

An epistemological reflection on the relevance of monastic traditions for retreat in the Dutch Reformed tradition

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Abstract

The article focuses on retreat as a relatively new phenomenon in the Dutch Reformed tradition. Retreat is viewed as “communicative action”. The aim of the article is firstly to explore epistemological theories in the postmodern paradigm. These theories provide a mental framework for the identification of a research model and a related methodology by means of which the relevance of monastic traditions for retreat in the Reformed tradition can be discovered. The identification of appropriate theories offers an adequate model and method for entering into a narrative inter-dialogue with retreatants. The article argues that Paul Ricoeur’s concept of the hermeneutical arc, Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of the fusion of horizons, and Jürgen Habermas’ emphasis on symmetrical communication supply the necessary epistemological theories for such a project. From the perspective of this epistemology, the “action of retreat” is described in terms of a social constructionist model which paves the way for the method of qualitative interviewing. The project can be described as a narrative research journey.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article is a written report of a research journey which was observational, participatory and experiential. It was a reflection on the action of retreat. The aim of the research project (see Schutte 2006a) was to gain inside knowledge of monastic traditions which subsequently led to a personal transformation. In

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other words, this research narrated a process of increasing assimilation – a pilgrimage which developed via active participation in twelve retreats in South Africa as well as in the community life of and retreats at three monasteries abroad (subjective involvement *and* observation). The research was structured in the form of a plot which developed through interpretation and reflection in which researcher and the research subject (valued co-researchers and co-pilgrims) together constructed a shared reality and new story. The results of this narrative research journey will be described in two separate articles. The first focuses on epistemology and the second on the relevance of monastic retreat for pastoral care.

The main objective of the narrative research journey was not to formulate a new or adapted theory. It was to reflect epistemologically on the relevance of the monastic tradition for the Dutch Reformed Church. One line of the story was to describe the process of assessing the need or hunger in that church for a specific lived experience of God that is contemplative in nature and which values solitude and silence. A second line was participatory reflection on stories of retreatants and their experiences of God in the context of holy places, monasteries and retreat centres of the Benedictine and Franciscan orders and Taizé. My aim was to compare the various retreat-stories in order to extract pointers for a *way of retreat* (retreat structure) and for a *way of life* (after or between retreats). The intention was to contribute to the enhancement of the spirituality of the researcher's own denomination and the broader Reformed tradition in South Africa.

In light of my assumption that retreat can be perceived as “communicative action”, the aim of this first article is to explore epistemological theories in the postmodern paradigm that can provide a mental framework for the identification of a research model and a related methodology. The chosen theories, model and method enabled me to engage in a narrative inter-dialogue with retreatants (co-researchers). Paul Ricoeur's concept of the hermeneutical arc, Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons, and Jürgen Habermas' emphasis on symmetrical communication supplied the necessary epistemological theories. From the perspective of this epistemology, the “action of retreat” can be described in terms of a social constructionist model. The choice of this model paved the way for the method of qualitative interviewing. The whole process can be described as a narrative research journey. The article “concludes” with findings regarding the relevance of monastic traditions for retreat in the Reformed tradition that serve as the preface to the second article.

2. EPISTEMOLOGY

The aim of epistemological reflection is to find an appropriate methodology for research. Therefore epistemological reflection is also needed for this investigation into the relevance of the monastic tradition for pastoral care in the Dutch Reformed Church. It builds a bridge between an idea and its execution in praxis. Epistemology as a “theory of knowledge” is a reflection on the nature of knowledge, its sources, criteria, possibilities, and limits.

The approach to my study was not neutral or objective. Specific presuppositions determined by a particular worldview, view of life and philosophical mind-set form the point of departure in any research project (see Vorster 1999:101-105; Venter 2004:438). The postmodern view of reality consciously and unconsciously determined and influenced my approach and premises regarding the research field. In this context paradigm theory (see Lamberth 1997:205; cf Barker 1996:xv-xvii) shows how Western society has proceeded from the *premodern* associative paradigm, beyond the *modern* disassociative (“enlightenment”) view dominated by ideal of scientific progress and “absolute” truth claims, to *postmodernity*. Here the emphasis is on the human experience of the present, the interest in peoples’ authentic spiritual experience of the metaphysical, also referred to as the “cosmological Source” (Du Toit 2000:14-23, 55-56; cf Grondin 1994:141-142; Van Peursen 1995:9-10, 21; Ackerman 2001:22-25; Riggs 2003:29). This process represents a development from inductive and deductive (see Van der Ven 1998:108; 2000:56-57) to abductive reasoning (see Peirce 1957:236-237).

Postmodern suspicion of grand theories of meaning and truth (meta-narratives) does not preclude all theoretical reflection (Cartledge 2003:249). Theory evolves from an understanding that language and knowledge are thoroughly conditioned by historical contexts, are inter-subjective and do not presuppose “true” assertions about an “objective” reality *out there*. A postmodern approach calls for a dynamic reciprocal and interactive interplay between theory and findings or results in a non-positivistic way (cf Van Huyssteen 1999:29). An *abductive* epistemology (Peirce 1932:136-138, 152-153; 1957:236-237; cf Fann 1970:17-18, 50; Curt 1994:235; Dreyer 2002:923) replaces positivistic deductive and inductive reasoning. Active, reflexive reasoning provides a means to explore data without formulating foundational theories (see Burkhard 2004:131-133; cf Murphy & McClendon 1988-1989:192-193; Thiel 1994:17-19, 82-84, 87-88, 94-97; Guardino 1989:241-252; 1990:221-235; 1995-1996:57-69). It goes beyond conventional thinking. By participating in (an) existing stories(y) one’s own reality is transformed into a new life story. Such an internarrative discourse does not try to “prove”

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anything, but rather suggests possibilities of existence (cf Brawley 2003:605-608; Curt 1994:88, 232).

Within this paradigm the model of meta, basis, and praxis theory does not function as a mental construct which exists independently of the physical, psychological, and social structures of life (Anderson 2004:21; cf Riggs 2003:79:111; see Habermas [1981]1984:397). Throughout this research journey my aim was to be constantly aware of life stories *out there* and the ongoing transformation of my own inner story. This includes an awareness of one's own presuppositions, interests and concerns that could influence the research process and outcome. It comprises a back-and-forth movement between the researcher and the researched. When data requires it, the researcher should be flexible and adaptable. This kind of reasoning can be described as a *critical-realist* epistemology. Relationality and inter-subjectivity exclude dominance. At times a more detached stance is necessary, especially in a narrative laden environment, because knowledge is *limited* and *partial* (cf Wright 1993:32-46; Cartledge 2003:17, 26-27, 44-45). This distanciation helps the researcher to avoid absolute and totalitarian truth claims.

This epistemological perspective has the consequence that my reflection on the monastic traditions and the action of retreat was ideological-critical, deconstructive, and inclusive, striving towards authentic communication with respect for the interactive input of others as co-researchers. Instead of imposing "conclusions", the findings of this research rather opened questions for further research. The reason for this open-endedness was that the research focused on different traditions: the Jesus tradition, the stories of the co-researchers, the monastic traditions, the Reformed tradition, as well as the researchers' own story. When new life stories are created, new choices are opened up (see Neuger 2001:86-87).

The epistemological presuppositions of my investigation function within a communicative meta-theoretical model which utilises the science-philosophical positions of Hans-Georg Gadamer (*Understanding and Self-understanding*), Paul Ricoeur (*Explanation of Existence*) and Jürgen Habermas (*Theory of Practical Intent and Emancipating Interest*). My model employed especially the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. His abductive reasoning focuses on praxis, appropriation, experience, application, ideology critique and political philosophy. He is also known for his response to the challenge of pluralism. Ricoeur's work therefore provides a distinctively postmodern resource for theological reflection (see Stiver 2001:30-31).

On account of the chosen abductive epistemology, my research journey presupposes that all knowledge and meaning are relative and that the interpretation of data is an ongoing process, Signs used in language – verbal

or non-verbal – are symbols that ask to be interpreted in an indirectly way. This causes interpretation to contain a mystical element. Interpretation has the potential to constantly generate new ways of understanding because of ever changing experiences. Interpretation always creates congeniality *and* distance. Therefore a research journey should provide space for two horizons. The endeavour to understand leads to belongingness (the commonality of human experience and tradition). The second horizon is that of dissociation. This causes alienation rather than commonality. Alienation creates the space for mediating self-understanding, appropriation and self-criticism.

In my research journey Ricoeur's (1967:17; 1973:141, 213-215; 1974:160-208; 1981:36, 52, 131-144, 150; 1984:57; 1991:16-19) model for *text interpretation* is employed to provide a paradigm of and analogy for the "action of retreat". His insights make it possible to do justice to both the *researcher's* and the co-researchers' life-story (past, present and future). Ricoeur's (1981:180; 1985:52-87; 157-179; cf Flick 1998:33; Dreyer 2003:326) concept of the *hermeneutical arc* encompasses the whole process of the understanding of narratives. It provides a framework for the interpreter to move beyond a first understanding (pre-understanding, pre-conception). This process of "prefiguration" contributes to the interpretation of retreat in the respective traditions. Through a critical explanation built on an interpretations constructed by this "prefigured world" a process of involvement, imagination, reflection and self-understanding is created. This is the second phase called the "configuration" of the narrative discourse which leads to a post-critical understanding, which is the third phase. It is referred to as "refiguration". Post-critical understanding is the process of internalisation (appropriation and application of meaning). Both researcher and co-researchers are engaged in this process. In my research I listened to and reflected on the co-pilgrims' and my own stories about God, experience of God and of monastic retreat. This has created a personal, *new, alternative or unique* research story.

The concept of the "alternative or unique story" correlates with Gadamer's (1982:5-7, 101-110, 269, 300-307) view that people's lives are narratives that are written, revised and rewritten over time because of changing experiences and traditions. According to Gadamer (1982:230, 370) two horizons fuse. This happens when one's own existence merges with that of another by means of interactive dialogue. In my research journey a connection between *my horizon* of assumptions and presuppositions (shaped by the Dutch Reformed tradition and my affinity for monastic retreat) and the *horizon of the research action* developed. In other words, the horizon of the researcher (Gadamer 1982:292) expanded on account of the encounter with the horizon of the co-researchers and co-pilgrims within the monastic tradition.

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My application of Gadamer's notion of the hermeneutical circle is enhanced with Jürgen Habermas's philosophy. Habermas' (1972:51, 195, 302-304, 310-324) concern with *practice* and *emancipation* (which consists of *self-reflection* and *ideological-critical interest*) guided the hermeneutical process of my research journey. This means that my epistemological reflection on the research problem was a critical reflection. It also means that my own beliefs, agendas and interests were scrutinised.

Other theories also contributed to my epistemological reflection. Firstly, an existential-hermeneutical-dialogical approach (see Jansen & Steinberg 1991:57; Cartledge 2003:79) supported my direct observational and motivational explanation. A symbolical interaction theory (see Flick 1998:18) made my interactive-subjective interpretation possible. With the help of a narrative hermeneutical theory (see Ricoeur 1981:171-176; 280-287) aspects such as contextuality, locality, pluralism, inclusivity, and self-understanding through a narrative discourse could be explored (see Gerkin 1991:54- 59; White & Epston 1990:3-9; cf Müller 1996:4, 25; Dreyer 2003:327). From the perspective of a constructionist narrative theory participatory observation and experiential, reflexive, listening to stories became possible (see Van der Ven 1998:9; cf Neimeyer 2000:6-7, 207-242; Pare 1995:3-7). Myth theory and its emphasis on ritual helped to explain stories of a religious nature by combining aspects such as myth, rite and ethics (see Nijk 1968:272; Bolle 1987:261; cf Malinowski 1971:11-35; Theissen 1999:2).

My epistemological reflection is praxis and empirically oriented. The praxis orientation consists of both value-laden activities and the experience of Gods' presence in the world. My interactive experience with the social environment required an empirical investigation. This means that the researcher participated in order to determine what meanings the retreatants attributed to the action of retreat. In light of Ricoeur's (1992:143-168) insights, interpretation of the stories evolved as a dialogical process. This led to my research story to become an epistemological reflective observation. The results described in these articles consist of an understanding and explanation of retreat.

The methodology used here focused on the role of shared meaning, authentic communication, and self-actualisation in an evolving dialogical relationship between the researcher and the research participants. By using this methodology the "subjective meanings" (to see the world from the perspective of the research subjects by getting involved in it) of the individuals and groups on retreat could be highlighted. The notion of "subjective meaning" refers to the perspective of the research participants, to their experience of retreat with regard to the place, the elements of the retreat, the events and

rituals. The empirical investigation consisted of a reflective inner-dialogue between researcher and co-researchers (co-pilgrims). This process enabled me as the researcher to identify various aspects of the experience of retreat in order to develop a model which can be used in the Dutch Reformed tradition.

The process of inter-dialogue assumes an ongoing narrative-hermeneutical approach. In a narrative discourse the *space* (the topical arena) where the characters are active, is important. Retreat is the immediate storied context of this narrative research journey. This context with, for example, its emphasis on mystical elements, ritual, and religious experiences provided a framework in which various epistemological theories could be accommodated. Insights of Ricoeur, Gadamer and Habermas assisted in the investigation of the dynamics of the inter-dialogue.

With the help of the insights of the practical theologian, Hans van der Ven's (1993:101) methodological reflection on empirical intra-disciplinarity, I borrowed, adapted and integrated concepts, methods, and techniques from other social sciences. Some principles (see Schweitzer & Van der Ven 1999:331-332) were honoured during the epistemological reflection. The research began with my own presuppositions which were transformed by the data. The context of the research subjects was consciously taken into account. Their multi-dimensional context includes religious, ecological, economic, political, social aspects. The process of research was subjected to a hermeneutics of suspicion. From an ideological-critical perspective, the thoughts, praxis, and feelings of both the researcher and the co-researchers were critically explored.

A critical-realistic epistemology guided the research process. In such a pragmatic theory (cf Cartledge 2003:41-45), truth is viewed as relational and is seen as the result of an interactive interpretative process between researcher as "subject" of knowing and the co-researchers as the "object" of research. In a storied context the interpretive process involves the inside knowledge and experience of the characters/participants/researcher/co-researchers emplotted in the narrative research journey (cf Shuman 1997:215-217; Lindbeck 1984:112). During the research journey, perceptions of the present reality of mystic traditions and retreat, memories of experiences as well as the different stories of reality of scholars and monastic communities provided the data for the *listening* process.

Therefore, a narrative approach was a significant aspect of my investigation. In order to make sense of our lives and to express ourselves during the research journey, experiences were consciously and unconsciously storied (shaped in story form) and it was this *storying* that determined the meaning ascribed to the retreat experience (Ricoeur 1984:52; cf Crites

1971:291). In this narrative research journey many stories occurred simultaneously and the different stories about retreat were shared and listened to.

This “communicative action of retreat” is described in terms of a postmodern narrative model. The intention was to construct a new life story. This is referred to by Keeney (1985:20) as a “new system”. “Knowledge” narrated in story-form is not a philosophical, theological, or psychological construct. Such constructs give rise to master narratives – consciously or unconsciously. Viewing a narrative research journey as a dynamic listening process rather deconstructs existing master narratives and helps to construct “renewed authentic narratives”. The aim of my research was to transform master narratives in the Reformed tradition by listening to the monastic traditions. My narrative approach required symmetrical interaction between the researcher and co-subjects (participants), critical self-reflection, not aiming for a one and only “final truth” (modernistic) to be deductively discovered by a “rational” subject (the researcher).

3. A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST MODEL

The research was positioned within the postmodern social constructionist model (see Gerkin 1984; Browning [1983] 1991, 1996). By being a participating observer of retreat, a new world was created for both myself (the researcher) and the co-researchers on account of a shared interpretation of traditions. This narrative research journey transformed scattered events and experiences (sub-plots of the researcher and co-researchers) into a new meaningful coherent plot (see Ricoeur’s [1981:274-296] explanation of such a transformational process). On such a narrative journey the sub-stories begin to speak for themselves: the narrators/researchers fade into the background. Their new life story becomes a confession, a witness and reflection on the experience and interpretation of what has occurred during the research journey.

In light of this process of refiguration, according to White & Epston (1990:79-83), the narrative model focuses on the *lived experiences* of characters involved. Each person/group/tradition finds meaning through the interaction with the stories of others. Their perception of the world has changed. Previous lived experiences have been renewed. This is a plotting process: people have been linked together and their stories have merged.

There is a temporal dimension to the plotting process. In the narrative discourse *time* refers to a linear unfolding of episodes from past to present to future. It also involves a more conceptual dimension, referred to as the “subjunctive mood” (the liminal or betwixt, the mood of maybe, might be, as if,

hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire and focus on human possibilities rather than certainties). From a postmodern perspective, narrative refiguration can be explained in terms of the “subjunctive mood” because the new lived experiences are flexible rather than fixed. An implication of flexible lived experience could be an awareness of presuppositions which triggers new presuppositions. According to the philosopher Jacques Derrida ([1967] 1978) one story displaces the next and the next ... “Intertextuality is a theory that conceives of every text as a set of relations between texts, an intersection of texts that are themselves intersections of other texts, and so on. Every text is a locus of intersections, overlaps, and collisions between other texts. Every text is an *intertext*, that is, a between-text (*inter*, ‘between’), a paradoxical locus of dislocation ...” (Beal 2000:128).

Such a postmodern epistemology assumes an openness for aspects such as shifting meanings, multiple perspectives, multi-voiced polysemy, pluriformity, metaphoricity and the use of symbolism in the description of experience. A reflexive posture and an appreciation of the participation of others in the interpretive actions are elements in the construction of new stories. From the perspective of the researcher it requires reflective questions regarding people’s *current* experience of retreats, for example *who, why, what, with whom, against whom*. Such questions reveal how they view themselves: either as agents or victims in the narrative. In the telling and retelling of the research story the participants gain a sense of authorship and re-authorship. They acknowledge that new stories are co-produced. In this sense the co-researchers have become the privileged authors.

My narrative research journey with the monastic tradition was socially constructed by applying Paul Ricoeur’s (1981:145-181; 1984:5) hermeneutics. This was a process of understanding and critical theological reflection that developed both from an *inside-belonging* perspective and an *outside-distancing* perspective. The first perspective included personal impressions and experience (participatory understanding) and the latter a distancing between the self and the praxis of retreat by means of a critical explanation.

The narrative research journey follows three phases in the form of *circular* progression. The first phase was that of participating understanding and experience of the “narrative of retreat” where I became one of the pilgrims or retreatants both in the context of South Africa and abroad. The second phase consisted of the explanation of the various contexts by taking a distancing and critical stance. This meant looking at the pilgrims and traditions from the outside. The third phase took the form of a second participatory understanding. The results of the first and second phases were merged in a critical-hermeneutical way.

The aim was not just to gather information or to change people's worlds, but was rather to interpret the subjective dimension of retreat (a situation where people are in relation with God and each other) qualitatively. The focus was on the human experience of retreat: the actions and intentions, as well as on the values behind the actions (see Ricoeur 1991:265-272; cf Dreyer 1998:20-22). Van der Ven (1998:106-114) describes such an ongoing research process as *participation in the action (experiential)*, reflection *on the action (experimental)* and teleological reflection *in/on the action (transformational new story development)*. My focus was on the conscious experience of retreat (the experience of the *now*), but keeping in mind that the three *temporal* modalities of past, present and future all feature in the "now". In the now the experiences of the past are remembered as *memory*. The now of experiences of the present is *awareness*. The now of the future is *anticipation*. All three come together and determine the content of the experience of the present. The listening process included the stories about past, present and future that developed from one temporal source, for example the present, which is representative of the storytellers' whole life. The listening process became the means by which a social constructionist model developed. The social context was that of the Benedictine, Franciscan, Taizé, and Dutch Reformed traditions.

An engagement with the *life world* of the mystic traditions was my point of departure. This engagement gave rise to questions, and re-engagement with the respective traditions and spiritualities. The focus was on the action, stories, symbols, traditions and praxis of retreat. My abductive approach of going back and forth between praxis and theory (creative analysis of data and theological reflection) generated new insights and created a new personal life story for me which can maybe serve as a model for the Dutch Reformed tradition.

4. METHODOLOGY

In light of the epistemological theories and the social constructionist model explained in the previous sections, a predominantly *qualitative* method was required in order to achieve the objectives of this narrative research journey. In a qualitative investigation (Mouton & Marais 1990:164-168; cf Cartledge 2003:70; De Vos 2000:240) people/data are studied in terms of their own definitions of the world and of their subjective experiences. The researcher should remain sensitive to the contexts. I also used *quantitative* surveys to identify focal points and tendencies in the stories of the participants. During the investigation I *participated* (Collins 1999:2-3) in the field of the subject of retreat as well as in the experiences of the co-researchers and co-pilgrims. It

was not possible to plan the entire design for the qualitative research project beforehand. The design changed as the initial interviewing and literature review progressed – this was to be expected on account of the abductive reasoning which was employed.

The experience and interpretation of the co-researchers were valued and the stories by means of which they gave meaning to their experiences, acknowledged. The empirical focus contributed to the development of the narrative research journey. Empirical participatory engagement required an immersion into the action of retreat. I resided in monasteries, in order to generate an in-depth understanding of the group and its context. In the monasteries, ample time was spent with retreatants of the different mystic traditions as well as with the presiding monks. Open questions were asked and comprehensive field notes were documented throughout. The action of retreat in a specific situation served as a “living human document” with social and religious dimensions. This “text” was “read” while listening to the stories of retreatants and monks. My analysis consisted of asking empirical questions such as: what happened, why did it happen in this way; who is involved; how are they involved; how is the event unfolding?

My chosen participatory action research model led to the choice to employ the method of overt observation strategy (Flick 1998:141). This strategy follows the route of observing, interviewing and surveying. I was transparent as to the nature of my research and invited the participants to share their experiences with me and to ask any questions or make observations from their perspective regarding my role researcher. I emphasized that the lived experience and stories of the co-researchers and dialogical partners were valued (Brueggeman 1993:8-9; cf Gerkin 1991:53).

The employment of the hermeneutical circle of Ricoeur (1981:145-181) made it possible for me to become a part of the whole (belonging). Although I actively became part of the observed field, from time to time I deliberately chose for distancing in order to do critical self-reflection (Ricoeur 1984:5; see Dingemans 1990:93-100) on, for instance my theological presuppositions, my ecclesiological and spiritual perspectives, my own life world and theoretical framework. The process included both sides of the coin: *association* (insider perspective) and *dissociation* (outsider perspective) (Ricoeur 1991:75; see Van der Ven 1993:80-106; cf Dreyer 1998:20-22).

The qualitative nature of my research helped me to achieve the ideal of belonging and entering into the life world of the co-researchers’ action of retreat. This became a concrete reality during my study tour to monasteries abroad and during my participation in retreats in South Africa. In all of these contexts reflexive self-observation was documented. Topics for reflection were

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among others: personal emotions, thoughts, experience, questions, spirituality, frustrations, relationship with God, pain. The outcomes of self-reflection as well as the observation of others were carefully documented. As far as the retreat itself is concerned I focused specifically on worship and prayer, the elements of the retreat, ritual aspects, the silence, solitude, meditation, *lectio divina*, music, atmosphere, environment, nature, as well as on the people who were involved. On account of the chosen method of reflexive self-observation I took on different roles at different stages, for example that of full participant, or of participant-as-observer, or of observer-as-participant, or of observer only.

Documents relating to the three monastic traditions were studied before, during and after the tour. Examples of such literature are the newsletters from Taize, songbooks, media reports, the Benedictine, Franciscan and Taize Rules or Sources of Life, as well as documents about the essence and history of the traditions and their founders. These documents provided essential background information and provided insight into how each tradition approaches God, monastic life in God's presence, retreat, and their specific way of life. After having done a comprehensive literature study of other documentary sources and books on aspects of the key concepts of the retreat and the underlying epistemology, I compared this to the data gathered by means of reflexive observation. I approached the literature study as part of a dialogue (with the focus on listening) with the stories of other pilgrims and thinkers, past and present. Notes were taken with anticipation for the research story to develop.

Qualitative interviews (Rubin 1995:31, 195; Flick 1998:77, 81, 86; cf Cartledge 2003:71-74) were utilised extensively during the research journey overseas and during the retreats in South Africa. My aim with the interviews was to give the interviewees the opportunity to tell their own stories. Ample time was given to listening to the stories of the retreatants or monks, sometimes without posing detailed and focused questions, and at other times focusing on specific subjects by means specific questions. Unstructured, structured, semi-structured, focused, semi-standardized, problem-centred, expert, group, and ethnographic ways of interviewing were conducted (see Rubin 1995). Detailed notes were taken, tape recordings were made and subsequently transcribed. Items from the questionnaires or surveys were also used as questions in some interviews. I did not follow the schedule of questions rigorously but rather followed up interesting lines of conversation even if it meant that some questions were not posed. Overall, a rich repertoire of clear answers to the main questions regarding the research objective

became available. New questions which emerged at times, were incorporated. Persons were interviewed individually as well as in groups.

When I conducted a retreat myself, I set aside time for interviews early on, halfway through and towards the end of the retreat. I interviewed the whole group or part of the group or smaller groups. The interviews were on elements of retreat, for example the symbols and rituals, and on the pilgrims' experiences. When I was not the spiritual director of the retreat, I interviewed individual retreatants with the consent of the spiritual director.

At times, in accordance with Flick's (1998:98) approach to stories and narratives as data, I constructed the interviewee's experiential world in a comprehensive narrative form. Part of the narrative approach, was to listen for types of response. The interviewee's experience of the *now* determined their or non-response in the different types of interviews. This was done from not-knowing position. Respondents were invited narrate their own perspectives. However, in a few instances I took the initiative to begin the narrative interview with a broad question such as: "Could you please tell me the story of your spiritual journey and how it unfolded up till now at this retreat? You may start as far back as you wish."

During the early stages of the empirical fieldwork, I had to identify more specific focal points and tendencies in the stories about the experience of the different ways of retreat. In accordance with Hamilton's (1987:43-55; cf Mouton 2001:75, 107; see Cartledge 2003:74-75) method of compiling a quantitative questionnaire I developed a questionnaire not so much to use for the statistical analysis, but to find out more about retreatants' preferences and experiences. I implemented this questionnaire at most of the retreats in South Africa. It provided a rich repertoire of relevant data regarding the research questions. Nearly all retreatants participated. The responses were subsequently quantified and tabulated under different headings. Group discussions, the observation of specific behaviour, spontaneous conversations, were also utilised to provide additional data. Ultimately, the empirical fieldwork and literature study culminated in the tabulation of data: for example, quantitative survey data, experimental recordings, historical and literary texts, qualitative transcripts, or discursive data. Data was analysed by categorising it into themes, patterns, trends, and relationships. The aim of the analysis was to understand the various constitutive elements of the data. I investigated the relationships between concepts, constructs, and variables in order to identify patterns, trends and themes. In accordance with my abductive epistemology, the preliminary data analysis began at the time of the first interviews in order to ascertain whether questions had to be redesigned to incorporate central themes and concepts that came up as the narrative

research journey progressed. Finally I integrated the themes and concepts into one framework in order to present an accurate, detailed, yet subtle interpretation of the research arena. The results of my narrative research journey were narrated in the form of a non-linear story (see Lamott 1995:62; cf Müller, van Deventer & Human 2001:76-96). The choice of methods and model was consistent with the epistemological theories described above.

5. FINDINGS

The research methodology took the form of the writing of a story, involving many stories of those who participated in the research journey. What evolved, was an epistemological reflection on these stories, but also a new writing, a personal research story with new possibilities. The narrative reflective research approach represents an active process of story development. By means of interpretation and reflection a shared reality, a new story was constructed together with co-researchers. The denouement of the plot of such a story is not a “conclusion” but rather an open ending, a possible preface to the next text, that could stimulate a new/alternative story and new research.

The findings of my research project (see Schutte 2006a) will be expanded on in a following article (Schutte 2006b). The narrative research journey provided the following findings:

- **Retreat and the presence of God**
Monastic retreat is a justifiable, commendable, or even for some pilgrims an “essential” way of becoming aware of and experiencing the presence of God.
- **Retreat and pastoral care**
Retreat provides a context conducive to therapeutic, regenerative pastoral care.
- **Retreat as ritual and rite of passage**
There are definite similarities between retreat as pilgrimage and the structure of rites of passage. If these similarities are taken into account when planning a retreat, retreatants could have a more meaningful experience of retreat.
- **Retreat, pilgrimage and holy places**
There is a growing popularity of pilgrimages (retreats) to “holy” places such Taizé in France and Assisi in Italy. A reason for this is a general

awakening of spirituality the postmodern world. This is accompanied by high devotional tones, detachment, entering into dimensions of solitude, silence and prayer. Though detachment and solitude are the main focus there is also a need to share spiritual experiences.

- **Elements of retreat**
Certain elements of monastic retreat pave the way for pilgrimage into the Ultimate Mystery.
- **Monastic traditions: Way of Life and Way of Retreat**
The differences and similarities of the Benedictine, Franciscan and the Taizé ways of retreat and ways of life, provide inspiring models for Christian who do not live in monasteries but who would like to participate in a pilgrimage experiences.
- **A monastic Way of Life and the Reformed tradition**
The Monastic Rules of the different traditions, although they originated in a premodern context, are a valuable source for a spiritual way of life in the Reformed tradition in a postmodern context.
- **Retreat and ecumenism**
Ecumenism is not a prerequisite for retreat. However, the ecumenical community life at Taizé which draws great numbers of postmodern youth, emphasises the significance of ecumenism also for the retreat experience. Diversity in the postmodern church can be transformed into a shared experience by means of retreat.

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