup> Grundlingh, *A Cultural Conundrum?*, 102,106.

<sup>25</sup> Grundlingh, *A Cultural Conundrum?*, 102.

<sup>26</sup> Grundlingh, *A Cultural Conundrum?*, 104.

(warriors). It offers a remarkable, monumentalised version of the syndrome of ‘circling the wagons’.<sup>27</sup>

On 16 December 1838 the besieged Voortrekkers took a public vow together before the battle, which stated that they would build a church, and that they, together with their descendants, would commemorate this day as a holy Sabbath, in return for God’s help in obtaining victory.

Sarel Cilliers was the undisputed religious leader of the Voortrekkers, as well as the driving force behind the Covenant that was made between the Voortrekkers and God in view of a victorious battle against the Zulus.<sup>28</sup> I am a direct descendant of Sarel Cilliers, being the tenth generation of the Cilliers’ in South Africa.<sup>29</sup> On the marble frieze – said to be the largest of its kind in the world – situated in the Hall of Heroes, Sarel Cilliers – my great, great grandfather – can be seen leading the Voortrekkers in their Vow.

It would seem that my DNA is somehow mixed into the marble of the Voortrekker Monument...

### Remembrance, Time, Space, and Movement

How should we then evaluate the role and meaning of the Voortrekker Monument? Such an evaluation could obviously be done from a variety of perspectives. In this article, I limit myself to a number of aesthetical and theological comments, using the keywords *remembrance*, *time*, *space* and *movement* as lenses.

Remembrance as such is part and parcel of being human. Monuments that call upon us to remember are, and will be, with us as long as there is history to remember. Remembrance forms a characteristic part of all religions; religion has always had a memorial aspect.<sup>30</sup> Christianity could also be called a religion of remembrance.<sup>31</sup>

A rediscovery of a so-called culture of memory has currently become evident, and even popular.<sup>32</sup> But it is also clear that a *responsible, hermeneutical dialogue* with the past is of pivotal importance, as we often tend to apply a reduced form of remembrance, a selective memory, if not total amnesia. On the one hand, we should acknowledge the vulnerability and weakness of our acts of memory; on the other hand we should also embrace the poten-

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers, *Preaching Fools. The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*. Waco, Texas; Baylor University Press, 2012:60f.

<sup>28</sup> Cilliers has been described as a man with strong religious convictions, a pious character – and somewhat fearsome. He regularly preached fire and brimstone to those who dared to partake in dance parties and he passionately detested any new form of fashion! Cf. Karel Schoeman, *Die wêreld van Susanna Smit 1799-1863*. Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 1995:120.

<sup>29</sup> I am the tenth generation after the first Cilliers couple (Josué and Elizabeth) arrived on the ship *Reijgersdaal* at the Cape in 1700. Sarel Cilliers (the fifth generation after Josué and Elizabeth) played a major role in the so-called Battle of Blood River, and was seen as an important spiritual leader of the Voortrekkers who journeyed inland toward the northern borders of what is now South Africa.

<sup>30</sup> JS Landres, and OB Stier, Introduction. In *Religion, Violence, Memory, and Place*. Editor JS Landres and OB Stier. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006:1-12.

<sup>31</sup> According to Marksches and Wolf, “Erinnerung ist nicht irgendeine periphere theologische Kategorie des Christentums. Im Gegenteil: Gedächtnis ist ein theologischer Zentralbegriff, den als Offenbarungsreligion ist das Christentum eine Erinnerungsreligion.” Christoph Marksches, Hubert Wolf, “Tut dies zu meinem Gedächtnis” Das Christentum als Erinnerungsreligion. In *Erinnerungsorte des Christentums*. Hg. Christoph Marksches, Hubert Wolf. München: CH Beck, 2010:15.

<sup>32</sup> Marksches, Hubert Wolf, “Tut dies zu meinem Gedächtnis”, 10.

tial of memory to interpret the past in a hermeneutically responsible manner.<sup>33</sup> Memory is an important link to the past. But memory can also be abused in various ways, for instance, on a pathological and therapeutic level, on a practical level (especially in terms of finding and defending our identity), and on an ethical-political level.<sup>34</sup> Memory can operate not only as a grasp towards the past, but also towards the future, as an effort to secure the future – in view of certain, fixed ideals.<sup>35</sup>

A slogan that is often seen on monuments says: ‘Lest we forget’. But we also know that the function of memory can be complex – albeit personal or communal – and in both cases it can be highly selective and misleading regarding the truth of the events recalled.<sup>36</sup> Writing about the Great War in European cultural history and the modernist approach to memory, Jay Winter states: “To array the past in such a way is to invite distortion by losing a sense of its messiness, its non-linearity, its vigorous and stubbornly visible incompatibilities.”<sup>37</sup>

Monuments, that intend to capture time, can ironically fall prey to a loss of time, to an a-historical, mythological approach to memory. Monuments that simplify history for the sake of nationalistic or other ideals, that endeavour to blunt the rough edges of time, in an effort to eternalise time, in effect contradict (the ongoing of) time. Monuments then become servants of ‘timeless’ myths.<sup>38</sup> *Myths change history into nature.*<sup>39</sup> A few viewpoints are abstracted from the unique interrelations of historical events and changed into a repeatable pattern. This pattern or principle is applied with a specific objective, for example, the justification of social, political or ideological structures.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, in this *privation of history* all

<sup>33</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, history, forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004:21.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Vosloo, Reconfiguring ecclesial identity: In conversation with Paul Ricoeur. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae. Journal of the Church History Society of Southern Africa*, 2007:32 (1):273-293.

<sup>35</sup> One could in fact argue that the Egyptian Pyramids represent a *monumental encapsulation of the future*; indeed an attempt to control death.

<sup>36</sup> Indeed, “... the designers of monuments inevitably cast a specific memory in stone. The structure as such cannot be modified constantly, but its meaning can be reinterpreted, even completely negated by future viewers who do not share the identity of the designers.” Estelle A Maré, Monumental complexity: searching for the meaning of a selection of South African monuments. *SAJAH*, Volume 22, number 2, 2007:36.

<sup>37</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning. The Great War in European cultural history*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995:5.

<sup>38</sup> The *phenomenon of myth* is complex by nature and, for example, can be described in philosophical, philosophic-semiotic, sociological, and religio-scientific terms. In formal terms, the myth is a *narrative*. Yet it is to be distinguished from fables, fairy tales, and legends that play roles in their own worlds and conclude according to their own rules (until “all live happily ever after”) and especially function with their own concept of time (“Once upon a time ...”). Indeed, myths do have their ‘own’ times that transcend the boundaries of history, for example, in the so-called *anthropogenic* myths, in which the world’s ‘ancient history’ is told, or the *cosmogonist* myths, in which the ‘prehistory’ of the world is at issue, and certain *personal myths*, in which either unhistorical or historical figures act and who start to display unhistorical, timeless traits in the narrative. Yet the myth often enters into a relationship with ‘real’ time. For example, in the cult, the myth is retold and celebrated in order to *continue it*. In the cultic repetition, the myth attains ‘eternal’ value, and, in this sense, it is an allegory (image) that verbalises the ‘eternal’ in human words. Thus, the myth moves from the ‘eternal’ into time, to again become ‘eternal.’ Myths use time (cult) to keep themselves alive. Cf. Cilliers, *God for Us?*, 31-32.

<sup>39</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythen des Alltags*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1964:129.

<sup>40</sup> According to Roland Barthes, the essence of a myth exists in its love of, and continuous search for, timelessness. Real history is negated, annulled and changed into a myth. To be timeless, the myth thus uses history and never becomes altogether detached from it. Neither does it want to do so, because it lives on it, finds its roots in it, and especially conceals itself in it. This secretive game of hide and seek – masking – defines the myth. Barthes, *Mythen des Alltags*, 118.

history evaporates, is changed into nature – which obviously serves the irresponsibility of human beings. In effect this results in the belief that what happens is not the result of historical, human actions, also entailing guilt, but rather ‘eternal destiny’. These sentiments can, in my view, be seen clearly in the depictions of the actions of the Voortrekkers, juxtaposed against those of the indigenous people on the frieze in the ‘Hall of Heroes’. No ‘heroes’ emerge from the ‘other side’.

\*\*\*Myth endeavours to eternalise time, but it also usurps space. It fundamentally affects the relationship between time and space. Paul Tillich calls time and space the basic structures within which we exist, the *‘Hauptstrukturen der Existenz’*.<sup>41</sup> Everything that exists, also movement, takes place within time and space. Time and space are related to one another, but are also in constant tension with one another – one could indeed call this the fundamental tension of our existence (*‘fundamentale Spannung der Existenz’*).<sup>42</sup> When this tension is broken, dangerous and inhumane myths may be formed. Tillich refers to the classic symbols of a *circle* (representing enclosed space) and a *line* (representing linear time).<sup>43</sup> If, for instance, space is understood as an exclusive entity (circle), it acquires eternal characteristics. Therefore this exclusive circle must constantly be shattered by the *line* of time, reminding space of its inherent transience.

According to Tillich, certain forms of nationalism have always operated from an exclusivist understanding of space, and many of these nationalistic myths have also corrupted the true understanding and function of time: instead of time interrupting exclusivity, it is now transformed into an (eternal!) cycle of time.<sup>44</sup> The latter somehow also signifies the victory of space over time, because time then becomes another eternal, repetitive reality. Where this happens – that is, where the gods of space conquer and corrupt time – life becomes truly heathenised.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Paul Tillich, *Auf der Grenze. Aus dem Lebenswerk Paul Tillichs*. Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1962:187.

<sup>42</sup> Tillich, *Auf der Grenze*, 187. In literature research, Bakhtin speaks about *chronotope* (literally, ‘time space’) when referring to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are expressed artistically in literature. To Bakhtin, *chronotope* expresses the inseparability of space and time, time being the fourth dimension of space. Mikael Bakhtin, *The dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by MM Bakhtin*, editor Michael Holquist. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981:84.

<sup>43</sup> Tillich, *Auf der Grenze*, 187.

<sup>44</sup> Tillich, *Auf der Grenze*, 190-191.

<sup>45</sup> According to Tillich the role of the prophets has always been to reclaim space that has become institutionalised as eternal. Prophets point towards something new. They indicate a direction, presupposing a beginning and an end, which contradicts the tendency to strap God down in space, as though God was just another clan deity. In this way the tragic and repetitive circle of eternalised space is broken, interrupted, and the God of history acknowledged and worshipped. Indeed, the God of time is the God of history. That means above all that God is working in and through history towards a culmination, a *telos*. A mature theology operates with a linear understanding of time that presupposes a beginning and an end. In the process it affirms human beings as not being subjected to a fatalistic and tragic repetition of time, but that they can in fact be broken out of the circle of repetition and turned in the direction of something truly new and surprising. Both the Old and the New Testaments express God’s history-making action predominantly with the help of *linear* time categories. The linear passing of time (history) is thus not conceived as an abstract continuity of time, but rather the God-given content of certain moments in history. God’s objectives for the world move to a consummation; things do not just go ahead or return to the point where they began. Although it could be said that the fall of humanity made history meaningless and monotonous, it is indeed God’s intervention that (always) imparts purpose and new meaning. Linear time is not a sequence of inevitable events, but moments, ‘days,’ in which God brings his objective for the world closer to its conclusion. These are unrepeatable moments, *kairos* moments, in which God allows a specific objective to be fulfilled at a specific time. The fullness of time, with Christ’s coming, the *ephapax* of his crucifixion, is the most striking example of this. In



Would it be too harsh a judgment to say that the Voortrekker Monument symbolises the myth of encircled space (literally within the 64 circled wagons) and cyclical – eternalised – time (with the ray of sun repeatedly illuminating the cenotaph on 16 December)? That the thousand years or more that Gerard Moerdijk envisaged his monument to endure, in order to remind people of the great things that happened, indicates a yearning for the eternal monumentalisation of a specific religious experience? Are these not the characteristics of an imperial religion, *par excellence*: cyclical time and encircled space?

Such a monumental religion fosters, and stems from, a granite theology.<sup>46</sup> A granite theology finds powerlessness and vulnerability intolerable. It resists the movement from perfection (40 meters by 40 meters by 40 meters!) to pliability, because it is set in stone; it fails to fathom the reality of fragmentation, because it professes totality and finality; it circles the wagons, because others might endanger this theology's grasp on 'truth.' In such a theology, nothing is fluid; all is solid.

Could we say that, in such a granite theology, *history is indeed changed into nature*?<sup>47</sup> Time is arrested and fixed in space. The clock is stopped for the sake of solidification. Flow becomes finality. But, states Tillich, we worship the God of *history*, the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Hagar, that is, the God of the past (who calls people out of their *encircled spaces*), but therefore also the God of the present and future (i.e. a God who grants us the surprising possibilities of 'new time', of *kairos*).<sup>48</sup>

## God in Granite?

Indeed, God is a God that moves. *God is not a monument, but movement*. God, (not) needing time and space, moves through time and space. God moves within the realms of culture, cosmos and the dynamics of human relationships. God is the God of the tabernacle, the tent of transit, not the gravity of granite.<sup>49</sup>

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some instances, for example, in the Wisdom tradition, we do find the concept of cyclical time. In our view the biblical understanding of cyclical time does not oppose the notion of linear time. Within linear time there are certain occurrences that repeat (for example, seasons), but these repetitions are never understood as the inevitable, unpredictable fruits of fate. Cyclical events can be seen as part of the linear movement towards the Day of the Lord, even if this Day sees many fulfillments. Tillich, *Auf der Grenze*, 188-195; cf. also WG. Kümmel, *Theology of the New Testament*. London: SCM, 1974:141-146; also Johan H Cilliers, *God for us? An analysis and evaluation of Dutch Reformed preaching during the Apartheid years*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2006:21.

<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere I spoke about an iron theology, which is a synonym for granite theology. Cf. Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers, *Preaching Fools*, 63.

<sup>47</sup> Barthes, *Mythen des Alltags*. 113.

<sup>48</sup> Tillich, *Auf der Grenze*, 192f. Cf. also NJ Duff, Recovering Lamentation as a Practice in the Church. *Lament. Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*. Ed SA Brown and PD Miller, 3-14. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2005:11; cf. also Johan H Cilliers, Preaching as language of hope in a context of HIV and AIDS. *Preaching as a Language of Hope. Studia Homiletica* 6, (ed.) Cas Vos, Lucy L Hogan and Johan H Cilliers, 155-176. Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2007:155-176.

<sup>49</sup> Obviously, God is also the God of the temple, at least in Old Testament terms. An important distinction here is that between centralised and decentralised spaces. In Genesis we find mostly the *decentralised model* of spatiality, as opposed to the *centralised model* (embodied in the temple). In liturgical terms, as far as these models are concerned, at least three modes of spatiality must be distinguished, i.e. the temple as *domus dei* (the centralised space), the meeting of Christian believers, the *domus ecclesiae* – which is to some extent based on the synagogue, but also bears the character of fluid, holy space (moving from centralised to decentralised space), as well as the dispersion of holy space into the realities of everyday, as *leitourgia* of the street (decentralised space). It is my contention that the notion of decentralisation, or dispersion of holy space is of paramount importance to guard against a fixation of holy space, albeit in the *domus dei* or *domus*

In the Old Testament accounts of God's presence, we find an interesting tension between what has been called *locative* and *non-locative* models of Divine presence. Some scholars even opt for a description of the Divine presence as *locomotive*: there is a sacred centre, but it moves constantly between centre and periphery.<sup>50</sup>

It would seem that, also in the Biblical accounts, the notion of *fluid space* constantly acts as a type of contra-testimony to fixed space.<sup>51</sup> Even if the tabernacle was initially understood as a fore-shadow of the temple of Solomon to come,<sup>52</sup> it still maintains its *metaphorical function of constantly liquefying space*, representing a stance against a more "settled idea of presence crystallised in Israel."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, within this tension between locative and non-locative, the locomotive God can be in only one place at a time, but also in many places over the course of time.<sup>54</sup>

In short: God's power is not set in stone; not cast in concrete; not immortalised in marble; rather epitomised in movement; ultimately in the vulnerable figure of the Son of Man who wandered on this planet, without finding a place to rest his head, not even a stone to use as pillow.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps we could even state with Michel Serres, the somewhat enigmatic French philosopher, that the empty tomb of Christ is the greatest statue of history! The movement of Christ from death to life transforms all statues into stones that are rolled away from their fixed places. The resurrected Christ now moves through life.<sup>56</sup> Theology that follows in these footsteps, so to speak, practices a kind of *leitourgia* or street liturgy, following God-in-transit through the seemingly mundane realities of life.<sup>57</sup>

*ecclesiae*. Kunin describes the decentralised model as follows: "The significant element ... is the absence of implied singularity or uniqueness. In each case there is no suggestion that the holy place is in any way distinct from other holy places... The decentralised model allows for a multiplicity of sacred places and therefore a multiplicity of centres." SD Kunin, *God's Place in the World. Sacred Space and sacred Place in Judaism*. Cassell. London and New York, 1998:28.

<sup>50</sup> According to Sommer "When set against texts that glorify the Jerusalem temple, the priestly tabernacle appears to express a different notion of divine presence. The tabernacle, after all, is not limited to one place, for it wanders with the Israelites. Thus P texts, in comparison to the Zion/Sabaoth theology, seem not locative but what I would describe as *locomotive*: there is a sacred centre, but it moves... The axis linking heaven and earth (or at least heaven and the nation Israel) is an ambulatory one. The locomotive model, then, combines aspects of locative and Utopian ideologies: the center moves towards the periphery, while points in the periphery can become, temporarily, a centre." B Sommer, "Conflicting constructions of divine presence in priestly tabernacle." *Biblical Interpretation 2001*, 9:48,49.

<sup>51</sup> In the light of this tension, it could be said that we continuously need (new) monuments, but always with the knowledge that these monuments are fleeting, and not eternal; that they offer a restricted view on history, and not solidified 'truth'.

<sup>52</sup> According to Fleming, 486: "In all traditions, the tent shrine makes its appearance with the birth of Israel as a people, and it is permanently displaced by the Jerusalem temple." D Fleming, "Mari's large public tent and the priestly tent sanctuary," *Vetus Testamentum 2000*, 50/4:484-498.

<sup>53</sup> Sommer, "Conflicting constructions of divine presence", 50: "Thus God's presence was not linked to any one site in the land of Israel but to an event outside the land in which community, not place, was of paramount importance; and God was conceived as being present only temporarily. After the establishment of a strong centralised monarchy with its seat in the formerly Jebusite city of Jerusalem, a more settled idea of presence crystallised in Israel."

<sup>54</sup> "The place [which Yahweh would choose] would be identified by the tabernacle and the ark within it. Thus, though there was only one tabernacle, it would be moved from place to place; there would be many places over the course of time, but only one place at a time." J Niehaus, J 1992. "The Central Sanctuary: Where and When?", *Tyndale Bulletin 1992*, 43.1: 4.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Matthew 5:20

<sup>56</sup> Michel Serres, *Statues*. Paris: Francois Bourin, 1987:226.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Romans 12:1

The Voortrekker Monument challenges me to rethink my (theological) understanding of this God-in-transit. In a monumental manner, it confronts my perception and experience of space and time. On the one hand, God *does* enter space and time. One could even speak of a theology of place or space.<sup>58</sup> For Karl Barth, the encounter between God and human beings does not take place in an empty space but in a special space (*bestimmten Raum*). It denotes a particular place, fashioned by God for redemption; *a place where, and when, grace meets space*.<sup>59</sup>

These spaces and times may however, on the other hand, never become the breeding ground for ideological and identity motifs and agendas.<sup>60</sup> It may not be transformed into a handle on eternity, in order to serve that which is transient. While certain monuments represent a particular understanding of time (as eternalising) and space (as condensing; coagulating), a theological understanding would prefer to speak about *fluid space and infinituding of time*. Space flows, and time is filled with the infinitude; it becomes infinitude.<sup>61</sup> Not only does movement take place *within* time and space, as Paul Tillich argued,<sup>62</sup> time and space *themselves* move.

This understanding of time and space, as being a not coagulation nor condensation, is of course nothing new. Heraclites already said that everything that exists moves (*panta rei*). All of reality (time, space, cosmos) is in flux.<sup>63</sup> The opposite of a granite theology would be a theology-as-time-and-space-in-movement (*theologia tempus et spatium motu*). This does not equal relativism, but rather relationality – it is *God* that moves with us through time and space. We are not left alone in the cold of a space-time vacuum; nor are we ingrained in immovable marble – we are taken along in the movement of the God of history. In this sense, theology is not so much a noun-theology, as a verb-theology: God's Name is A Name-on-the-Move.<sup>64</sup>

But perhaps all of this is said best – as is often the case – in aesthetical terms. The Argentinian born artist/architect, Tomás Saraceno, has created a remarkable artwork entitled: *On space time foam*. It was displayed in Milan in a hangar (*HangarBicocca*), and consists basically of a transparent surface that is accessible to visitors, hanging at a height

<sup>58</sup> Speaking from a South African perspective Ernst Conradie states: “At a deeper level a theology of place should be understood in terms of God’s presence in creation. A theology of place will become shallow when it focuses only on geographic location and ethical concerns and when it fails to do justice to an understanding of God’s immanence and transcendence... A theology of place is not about the generic concept of space but about a specific place. The task of a theology of place is to discern the significance of God’s presence in this particular location and time.” Ernst M Conradie, *Towards a Theology of Place in the South African Context: Some Reflections from the Perspective of Ecotheology*, *Religion & Theology*, Volume 16/1-2, 2009:4,5. Conradie points out that a re-emergence of a theology of place is currently taking place in the context of ecotheology, after, for instance, a preoccupation with the category of time in western theology (5ff.).

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008:137-8.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Joris Geldhof, *De Ruimten waar Christenen vieren. Over de intrinsieke verband tussen liturgie en kerkbouw*, in: *Ruimten voor Heiliging. Over liturgie, kerkgebouwen en hun interieur*, redactie Joris Geldhof. Halewijn: Antwerpen, 2011:15.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Johan Cilliers, *Time out. Perspectives on liturgical temporality*. *NGTT*. 2009:50 (1 en 2):26-35.

<sup>62</sup> Tillich, *Auf der Grenze*, 187.

<sup>63</sup> Of course Heraclitus did not know about astrophysics, or the relativity theory of Albert Einstein, or the notions of warped space and time, or multiple universes, as put forward by people such as Stephen Hawkins!

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Niehaus, “The Central Sanctuary: Where and When?”, *Tyndale Bulletin* 1992, 43.1:3-30. This understanding of God’s Name as movement implies that the movement is not haphazard – although it may seem like this from time to time. The movement of God has a direction; the moving God is headed, with us, towards a *telos*.

of 20 meters above the ground and covering 400 square meters. It is constructed in three layers, which offers a total of 1200 square meters that draw the public into extraordinary spatial and emotional experiences. The large soft and floating film creates a feeling of moving in mid-air between the floor and the ceiling, earth and sky, and it compels those that enter to lose their spatial co-ordinates.<sup>65</sup>



In effect, Saraceno engages with the notion of *boundary*, challenging it through the participation of those that enter this space-time foam. Those that dare to enter, often state that not only is their space-orientation changed, but time also seems to lose its normal characteristics. No more handles to hold on to; no more compasses to follow; no more time to tick by! Space and time now move in different ways (*tempus et spatium motu!*). It becomes a type of play of flight and lightness – an experience of the “unbearable lightness of being”<sup>66</sup> – moving beyond the limitations of physics. No eternal recurrences here, no repetition *ad infinitum*; only the event of playful and continuous re-co-ordinating, and re-timing. Truly, a *moving experience* – in all the senses of the word.

This play within space-time lightness constantly changes the architecture into a living organism, one that breathes on account of the movements of those who cross it. It visualises

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.archdaily.com/292447/on-space-time-foam-exhibition-studio-tomas-saraceno/>

<sup>66</sup> One is reminded of the classic postmodern novel by Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), originally published in 1984. An American film starring Daniel Day-Lewis, Lena Olin, and Juliette Binoche was produced in 1988. Kundera challenges Nietzsche’s notion of eternal recurrence, i.e. the idea the universe and its events have already occurred and will recur *ad infinitum*, and postulates that each person has only one life to live and that which occurs in life occurs only once and never again – therefore the ‘lightness’ of being. Whilst the notion of eternal recurrence imposes a ‘heaviness’ on our lives and on the decisions we make, giving them ‘weight’, the ‘lightness’ of being sees life (and love!) as fleeting, haphazard and perhaps based on endless strings of coincidences, despite holding such significance for humans – and thus also being ‘unbearable’.

the infinite relationships that tie people to space. In the words of the artist himself: "...the films constituting the living core of HangarBicocca are constantly altered by climate and the simple movement of people. Each step, each breath, modifies the entire space: it is a metaphor for how our interrelations affect the Earth and other universes."<sup>67</sup>

In this 'tent in transit' time and space are not eternalised or postulated as cyclical and fixed, but as a space-time *event*, constituted by the interplay of relationships. Here we find no frieze, frozen in time and space, but foam, floating in, and with, time and space; no perfection, but play; no marble, but movement.

Truly, a moving metaphor for a moving theology?

## Conclusion

The two architectural designs depicted above (Voortrekker Monument; HangarBicocca), could indeed be seen as *metaphors* for two distinct forms of theology, and in particular also liturgy. On the one hand, the Voortrekker Monument reminds us that we often tend to create God images that we can handle, see, and touch – images that can become fixed and static. The HangarBicocca, as metaphor, reminds us that God is in fact beyond our metaphors – those that we construct from granite, and those that we construct in our minds. It reminds us that every God image is fluid, or should be fluid, given the fact that we construct them, within the times and spaces of our different contexts. It reminds us that even our acts of remembrance, also in liturgical settings; even our architectural construction of 'liturgical spaces', cannot contain the God-in-transit of whom the Bible speaks. In a sense, these two constructions invite us into the *space of tension* that underlines every (theological) effort to speak about God, inclusive of every (liturgical) effort to worship this God.

- Indeed: God, our Rock, is not a God-in-Granite; God, the Locomotive, is located-with-us.

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<sup>67</sup> As quoted by Tina Chen, On Space Time Foam, in *Raine Magazine*, Volume 18, 2014:1.