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Verrips, J.

Publication date

2013

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Jaarboek voor liturgie-onderzoek

License

Unspecified

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Verrips, J. (2013). Speaking and Singing: Or how Ultra-Orthodox Calvinists Tune their Bodies. *Jaarboek voor liturgie-onderzoek*, 29, 133-145. <https://ugp.rug.nl/jvlo/article/view/11473>

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Speaking and Singing or how Ultra-Orthodox Calvinists Tune their Bodies

Jojada Verrips

‘(...) concrete activities such as speaking, chanting, singing, reading, writing (...) can be as much a condition of possibility for the experience of the divine as a response to it’.¹

‘It takes (...) a very short excursion into the auditory to know how closely listening is knotted with feeling, desire, responsiveness and, touch, with the stirring and soothing of passions – whether joy, love, grief, courage, or heavenly yearning’.²

1. Introduction

In 1933 my maternal second cousin once removed, Jacobus den Hartog, a convert who was born in 1892, founded in a fairly remote rural area of the Netherlands an ultra-orthodox Free Congregation, on a Reformed basis, called ‘Filadelfia’.³ Until his death in 1963 Jacobus was the uncontested, informal leader of this small, unique congregation. In the beginning he or a fellow preacher would preach to his followers, mostly relatives and neighbors, at first in their living rooms and later in the old hay barn of the farmhouse in which he was born. Their children were not baptized and they refused to vote. Jacobus travelled widely in what is known as ‘the Bible Belt’ of the Netherlands, visiting sessions of those of the region’s ultra-orthodox Protestants who disliked the official Protestant Churches and considered them to be presenting the evangelical message in the wrong way. In exchange for his performances in those circles he received enough gifts in cash and kind to enable him to live without a regular job. God took care of him and his family, he used to say. After Jacobus’ death, the congregation came together in a newly built shed next to the hay barn. Meetings were held here until June 1996, where after they were held in a real church with a small tower, built by his followers with their own hands and their own capital, just behind the shed that it replaced. In fact, about 25 family members between them raised more than 1.5 million guilders. Year in, year out,

¹ W. KEANE: ‘Religious Language’, in *Annual review of anthropology* 26 (1997) 47-71, p. 48.

² L.E. SCHMIDT: *Hearing things. Religion, illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA 2000) 34.

³ See for a short history of ‘Filadelfia’ S.C. BAX: ‘Gemeente Filadelfia werd in 1933 gesticht “op Zijn gezegend bevel”’, in *Reformatorsch Dagblad* (28 June 1996) and Wikipedia, catchword: Filadelfiagemeente_(Culemborg).

I am grateful to Birgit Meyer and Harriet Impey for their constructive remarks on an earlier version of this essay.

they listened in these buildings to the sermons, letters, treatises, poems, confessions of faith etcetera which Jacobus had written during his lifetime and which were available in print after his death.⁴ They were read again and again, Sunday after Sunday, by one of the elders in charge of the service. Apart from Jacobus' writings, the Bible and a psalter, both in the old translation (the so called *Tale Kanaäns* or 'Language of Canaan'), no other texts were used during the sober and somber meetings.

As a small boy I occasionally went to the old hay barn with my father, who liked to visit the different churches of the region, to listen to Jacobus or another elder preaching there. My mother disliked Jacobus' 'canting', as she called it, so she never joined us. I vividly remember his gestures, his earnest-looking face and, last but not least, the way in which he spoke. In fact, I should say, the way in which he sang or chanted his sermons. I was used to the strange, musical way in which the elders of the orthodox Calvinist church in our village read the Ten Commandments,⁵ biblical passages, and the Confession of Faith that preceded the sermon: a way of speaking that differed considerably from their normal speech. However, Jacobus' way of speaking was on another level: he went, as it were, into a higher gear. His religious performances, which often lasted more than two hours, were a curious mixture of speaking, singing, sighing, and moaning, as well as weeping and crying in a specific rhythmic and melodious manner. Furthermore, the language in which he expressed himself was highly specific. As well as using many old-fashioned words and phrases from the old translation of the Bible and the books of the so-called 'Old Writers' of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,⁶ he also included many words and expressions in use in Dutch pietistic circles, as well as many of his own neologisms. For me, it felt as if I were listening to someone speaking, or rather singing, some foreign or secret language that I did not understand, for it referred to (biblical) persons, things, distinctions and experiences with which I was entirely unfamiliar.

⁴ For this article I read 33 of Jacobus' printed writings, which I got from a lady who had left the congregation. It was not easy to lay hands on them, for these sources are in principle for followers only and not for sale. Rather peculiar are the letters Jacobus wrote to the woman, who according to him was predestined by God to become his wife, but who was for a long time in serious doubt about this divine decision before she accepted it; see J. DEN HARTOG: *Alzo gingen die beiden* 1-7 (Culemborg 1995).

⁵ In the sixteenth century it was the custom that the Ten Commandments in the churches of the Reformation were sung.

⁶ 'Old Writers', that is, pietists who put their religious beliefs and experiences on paper, were and still are very popular as sources of religious inspiration in orthodox reformatory circles. Jacobus, for example, frequently refers to the works of Jodocus van Lodenstein (1620-1677) and Theodorus van der Groe (1705-1784). Other famous examples are Bernardus Smytegelt (1665-1739), Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711) and Wilhelmus Schortinghuis (1700-1750). See M.J.A. DE VRIJER: *Schortinghuis en zijn analogieën* (Baarn 1942).

However, what I still remember very vividly, alongside Jacobus' constant references to the immense importance of love and the gruesomeness of death, the grave and hell,⁷ is how I always started to develop strange fantasies, visions and feelings... although I also had to fight to stay awake, a battle that had apparently been lost by some of the people present. This evocation of fantasies also happened regularly when I attended services in the village in which I was born, but not as intensely or frequently as when I listened to Jacobus, this convert who claimed to have received, in the 1920s, a message from the Lord himself, announcing that he was predestined by Him to enter His Kingdom after Judgment Day and to stay with Him, His Son and The Holy Ghost in heaven for eternity. When I later conducted fieldwork in the Alblasserwaard (the Netherlands) for my PHD to discover more about the varieties of Dutch Calvinism, and visited so-called 'barn-churches' or conventicles, I came across a similar way of preaching, with chanting and weeping. I also encountered a similar type of language, full of archaisms, neologisms, as well as complex classifications and distinctions of religious states and stages believers had to go through before they could receive the sign that they had been elected.⁸

It was remarkable that in each of the three settings I have mentioned (Jacobus' hay barn, the church in my home village, and the churches in the Alblasserwaard) the congregations sang during the services in what is called an a-rhythmic manner: that is, using only whole notes (semibreves) and no half notes (minims). This turned psalms into heartbreaking and sometimes tear-jerking lamentations, even if their content was in fact not sad at all. Add to this the fact that the other parts of the services (reading the scriptures and other texts as well as the sermon) were also presented as a kind of chant or song, and it is clear how these services often turned into what was essentially a semi-musical performance, with the preacher and elders on the one hand, and the congregation on the other.⁹ In this essay I aim to shed some light on this curious phenomenon of preaching and speaking in ultra-orthodox Calvinist circles.

2. 'The return of the repressed'

Though I have been confronted numerous times with this remarkable style of worshipping God, first as a young believer and later as an agnostic student of

⁷ A nice illustration of Axel Michaels observation '(...) dass Religion die Antwort des Menschen auf das Bewusstsein seiner Sterblichkeit ist (...)', in A. MICHAELS (Hrsg.): *Klassiker der Religionswissenschaft. Von Friedrich Schleiermacher bis Mircea Eliade* (München 2010³) 13.

⁸ See J. VERRIPS: *En boven de polder de bemel. Een antropologische studie van een Nederlands dorp 1850-1971* (Groningen 1978) 187, 275 note 11.

⁹ There are some strong family resemblances here with, for example, the chanted preaching style as described by T. SMITH: *'Let the church sing!' Music and worship in a black Mississippi community* (Rochester 2004). But Jacobus would have been the last to admit this.

religion, I took this style for granted and did not try to find out more about its possible significance and effects. Instead I concentrated upon what people wrote and said about God and why and what the Word might possibly mean for their lives and afterlives. I assumed that those among whom I conducted my research did the same, and also saw the chanting style of the whole ceremony as essentially an irrelevant fringe phenomenon, not essential for ‘understanding’ the foundations of Calvinist belief and obtaining more knowledge about it. In short, I had – as so many Calvinists and students of Calvinism have had, and still have – a rather one-sided cerebral and rational or logo-centric attitude towards the Calvinist faith, emphasizing the immense importance of (theological) knowledge in the form of doctrines and representations, and in its wake values and norms, rules and regulations. Or, to put it more bluntly, I conducted fieldwork with a well-developed blind spot for other, less mentalist and more corporeal, material or sensual dimensions of this widespread offshoot of the Reformation in particular, and religion in general.¹⁰ In his excellent study on John Calvin, C. van der Kooi signals this blind spot when he deals with the role of the senses in Calvin’s work as follows: ‘This is an element in the image of Calvin which is hardly recognized today, thanks to the overpainting of later generations who were certain that Calvin was all head, and no body.’¹¹ However, I did not entirely forget the particular sensual style of presenting the Word of God and preaching the Gospel discussed above. Every now and then it cropped up in talks with my brothers about my maternal family, with its constant splits due to saddening and alienating quarrels about religious issues in general, and Jacobus’ influence on various uncles and their wives in particular, but I did not for many years feel the urge to delve deeper. A few years ago, however, this changed.

The reason for this ‘return of the repressed’ was that in 2009 I was invited to give a talk on the bestselling novel by the Dutch author Jan Siebelink, *Knielen op een bed violen* (‘Kneeling on a bed of violets’),¹² a novel I was in fact unwilling to

¹⁰ The research proposal I wrote in 1969 to get a grant from the Dutch Organization for Pure Scientific Research for studying the role or religion in a small Dutch rural community forms a nice illustration of this biased perspective on (varieties of) Calvinism. Naïve as I was, I expected to be able to get rational stories from my informants about their ‘belief system’ and what this system meant for their interaction with the landscape and mandscape they were part of. However, I soon realized that more attention should be paid to the role of the body for a better understanding of all kinds of religious phenomena, not only Calvinistic ones. I did this, for instance, in an essay on the occurrence of a Dutch Protestant revival movement in the middle of the 18th century by launching the hypothesis, that the convulsions and spasms shown by many of its participants might be triggered by ergot poisoning instead of by the Holy Ghost; see J. VERRIPS: ‘De genese van een godsdienstige beweging: Het Nieuwkerkse Werk’, in *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis* 18 (1980) 113-139.

¹¹ C. VAN DER KOOI: *As in a mirror. John Calvin and Karl Barth on knowing God. A dyptich* (Leiden 2005) 76.

¹² J. SIEBELINK: *Knielen op een bed violen* (Amsterdam 2005).

read, for fear that it might trigger just such a return, followed by a possible aversion or setbacks. Now, however, I am pleased to have overcome this disinclination and to have accepted the invitation, for it forced me to explore, and attempt to explain, aspects of presenting and consuming the Word in (ultra-)orthodox Calvinist settings that I had so far neglected.

Siebelink's novel, of which more than half a million copies were sold, is an impressive story about a man called Sievesz – in fact the author's father – who becomes caught in the grip of some ultra-orthodox Calvinists and experiences a vigorous Saul-like conversion, but nevertheless lives in constant uncertainty regarding his election by God.¹³ He completely alienates himself from his wife and children, who do not live in a 'state of grace,' and tries to hide from them his quest for a sign from the Lord indicating that he really belongs to the happy few that will enter His kingdom. For example, he spends a fortune on buying books by the so-called 'Old Writers' in the hope that they will lead him first to Jesus and later to eternal life, but hides the books in his nursery garden. He also visits assemblies of believers without telling his family, and has secret meetings with his brothers in the Lord in his workshop behind his house. On his death-bed Sievesz, still doubting and struggling, is surrounded by his religious friends. They talk, preach, sigh, weep and sing, until he dies without having received a sign of salvation. Sievesz' friends forbid his wife to be present for the last hours of his life, because she is not considered one of them. The novel is, like Jacobus' spoken and written texts, a *Fundgrube* for anybody who wants to know more about the role of language and texts in the lives of ultra-orthodox Calvinist believers. It illustrates the ways in which they preach, speak, talk and write about both religious doctrines and dogmas, as well as their religious experiences, such as their troublesome voyages through a world of darkness and doubt, or their occasional moments of joy when the Lord manifests himself in an arresting way.

3. From sensations to logocentrism?

A search for literature by sociologists and anthropologists of religion on this issue, i.e. the kind of impact on the members of exclusive ultra-orthodox Calvinist assemblies of the 'reading' (or sing-reading) aloud of religious texts such as those written by Jacobus, and of the 'listening to' this chanted reading and to the half-spoken and half-chanted prayers and sermons, in combination with a-rhythmic singing of psalms and hymns, can only end in disappointment. The emphasis in their publications on these and similar congregations appears to be on the kind of doctrinal and/or theological knowledge that is transmitted. By

¹³ See for types of conversion in (ultra-)orthodox Calvinistic churches in the Netherlands M. VAN HOUWELINGEN: *Als Paulus of als Timotheüs. De structuur van recente bevindelijke gereformeerde bekeeringsverhalen* (Master Thesis Religious Studies) (Leiden 2012).

contrast, there is little attention paid to ‘what’ the style of preaching, presenting and explaining the gospel generates in the (bodies of the) people who both produce and consume it and – even more importantly – the question of ‘why’ this is so.¹⁴ Let me illustrate this one-sidedness by giving a few examples.

In their book *Re-forming the body. Religion, community and modernity* Phillip Mellor and Chris Shilling¹⁵ present an impressive and fascinating overview of the ways in which the complex relationship between: 1) forms of embodiment, conceived by them as a specific constellation of techniques of the body, habitus and sensory organization; 2) forms of sociality, understood by them as specific patterns of interdependent individuals; and 3) forms of (religious) knowing that change over time. They start by distinguishing a ‘mode’ of bodily being in the world as it was generated by the Catholic Reformation, which they call ‘the medieval body’. This ‘mode’ or ‘body’ had ‘a sacred eating community’ as its social context and went together with a form of ‘knowing’ labeled ‘carnal’, implying that knowledge in this phase was gained through the body, more particularly through all the senses and not just a selected few. ‘Knowledge was gained (...) from a *thinking body* in which sensuous understanding involved *all* of the body’s senses, and from the intricate links which existed between the fleshy, physical body and the mind.’¹⁶ As far as religion was concerned, they state that effervescent ritual was dominant and the sacred was not understood so much as being transcendent, but as immanent and residing in the body. In their view, the Protestant Reformation then brought about a fairly radical change, replacing the medieval body with ‘the protestant modern body’, the sacred eating community with ‘profane associations’ and carnal knowing with ‘cognitive apprehension’. ‘The Protestant Reformation encouraged people to perceive their minds as separate from, and superior to their limited and limiting bodies,’¹⁷ as well as to rearrange the importance they attached to their senses. From now on, according to this scenario, only their ears and their eyes were emphasized as the sensorial organs that brought knowledge about the world and what it transcended – a loss of full sensorial engagement. ‘Carnal knowing’ did not disappear altogether, however: ‘[K]nowledge became an increasingly mental phenomenon in which the mind, experienced as divorced from the prejudices of the body’s passions and senses, provided valid knowledge.’¹⁸ The significance

¹⁴ But see, for example, S.F. HARDING: ‘Convicted by the Holy Spirit. The rhetoric of fundamental Baptist conversion’, in *American ethnologist* 14/1 (1987) 167-181, for she sketches how the language used by a fundamentalist Baptist reverend – conceived by her as a bundle of symbolic, narrative, poetic, and rhetorical strategies – not only constitutes its speaker, but also reconstitutes its listeners. However, Harding does not deal with the question what this (re)constitution might mean in a more physical sense.

¹⁵ Ph. MELLOR & Chr. SHILLING: *Re-forming the body. Religion, community and modernity* (London 1997).

¹⁶ MELLOR & SHILLING: *Re-forming the body* 23.

¹⁷ MELLOR & SHILLING: *Re-forming the body* 23-24.

¹⁸ MELLOR & SHILLING: *Re-forming the body* 24.

of effervescent rituals decreased or even disappeared, and the sacred was no longer perceived as an immanent, but rather as a transcendent phenomenon. According to Mellor and Shilling we now live in a world in which yet another body – a baroque modern one – dominates, characterized by a reappraisal of the senses and ‘...the reappearance of sensual forms of knowing and sociality’.¹⁹

I am critical of what Mellor and Shilling say regarding the turn to cognitive apprehension during and after the Protestant Reformation. Though they want to get rid of the idea that the rationalistic Enlightenment project implied a victory of the senses associated with rationality and gaining knowledge over the extra-rational ones and want to find out what kind of hierarchies appeared over time, they nevertheless sketch a rather lopsided perspective on, for instance, bringing the Word of God and preaching the gospel, for their emphasis undeniably is on these being exclusively rational and cognitive projects. I will provide a few quotes to illustrate their stance: ‘(...) the role of a Christian “minister” (...) concerns the expression of Christian discourse and the education of people in a sound *knowledge* of Christian doctrine...’;²⁰ and: ‘Reading or listening to the Scriptures (...) involved Protestants in *calm, considered thought* which enabled them to conceptualize their lives as religious narratives (...).’²¹ One of the sources of Mellor and Schilling’s viewpoints is the work of Pasi Falk, who introduced the notion of the ‘autonomization of language’, implying ‘the detachment of words from bodily states’.

I hope that it should be clear by now that *Re-forming the body* is not the kind of work that can be of much help in developing a better understanding of the specific genre of preaching, reading and talking in ultra-orthodox Calvinist circles that I have put under the spotlight, or of the role the remarkable rhetorical techniques may play for believers and their religious experiences. The point is that the authors sketch the Protestant preaching business as a purely cognitive phenomenon, anchored in an unspecified, apparently immaterial, mind and not grounded in the physical body at all, as so often is the case in the work of social scientists focusing on the body. There is a tendency to uncritically reproduce theological self-representations in their historical sketch of the reformed body, without paying even the slightest attention to actual Reformed bodily practices and their effects.

A book that offers more perspective in this regard is the work of Charles Hirschkind, *The ethical soundscape*.²² He not only pays serious attention to the theological knowledge mediated to young Egyptian Muslims attracted to Islamic reform movements by listening to sermons on cassette, but also to the emo-

¹⁹ MELLOR & SHILLING: *Re-forming the body* 30.

²⁰ MELLOR & SHILLING: *Re-forming the body* 104.

²¹ MELLOR & SHILLING: *Re-forming the body* 48.

²² C. HIRSCHKIND: *The ethical soundscape. Cassette sermons and Islamic counterpublics* (New York 2006).

tions it brings up. He argues that this listening triggers responses at a deep corporeal or visceral level (though he is not specific about the kinds of physiological and neurological processes involved) and how these particular soundscapes help believers in building up a specific type of religiously inspired morality and to engage in a form of self-cultivation so as to be pious Muslims. Though Hirschkind takes bodily functioning – or rather tuning – seriously in understanding the physical impact of sermons, in the long run he also turns his attention away from this physical impact towards the social and the cultural impact. However, it is my conviction that one might discover interesting things if one would concentrate more on the specific corporeal effects of the rhythmical and melodious character of the religious language of preachers like Jacobus den Hartog, or of the total musical soundscape they produce in their services.

4. Calvinist soundscapes

Before dealing succinctly with these possible effects, I would like to say something more about the kind of language Jacobus and similar preachers like to use, although this is not easily done, since this language is Janus-faced. It is my conviction that this language forms a key, maybe even *the* key to a better understanding of what it generates in the bodies of the people who produce it through their mouths and/or consume it through their ears. On the one hand, it is a language that suggests an immense knowledge and experience of a transcendental reality. This is why it gives the impression of being a useful tool for ‘learning’ a lot in an intellectual sense about the nature of this reality, its relevance for human beings, its main characteristics, how difficult entering a state of grace is, how many states there are, and the kind of experiences one must go through before receiving a sign of being elected etc. It is, moreover, characterized by the use of all kinds of detailed classifications and distinctions regarding, for example, the religious state of human beings and their moods and motivations, which gives it an intellectual and rational ring. On the other hand, it is at the same time a highly poetic and rather cryptic language, especially where it concerns descriptions of experiences with transcendental entities, such as God, the Holy Ghost and Jesus Christ. Take, for example, this description by Jacobus of a vision of the latter:²³

O, this Beloved, see Him in His blood-red robe. See Him bathe in blood and tears.
O, see him descend and swim and sink and drown in the oceans of God’s wrath

²³ O, die Liefeling, zie Hem in Zijn bloedrode gewaad. Ziet Hem baadden in bloed en tranen. O, zie Hem nederdalen en zwemmen en zinken en verdrinken in de oceanen van Gods toorn en grimmigheid. O, went over Hem (niet om Hem), maakt Hem nat met uwe liefde tranen, zalft Hem met innige smart en hartelijk leedwezen. En vergeeft het uzelve nooit dat gij Hem ’t harte heeft doen breken in de dood. J. DEN HARTOG: *Onderwijzingen op de Weg des Levens* 1 (Culemborg, s.a.) 50 (translation JIV).

and fury. O, weep over Him (not about Him), make Him wet with your tears of love, put ointment on Him with deep sorrow and heartfelt regret. And never forgive yourself that it was you who broke his heart in the death.

Jacobus claimed to have had many of this type of experience, some of which were rather exceptional. The most impressive one he described several times was his visit to heaven in order to get married to Jesus (whom he calls at the same time his bridegroom and brother²⁴) in the presence of God, the Holy Ghost, the Patriarchs, the Prophets and an army of angels making the sweetest music with flutes and harps. Less complex experiences were his occasional meetings with Jesus, who told him where to go next to let him feel His divine love, and in which he was washed away in an ocean of sweet feelings, making him forget for a moment that in fact he was a guilty and sinful creature, and therefore lower than a maggot or a worm.

In order to describe these kind of experiences, ultra-orthodox covert believers fall back on a plethora of archaic expressions and metaphors (often borrowed from the Old Writers) as well as neologisms, which make it rather difficult for outsiders to understand what exactly they are writing and talking about. An exception is when it concerns the reciprocal love between a Christian convert and God, or more specifically Jesus Christ, for then a rather stereotypical, theocratic repertoire of old is often mobilized.²⁵ It is also worth noting that their language is not always grammatically correct. These features make the particular language used by evangelists such as Jacobus into a kind of secret language, secret not only for outsiders, but to a certain extent also for insiders who still feel that they lack the amount of religious knowledge and experience held by converted believers, to whom the Lord himself has revealed their life after death. It is significant here that Jacobus often qualified the language he used in his texts (and sermons) as a kind of ‘gibberish’ (*wartaal*), only understandable after one has had a series of experiences with God and/or his Son, Jesus Christ through the Holy Ghost: in other words, experiences that outsiders usually call

²⁴ If one looks at his descriptions of his marital relationship with the Son of God, Jacobus saw himself at the same time as male and female. But there are also passages in his writings in which he perceives Jesus as female and himself as a baby drinking from his breasts.

²⁵ De Vrijer, who made an impressive study of ‘Old Writers’, especially Wilhelmus Schortinghuis, described his language as a ‘(...) devout, emotional language replete with adjectives and superlatives’ (DE VRIJER: *Schortinghuis en zijn analogieën* 107; translation JV). Schortinghuis himself said about his language that it ‘...emanated from the abundance of a full heart...’ and was an instrument for expressing ‘...the enchantment of the unsurpassable love of Jesus Christ felt in the heart...’. For him it was obvious that followers of Christ should coin their own words and expressions with regard to their religious experiences that would be unintelligible for outsiders (*Ibidem* 107; translation JV). The pietist Jodocus van Lodenstein compared the for outsiders often opaque language of pietists with the technical jargon of professionals. IDEM: *Uren met Lodenstein* (Baarn s.a.) 32-33.

mystical.²⁶ One good example of this ‘gibberish’ is this passage: ‘So then I descended from the highest level of being able to be called Mother, descended to highest level of being able to be called Mother namely: **God himself** in the Uterine of the Eternal Love can be called both Mother and Father’.²⁷

In the letters from Jacobus to his fiancée, who was still struggling to achieve the kind of experiences he continually had, he makes several remarks regarding some rather cryptic passages, which strike me as being very interesting in this context. It is important to note that it was and still is customary among Jacobus’ followers to regularly read aloud his letters, including the ones he wrote to his fiancée, during their services. A couple of such examples: ‘O Mary, these are no nice-sounding, melodic tones to tickle the ear or to move the nerves into kind-heartedness. Thus just sorcery! No, my beloved, but heart-tones given to me by the Love of God’²⁸, and: ‘Mary, what I write are not melodic tones or sounding bell sounds in order to titillate the nerves, but from the heavenly tones of my soul, which enjoys itself in God’.²⁹ In this connection it is interesting to know that Jacobus distinguished two types of singing and music: on the one hand that of God and the angels in heaven, produced with voices and specific wind and string instruments such as harps, lutes, organs and trumpets; and on the other hand that of Satan and his henchmen. ‘Do you play David’s harp or Jubal’s invention of all kinds of music to please the senses and stimulate the nerves in a dreadful dream of imagined pleasure?’ he wrote in one of his letters.³⁰

Here we are not only implicitly confronted with Jacobus’ (folk) insight, that sounds and tones can stimulate the nervous system and, in so doing, can generate blissful moods and emotions, but also with an explicit denial that this also might happen during religious language use of the type he and his elders devel-

²⁶ See in this connection DE VRIJER: *Schortinghuis en zijn analogieën* for the emphasis the Protestant believers who were inspired by ‘Old Writers’ put on *bevindingen*, that is the highly emotional experiences of the kind described by Jacobus. According to De Vrijer it here concerns mystical experiences of a Christian type, for the believers are striving for a personal communion with the Trinity. However, he thinks that some of them exaggerated, in which case he does not talk about *mystiek* but *mysticisme*, a distinction not made in English.

²⁷ *Zo ben ik dan van den hoogsten trap van Moeder genaamd te kunnen worden, afgedaald tot den allerhoogsten trap van Moeder genaamd te kunnen worden namelijk: **God zelf** in ’t Baarmoederlijke der Eenwige Liefde kan Moeder zowel als Vader genaamd worden (...)*. J. DEN HARTOG: *Ge-loofsbelijdens* (s.l., s.a.) 57 (translation JV).

²⁸ *O Marie, dit zijn geen schoon klinkende, melodische klanken om het oor te kittelen of de zenuwen in beweging te brengen in gemoedelijkeheid. Dus maar toverij! Nee, mijn beminde, maar hartetonen uit de Liefde Gods mij geschonken.* DEN HARTOG: *Alzo gingen die beiden* 38 (translation JV).

²⁹ *Marie, hetgeen ik schrijf zijn geen melodische klanken of luidende schel geluiden, om de zenuwen te prikkelen, maar uit de hemeltonen van mijn ziel, die in God verblijd is.* DEN HARTOG: *Alzo gingen die beiden* 215 (translation JV).

³⁰ J. DEN HARTOG: *Het fundament van het Nieuw Jeruzalem* 3 (Culemborg 1999) 21 (translation JV).

oped, even though it apparently did. As a matter of fact this was no new insight, because Calvin followed Augustine³¹ in airing this view in the preface of his *Genevan Psalter* of 1542, wherein he states:³²

And in truth we know by experience that singing has great force and vigor to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal. Care must always be taken that the song be neither light nor frivolous: but that it have weight and majesty (...).

I believe that Jacobus was unaware that exactly his kind of language use, especially when spoken, or even better (half-) chanted and combined with weeping, sighing and moaning, and a-rhythmic psalm singing, functioned as a special kind of driving behavior (or body technique), tuning the nervous system of believers into evoking themselves just such a ecstatic, emotional and mystical experiences that they desperately want to 'receive'.³³ He was not only a master in self-tuning, but also, in his performances, in tuning his audiences.³⁴ In this context we might refer to Peter Sloterdijk's 'Sirene-effect', that is, '(...) the intimate susceptibility of individuals for sound messages, which convey a sort of happiness hypnosis (...)', because '[T]he Sirene masters the art of filling the soul of the subject with self-created emotion (...)' and '(...) situates the subject in the centre of the hymnal rapture, which seems to well up from him-

³¹ See S.A.F. VAN MAAS: *Doorbraak en idolatrie. Olivier Messiaen en het geloof in muziek* (Amsterdam 2002) 105-131.

³² C. GARSIDE: 'Calvin's preface to the Psalter. A re-appraisal', in *The musical quarterly* 37/4 (1951) 566-577, p. 568; see also L.P. SPELMAN: 'Calvin and the arts', in *The journal of aesthetics and art criticism* 6/3 (1948) 246-252, p. 250. See also Heimbrock who points out '(...) dass Klänge von Musik (wie auch von Worten!) affective Wirkung unterhalb der verbalen Textbotschaft entfalteteten, die durch verbale Steuerungsinstrumente nicht kontrollierbar sind', in H.-G. HEIMBROCK: "'Modo religioso". Klang und religiöse Bedürfnisse', in G. FERMOR, H.-M. GUTMANN & H. SCHROETER (Hrsg.): *Theophonie. Grenzgänge zwischen Musik und Theologie* (Rheinbach 2000) 204-237, p. 207.

³³ See for an illuminating essay on how specific driving behaviours of self and/or others (such as dancing and drumming, as well as (listening to) singing and speaking) manifested during rituals can tune both the central and autonomous nervous system in such a way, that they start functioning in another, for example, mystical manner B. LEX: 'The neurobiology of ritual trance', in E.G. D'AQUILI et al: *The spectrum of ritual. A biogenetic structural analysis* (New York 1979) 117-152. I dealt with her work and that of others on bodily effects of sound, rhythm, etc. in J. VERRIPS: 'Wie zijn hoofd niet koel houdt gebruikt zijn hersens', in A. KOSTER, Y. KUIPER & J. VERRIPS (red.): *Feest en ritueel in Europa. Antropologische essays* (= Antropologische studies VU 3) (Amsterdam 1983) 346-372.

³⁴ Jacobus' behaviour shows a strong family resemblance with that of a shaman, who tuned himself with the help of drums, rattles and singing in such a way that he made 'journeys' to another world where he met spirits who talked with him in a similar way as God and Jesus Christ did with the former.

self and brings him into seventh heaven'.³⁵ What Jacobus was engaged in when preaching to his followers and/or talking with his fellow believers in a semi-musical manner has marked similarities to the techniques and driving behaviors used by mediaeval mystics in order to experience the nearness of the divine: to achieve its temporary entrance into their existence where their theological knowledge failed to do so.

Recently the mediaevalist Niklaus Largier has published a series of articles in which he sketches how these mystics used, for example, specific rhetorical means to construct what he calls 'theaters of arousal' and to create³⁶

(...) an experiential instead of a conceptual understanding of the excessive pleasures of the divine (...) the discovery of new and unheard states of emotional arousal (...) and finally (...) an amplification of the sensory and affective life through artificial means of the articulation of the word.

The fact that ever since the Reformation there have been Calvinist evangelists and preachers who have spoken and preached like Jacobus, that is, using a (semi-) musical manner and/or using certain rhetorical techniques and other corporeal practices firstly to generate outer and inner sensational experiences, and less importantly to transmit a reasonable understanding of the divine, shows that a break of the type Mellor and Shilling suggest needs serious revision. For the mystical tradition in which a series of different driving behaviors, such as praying, reading, singing and speaking in a specific, rhythmical and musical way has not vanished from the Calvinist stage at all, but has indeed been kept alive over time in certain ultra-orthodox Calvinist circles.³⁷

5. Conclusion

This article has brought up the extraordinary paradox of pietistic language use, especially in its (half) chanted form: its power to both express religious knowledge and – more importantly – to evoke mystical, ecstatic or even trance-like experiences at the same time.³⁸ This double dimension shows itself most

³⁵ P. SLOTERDIJK: *Sferen* (Amsterdam 2007) 327, 317-318 (translation JV). Fascinating are Sloterdijk's remarks on what he calls 'sirene-religiosity' which stirs up mystical forces and can lead to sectarian sorcery and ascension madness; see *Ibidem* 331.

³⁶ N. LARGIER: 'Divine suffering – Divine pleasure. Martyrdom, sensuality, and the art of delay', in *Figurationen: Gender, Literatur, Kultur* 12/1 (2011) 67-81, p. 75. See also N. LARGIER: *Die Kunst des Begehrens Dekadenz, Sinnlichkeit und Askese* (München 2007) 58 ff. where he deals with (...) *der Entfaltung rhetorisch induzierter Sinnlichkeit* (...).

³⁷ See in this connection DE VRIJER: *Schortinghuis en zijn analogieën* 98-99, 139, 237.

³⁸ We are confronted here with a phenomenon that is not unique for Christianity. In his fascinating article on the reading aloud of the Tora Moshe Idel, for example, states: *Nicht die spirituelle Beschäftigung mit der Tora noch etwa die Aufnahme ihrer religiösen Inhalte sind*

clearly when orthodox Calvinists start singing psalms after having listened in the same motionless posture to a 'weighty' sermon presented like a piece of monotonous music with an exceptional rhythm. One often hears the expression 'the preacher spoke beautifully' after the end of the service. This implies not only that he clarified the Word of the Lord in an enlightening way and presented a moral application, but also and especially that what he voiced generated sentiments, moods and motivations with regard to the Lord that go beyond words and belong to the realm of deeply felt emotions of – again – a mystical nature. Orthodox Calvinist preaching, just like reading pietistic texts, turns out to be a double-edged sword or 'sensational form', as Birgit Meyer might say,³⁹ for it physically tunes the body twice, both intellectually and emotionally. I think that it would be beneficial for everyone interested in the study of Calvinism if more attention were to be paid to the ways in which the voice is used and manipulated in religious settings, such as church services, and what the effects this use and manipulation have on the functioning of the body, in particular in the realm of 'outer' sensorial experiences and 'inner' emotions and perceptions. The Calvinist tendency to sharply distinguish between a material body or the flesh on the one hand and an immaterial mind or the word on the other should not blind us towards this undeniable use and manipulation of the voice in such contexts, and the kind of effects at a deep corporeal level they (temporarily) generate in, for example, the brain and nervous system of self and others.⁴⁰ Jacobus would have never agreed with such a perspective, for although like Augustine and Calvin he on occasion formulated somewhat similar thoughts, the three of them were convinced of the great negative tuning power of music and rhythm in secular settings.

Prof. dr. Jojada Verrips (1942) is emeritus professor of the Anthropology of Europe at the University of Amsterdam. He has written and edited a number of books, e.g., on the religious life in a Dutch farming village and on the unions of bargemen in the Netherlands. Some of his current interests are blasphemy, transgressive art and the erosion of boundaries between animals, human beings and things.
E-Mail: j.verrips@uva.nl.

es also, die in erster Linie zur Erfahrung der Vereinigung führen, sondern ihre vernehmlich laute Lesung, in M. IDEL: 'Die laut gelesene Tora. Stimmengemeinschaft in der jüdischen Mystik', in F. KITTLER, T. MACHO & S. WEIGEL (Hrsg.): *Zwischen Rauschen und Offenbarung. Zur Kultur- und Mediengeschichte der Stimme* (Berlin 2008) 19-55, p. 30. See P. DE ROOIJ: 'Als soefis het op hun zenuwen krijgen. Antropologiebeoefening tussen voorstellings- en belevingswereld', in *Amsterdams sociologisch tijdschrift* 13/1 (1986) 108-129 for the crucial role chant (in combination with movement and percussion) plays in evoking mystical experiences amongst Sufis who participate in *diker*-rituals.

³⁹ B. MEYER: *Religious sensations. Why media, aesthetics and power matter in the study of contemporary religion* (Inaugural Lecture) (Amsterdam 2006).

⁴⁰ See J. VERRIPS: 'Body and mind: material for a never-ending intellectual odyssey', in D. MORGAN (ed.): *Religion and material culture. The matter of belief* (London / New York 2010) 21-40.

Diverse bijdragen

