

STYLES OF THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE¹

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Abstract

The meeting of contexts, also in theological discourse, inevitably results in the development of some form of dialogue. Theological discourse is characterised by a series of variables, related to different aspects of such a dialogue. The article explores one subset of variables, namely the style or mode of theological discourse and discusses their relationship with other aspects of such a dialogue. A proposal is made for an interactive, constructive mode of theological discourse in the public arena.

1. Introduction

Dialogue implies difference and diversity. Without these, the need for dialogue would hardly exist. In their review of the present project on contextual hermeneutics and how it evolved during the past five years, Smit and Fouche explain how the focus shifted progressively from the issue of contextuality to the issues of power, plurality, particularity, identity and integrity, and inevitably to the question of dialogue. Because dialogue presupposes difference and diversity, it is accompanied by a whole complex of interrelated variables. These variables function on different levels and affect the process in different ways. The most fundamental is the choice for or against dialogue, as Smit and Fouche explain, with proponents taking different positions - Gadamer ('for'), Derrida ('against') and Habermas ('on'). Closely related to this is the motives for and expectations of dialogue. If dialogue is understood as an alternative to violence ('let's talk rather than fight'), the assumption is that dialogue is a more rational, with the expectation that it will solve problems and deliver peace (cf. Levinas 70). If the motive is to understand, to convince, to defend, the expectations will be different and the mode of dialogue will change accordingly. In this contribution, the focus will be on only *one* subset, namely the different *styles* of theological dialogue and the underlying reasons for these differences.

2. Variables in theological dialogue

In theological discourse, the option for a dialogical style of communication is not so obvious as it may seem at first glance. Other modes were or are often the most prominent. Proclaiming, witnessing, persuading and defending are forms which occur frequently in biblical material. They usually leave little room for the

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transactional, mediating, dialectical, responsive, participating, interacting, pragmatic nature of a truly dialogical mode of communication.

The choice of mode is directly related to the *purpose* of theological discourse. Is it to establish truth? Is it to defend/propagate the own tradition? Is it to understand the 'other' tradition better? Is it to enrich the own/other tradition? Is it per definition open-ended? It is in this context that Smit and Fouche refer to at least three main types of dialogue - 'trusting dialogue in goodwill' (represented by Gadamer), 'suspicious dialogue as counter-position' (Derrida) and 'non-coercive dialogue according to rational procedures' (Habermas).

The style of discourse is thus one subset of variables which have to be taken into account. Another (which we shall discuss in a little more detail) is the variation in audience, as developed by Tracy. But there are other subsets to be considered. The focus on audiences implies a concentration on the receiving end of the communication. Also important are the subjects or participants initiating the dialogue. Who conceives, formulates, articulates theological concepts and insights? Who are allowed to speak? Who can speak? On behalf of whom? Whom are listened to? Whose views are recorded, sanctioned and passed on? Who has control/influence on the way the dialogue develops and on what is put on the agenda? Who decides what is to be added to the tradition? Whom are entrusted with the task to interpret? Or to be the authentic or official voice? Who offers alternative interpretations? Who are the voiceless?

3. Variations in audiences

Variables in theological discourse therefore affect and qualify *all three* basic elements of the communication process - the sender(s), message and receiver(s). Any analysis of this type discourse of necessity will have to take this into consideration. In what follows, we concentrate on only one of these subsets, namely the different audiences involved in theological discourse.

The helpful distinction by David Tracy of three major publics of theology (the academy, the church and society at large), has made it possible to get a clearer grasp of this complex problem (c.f. Tracy 1981 :1-46). The place of theology at the university has always been a controversial issue (c.f. Lategan 1993), which differed according to the specific context or academic tradition (c.f. Harvey 1989, Kaufmann 1991, Heckel 1986, Baumgartner 1991, Wirsching 1991, Meuleman 1991 and De Gruchy 1986). In the critical environment of the university, theology is exposed or 'public' in a specific way. The public defence of theses and the publication of research forms the counterpart of academic freedom and the freedom in research. The results must be open to the scrutiny by peers and in principle by the public itself. Although often obscured in academic language and protected by elitist traditions, the academy is in essence a public space, open to public scrutiny - a responsibility affirmed by the university itself by its insistence on publication as a constitutive function. Due to the high premium placed on rationality in this context, the emphasis is on cognitive criteria of coherence and the ideals of inter subjective validity (c.f. Tracy 1990:3-4). This emphasis has led to unexpected results, where the participation of theology in the public sphere

in some cases has been hindered, rather than promoted. In the United States of America, the constitutional separation between church and state (cf. Clark 1990), made the teaching of theology at university, but especially in public schools, a highly controversial issue. This contributed in a large measure to what is experienced as the marginalization of theology (c.f. Farley 1983 and 1988, Kitagawa 1992, Long 1990 and Harvey 1989). In other countries the situation may be different (c.f. Kaufmann 1991 and Meuleman 1991), but there are also some marked similarities. This complex problem has lost none of its urgency. In the present South African transition, religion as a field of study at universities, but also in schools, once again has become an important issue. The higher visibility of religions other than Christianity and especially the prominence of African religions in this context, has brought new and very interesting dimensions to the debate, which is still continuing.

The second public, that of the church or the believing community, demands different ways of speaking and different ways in doing theology (c.f. Kelsey 1990, Farley 1982:183-191). But, although this seems to have the nature of an in-house conversation, there is a very specific and distinct 'public' dimension to this discourse. According to Tracy, the basis for this communality is some aspect of shared of human experience. This is specifically inherent in the foundational documents of the church, which lend to them 'classical' status. Although rooted in a very particular context, these texts have a disclosive power, "speaking to a potentially universal audience, because it expresses, through its very intensified particularity, some aspect of a shared human experience" (Conradie 1993:34). Paradoxically, the second public, which in a certain sense is 'closed' in so far as its sets specific requirements for membership and participation, is at the same time 'open' - open to public scrutiny, but also open in the sense that it has a potentially universal impact.

Perhaps the most critical - and for various reasons, the most neglected audience - is the so-called 'third public' which theology addresses (or should address), that is, society at large. In context of a society in transition, this public is of critical importance. It is the acid test for the contribution many are expecting theology to make and which theology itself is claiming to be able to make. However important other tasks and challenges for theology might be, this is the terrain which to a large extent will determine its future and the role it is likely to play in a new and fundamentally different society.

Taking the third public seriously, makes a critical analysis of this public, but also of its social location, essential. Reception theory has made us aware of the important role which audiences play in making successful communication possible. Audiences are not passive receptors, but active participants in a process of interactive exchange. The typology of readers also apply to the third public. What readers make up this public? Informed readers like policy makers? 'Ordinary readers' who may be the marginalized and powerless part of the third public? Resistant readers who are deeply suspicious of theology and especially of its intrusion in the public sphere?

The typology and social location of the third public are therefore important issues which require the tools and insights of social analysis to prepare the way for

successful theological discourse in this context. In order to do this, we first have to take notice of the other variables in the equation.

4. Variations in exponents

Differentiation of publics in terms of Tracy's classification is therefore useful to focus more clearly on the specific audience theology is supposed to serve in a specific context. But the same differentiation needs to be applied as far as the *subjects* of theology is concerned. In the discussion of a public theology, 'theology' is used in a much too monolithic and undifferentiated way. Who are the exponents and formulators of this theology? Who do we expect to be the subject(s) of a public theology? Are we talking about the organised church in its official capacity, which in concrete terms would mean that synodical decisions, policy statements or official documents form the substance of such a theology? Are we referring to the work of a prominent theologian like Niebuhr or academics like Tracy, Kelsey or others who are specifically engaged in this debate? Or is the recently discovered 'ordinary believer' the real subject of a public theology? The voice of the voiceless and of marginalised groups like women may be heard more frequently and more clearly, but are these voices really shaping the public image and message of theology? Is the 'hidden transcript' ever recorded and decoded? Empirical research, again illustrated at this conference by the contribution of Van der Ven from Nijmegen, indicates that these ordinary believers do not believe the way they are supposed to believe. Church members hold views quite different and even contrary to quite basic elements of the official position. And yet, it is this 'ordinary believer' who more than anybody else finds him- or herself in the public arena and at the cutting edge where issues demanding a theological input or a value judgement are decided. It is a exposed position where the protection of the cloth and the advantage of the home turf in the form of the moral high ground is not available. It is in this cut and thrust atmosphere (where representatives of the official position often are not present), where - out of necessity - a theology of sorts takes shape. The need is not only a reactive one, aimed at making sense and surviving in an often hostile environment, but also a challenge to pro-actively influence and shape life in the public sphere. To respond successfully to this challenge, the *mode* in which theology is done becomes a critical issue.

5. Variations in modes

Closely related to audiences and exponents are variations in the mode or style in which theology is done by the various subjects in order to communicate with various publics. Variations in subject and public determine to a large measure the mode. Burkhalter distinguishes between four modes of discourse. These modes formed part of a heuristic model developed to address the differentiation assumed in the praxis of religious studies. Although originally designed for the restructuring of religious education, the distinctions are also useful for our purpose (c.f. Burkhalter 1990: 150-151):

- 5.1 *The discourse of the believer*, expressed in worship and practice. The mode is affirmative, articulated in ritual, myth and symbol. The style is spontaneous, emotive, uncritical or rather pre-critical.
- 5.2 *The discourse of second-order reflection* within the tradition itself. Remaining within the broader outlines of the tradition, the mode is one of discovering, interpreting, clarifying, redefining, and identifying. The form might be that of theological or philosophical reflection, credal statements or codes of order or conduct. Essentially, it is an in-house activity.
- 5.3 *The discourse of the academic and the university*. Employing the critical tools of the Enlightenment sciences, the mode is one of detached analysis, critical evaluation and the exploring of alternative possibilities.
- 5.4 *The discursive practice of the student*. This discourse cuts across the other modes and seeks to integrate them in a way that is personally meaningful and communally relevant.

These modes, especially relevant for religious education, can be supplemented by yet further variations. For example:

- 5.5 *Apologetics*, where the mode is one of defending 'truth claims' in a wide variation of styles which could be persuasive, judgmental, confrontational, prescriptive or divisive.
- 5.6 *Proclamation*, in the style of propounding, positing, claiming and not very suitable for the purposes of engagement and dialogue.
- 5.7 *The prophetic mode*, usually in the form of witnessing and speaking out without fear or favour. Precisely because the prejudices and sensitivities of the audience are not taken into account, this is also a mode not congenial to dialogue.
- 5.8 *Policy discourse*. Of considerable importance for our theme is the further distinction which Gustafson (1988) adds to the prophetic, narrative and ethical modes of moral discourse. He calls this 'policy discourse', aimed at formulating a particular course of action about quite specific issues. Subject of this discourse is not so much the moralist or the theologian, but "accountable agents with certain powers and limits of power" (Gustafson 1988:50). For effective dialogue in the public sphere, this shift in mode and in subject is of critical importance. It is the recognition that it is neither a representative of the believing community in some official capacity, nor the theologian, nor the academic, but members of the third public themselves who must take the initiative here - and the responsibility for the course of the dialogue. There is a structural similarity with the insistence of the Institute for the Study of the Bible that the marginalised readers stay in control of the process. Those who find themselves to be part of the third public, should not look in the first place to the first and second public for leadership, but assume the responsibility themselves. To express this in reformed theological terms, it is the office of the 'ordinary believer' which comes into its own in the third public.

Conradie, in his penetrating analysis of Tracy's position and of the requirements for doing theology in a public way, makes the important point that the publicness may differ from public to public, requiring different strategies in each case. "The public defence of theological truth claims therefore requires, for Tracy, a particular form of rationality and a particular set of criteria for rationality in each of the three publics of theology" (Conradie 1993:35). In the case of the third public, the transformative potential of any theological truth claim is critically assessed and the consequences of Christian action and beliefs are evaluated. In order to be convincing, truth claims cannot merely be re-described, but need some basis of agreement and some measure of universality with those outside the faith community.

If different contexts and different goals require different styles, it also means that a particular style is not inherently superior or inferior. In most cases, styles are complimentary, rather than competitive. Intra-textual analysis, rediscovery of the own tradition, reformulation and re-affirmation of dogma, describing the world of the text in its own terms, narrating the story of Biblical texts for their own sake, explaining and defending the truth claims of theology, prophetic resistance and confrontation, uncompromising witnessing, apologetics of a more subtle or a more aggressive kind - all have their validity and function. The issue is to take into account which public one is dealing with and decide on which mode or modes would be suitable for that purpose. Furthermore, the more clarity that can be obtained in the context of the second public regarding the nature and content of faith propositions, the more effectively the discourse with the third public can be conducted. The different modes are complementary to each other and should be valued for their supportive contribution.

Nonetheless, in order to respond to the challenge and opportunity now presenting itself in the South African context, a specific type of discourse is needed. Alongside the modes of critical analysis and of prophetic witness and resistance, there is also the need to contribute to the establishment of a new public ethos in civil society - an ethos where theology and Christianity will not necessarily have a privileged position. This will require theology to move beyond its preoccupation with itself, beyond being concerned primarily with the validity of its own truth claims, beyond its defensive attitude, beyond its experience of marginalization and its resignation of not being able to influence civil society. But in order to be effective, this further step in the context of the third public will also require a change of style. It is important to spell out what the main characteristics of this style should be.

6. Proposal for an interactive, constructive mode of theological discourse in the public arena

What is being proposed here, arises from the attempt, in various forms, to develop a value system in the context of civil society that will support the transition to an inclusive, democratic dispensation in South Africa. As already pointed out, it is critical that changes in political structures and constitutional arrangements are accompanied and informed by a change in value system in order to establish a new public ethos in the country. Various projects of the Centre for

Contextual Hermeneutics related to voter education and education for democracy have underlined the need for concentrated attention to the issue of values. Cooperation with participants from the public sector, and more specifically, the Stellenbosch Economic Project in collaboration with the Department of Economics, aimed at investigation of aspects of a post-apartheid economy, has stimulated the discussion of values in a non-theological environment. These include the development of common values in diverse environments like the mining industry, community organisations, public corporations like the SABC and large scale commercial forestry. These 'secular' settings provide a unique opportunity to participate in a discourse not from a privileged and protected theological position, but which nonetheless generated values compatible with basic theological concepts. The important point was that these values were not formulated in theological, but 'secular' language and illustrated the need for and possibility for a discourse of a completely different nature. The plea is therefore to move beyond what is conventionally understood as theological discourse and to explore the possibilities of a form of language that is not primarily interested in preserving the integrity of theology, but to serve a wider cause. The leading question for this purpose is not: How do we defend Christian truth claims?, but: What contribution can theology make to the process of developing and establishing a new public ethos?

What is proposed here, comes close to what Gustafson (1988:45) calls 'policy discourse' - a discourse "which seek to recommend or prescribe quite particular courses of action about quite specific issues". As we have already seen above, it is a discourse conducted in the public arena with the focus on concrete issues, within the constraints of the possible. It has the added dimension of taking responsibility for what is proposed in this discourse and therefore demands accountability. Gustafson points out that it is a discourse not conducted "by external observers, but by the persons who have the responsibility to make choices and to carry out the actions that are required by the choices" (1988:46).

For such a discourse to succeed, very specific characteristics are required. Firstly, it needs to be *non-prescriptive*. Theology and theologians tend to be judgmental in their approach - listening to different positions and then declaring what is good or bad - with clear instructions on what should be done. The attitude should rather be one of joint discovery, allowing parties in the public debate to participate on their own terms and articulate from their own experience and perspective - letting issues and formulations emerge before directing and confining the discourse.

This implies secondly that the style needs to be *inclusive*, that is, open to the flow of ideas, to the new and unexpected, but also concerned that all possible contributions are considered and included. In the South African context, it means the ability draw from the many and diverse traditions which form part of the public scene and to enrich the discourse in the process. A Western humanistic tradition stands to gain from an African understanding of humanity and vice versa, but that presupposes an inclusive approach to public discourse.

Thirdly, an *interactive, participatory* style of discourse, not developed in the artificial and protected environment of the own group, where stereotypes are

neither exposed nor corrected. It implies the willingness to become vulnerable, to be challenged, and not to claim a privileged position for theology.

In order to be effective in a pluralistic public environment, it fourthly requires a discourse that gives evidence of *hermeneutical* competence. This not only implies bi- or multilingual skills (Bellah - cf. Conradie 1993:44), that is, familiarity with different discourses, but also the ability to move between these discourses and to mediate and interpret the issues as they are expressed and experienced in different contexts (cf. Bauman 1987 for an extensive analysis of the issue).

Theological discourse in the public sphere cannot succeed if it is conducted in a dominating or self-centred way, pre-occupied with its own concerns. It fifthly needs to adopt a *servant* mode, losing and transcending itself to become liberated in service to the other.

Without denying the importance of resistance and protest, public discourse sixthly needs to be *constructive* in the sense of a willingness to reach out, to build, to take responsibility and to jointly map out a possible course of action.

Finally, theology needs to transcend itself in the sense that it becomes *anonymous* or 'secular' - a discourse no longer formulated in recognisable theological language (cf. Tracy 1989:198 on the issue of camouflaged language), but effectively translating theological concepts in a public discourse accessible to participants from other discourses and in a form that is genuinely 'public'.

In this way, theology has much to learn from but also much to give to the development of a functional public ethos and a healthy civil society. It is an un- or underdeveloped area, crucial to what is now happening in the country and worthy of serious attention.

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