

Public theology and the translation imperative: A Ricoeurian perspective

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The aim of this article is to contribute to the academic discussion on the inter-linguistic translation of the Christian message in the public sphere. There seems to be consensus amongst academic public theologians and social philosophers such as Habermas about the importance of translating religious language in the public sphere. Views differ, however, on the manner of translation. Five key aspects of Ricoeur's paradigm of translation are discussed and offered as a framework for the academic discussion in public theology on the translation of the Christian message in the public sphere. It is argued that notions such as the tension between faithfulness and betrayal, the illusion of the perfect translation, striving for equivalence of meaning, the importance of the desire to translate, the work of translation and linguistic hospitality offer insight in the complexity of the translation task as well as its ethical nature.

Introduction

It is today widely accepted, perhaps with the exception in some fundamentalist circles, that the use of old texts or traditions in a new or different context requires a contextual hermeneutics. The 'reader' or interpreter of the texts and traditions has to try to understand the text in relation to the context of origin, but also has the duty to understand the text or tradition in relation to the new or different context. This hermeneutic task is central in any theological discourse, whether acknowledged or not. Listening to the Word of God and proclaiming its message in a new context is also a key task of any preacher. A contextual, or perhaps better, an inter-contextual hermeneutics (Van der Ven 2011) thus forms an important part of the practical theological field of homiletics.

The practical theologian and homiletician T.F.J. Dreyer, who this article is dedicated to, has made an important contribution regarding a contextual hermeneutics in the South African context. He has, for example, reflected on the changing South African context and the challenges that this presents for preaching, pastoral care and a practical theological ecclesiology. A good example of the centrality of a contextual hermeneutics is found in an article "Preaching and culture" (Dreyer 2005). In this article he reflects on the changes in the South African context and the challenges that these present to the church. He writes that the aim of this article is to:

attempt to define the relation between culture and preaching from different hermeneutic perspectives, namely the cultural embedding of the biblical kerygma; the interwovenness of language and culture; and the necessity for contextuality in preaching.

(Dreyer 2005:793)

The Biblical message cannot be communicated without interpreting it in a new cultural context (Dreyer 2005:804). Such a contextual hermeneutics requires a deep understanding of the context and a pastoral relationship between preacher and members of the congregation. Although much of his academic interest was focused on the congregational context, Theuns Dreyer also stressed the importance of the 'public square' (Dreyer 2005:806). The *missio Dei*, the church as a servant in the world, features strongly in his work.

Although there is widespread agreement on the importance of a contextual hermeneutics, it raises many theoretical and practical problems. The role of tradition, the relation between the 'reader' and the text, and conflicting interpretations, to mention only a few aspects, make hermeneutics a contested field. These problematic issues are very prominent in the field of homiletics, T.F.J. Dreyer's field of specialisation. These issues are, however, not in centre of attention in this article. In this article I focus on the communication of the Christian message in the public sphere as part of a contextual, or perhaps better, an inter-contextual hermeneutics. This task demands even more from a contextual hermeneutics as it adds another layer to the hermeneutical process. Whereas Professor Theuns Dreyer's research mainly focused on a contextual hermeneutics within the church, I would like to reflect in this article on some of the challenges for a contextual hermeneutics of the Christian message in the public square.

This article is a follow-up on a previous article on religion in the public sphere (Dreyer & Pieterse 2010) where Habermas's demand to translate religious language in the public sphere was discussed. This 'translation imperative' poses important challenges for a contextual hermeneutics. Following Ricoeur's use of the metaphor of religion as a language, we can call the interpretation of the Biblical message and our faith traditions in a religious context where religious values and beliefs are shared an *intra-linguistic* translation. This intra-linguistic translation is, however, not adequate when we enter the public domain where people of different faiths and worldviews (including secular and atheistic worldviews) are claiming support for their ideas. The reason for this is that there is no common 'language' in the public domain regarding worldviews, values and beliefs (Van der Ven 2011). Participation in the public domain thus requires more than an intra-linguistic translation. Continuing Ricoeur's metaphor we can say that it requires an *inter-linguistic* translation, a translation of our one language into another language, our religious and theological language(s) into the language(s) of the public sphere. This inter-linguistic translation adds new challenges to a contextual hermeneutics.

The aim of this article is to contribute to the academic discussion on the inter-linguistic translation of the Christian message in the public sphere. In order to do so I focus on the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's paradigm of translation. What can we learn from the Ricoeurian approach to translation that might be of value for a responsible public theology in a global era (De Villiers 2011)? Firstly, I briefly explore some views on the translation of religious ideas in the public sphere. Despite some possible objections there seems to be consensus, at least amongst public theologians, that translation of the 'church language' into a language that is accessible for believers and nonbelievers, for religious 'insiders' and 'outsiders', is necessary in a global era. On closer inspection it soon becomes obvious that there is much disagreement about the criteria for a good (or adequate) translation. What must be translated, by whom and how? After a brief exploration of some of the problems and challenges regarding the translation of the Christian language in the public sphere, I turn to Ricoeur's paradigm of translation as a resource for dealing with some of the problems and challenges presented by the translation imperative. Some key features of Ricoeur's paradigm of translation are discussed. This is followed by a brief reflection on the significance of this Ricoeurian perspective for public theology. It will be argued that some of the key concepts of Ricoeur's paradigm of translation could help us to build a framework for discussion on and dealing with the issue of translation in the area of academic public theology. The article ends with a brief conclusion.

The translation imperative

In the previous section we referred to the necessity of an intra-linguistic as well as an inter-linguistic translation of the Christian message. In this section we reflect on the need (and the demand from social philosophers such as Habermas) to translate the Christian language in the public domain, as well as some of the challenges to do so.

Communicating the Christian message in the public sphere is difficult. In modern societies religion has lost its function as a sacred canopy (Berger 1967). We live in a secular age (Taylor 2007) in which many do not understand or are not interested in the language of faith. The communication of the Christian message in the public sphere is further complicated by the separation between religion and state. Secular states demand both freedom for religion and freedom from religion. This is also true of South Africa despite the high percentage of South Africans who claim adherence to the Christian faith. South Africa is a constitutional democracy and the freedom of religion and freedom from religion are constitutionally protected. Although many might still share a Christian worldview, it is unconstitutional to force a specific worldview in the public sphere.¹

The aim of this theoretical reflection is to explore the possibilities and limitations of different approaches to the translation of the Christian faith in the public domain. This does not mean that it is the only way to approach this topic. Another approach could be to study the actual ways in which the Christian faith is communicated in the public sphere. Every Christian believer appropriates the Christian message in his or her own life-world. This is part of our religious socialisation. In word and deed we communicate our Christian values and traditions. From a practical theological perspective it is important to research the 'lived religion' – how people do these translations in their own contexts. The translation of the Christian message in an accessible idiom is not restricted to academics or public theologians in academic settings. It is the duty of every Christian. It is done whether recognised or not. What role is there to play for academic public theologians? I think it is important to study the actual translations – how people actually translate their understanding of the gospel in their contexts. There is not a standard translation that has to be accepted by all. The interpretation is, however, not something done individually. We are all part of specific religious traditions – traditions that give a particular interpretation and that help us to translate the Christian message.² The intra-linguistic translation (the church language, the language of the tradition) is, however, not adequate for participation in the public sphere. I think it is partly the task of parents, pastors and church leaders to help others with this difficult task of translating the Christian message in their daily lives and in the public sphere. For example, how do we assist parents in communicating their Christian values in a school board meeting of a local multicultural and multireligious public school? Can our traditions help us to translate our Christian values in a diverse and pluralistic work environment? Academic public theology in my view also has the task of studying the actual translations that take place, the conditions for and the effect of these translations, and to discuss these results critically in relation to our Christian traditions and contextual factors.

How do we take part in the public square with its conflicting views, values, and convictions without speaking a 'foreign

1. A good example of this is the policy on religion education in public schools (Dreyer 2007). Public schools are not allowed to exclude anyone on the basis of religion.

2. The traditions themselves can be seen as expressions of intra-linguistic translations.

language' that is not understood by others? How do we meet people from other religious faiths and convictions in the public sphere? Can we do that by using the same religious or 'church language' in the public sphere? These are just some of the questions raised by the imperative to translate our religious convictions, beliefs, values and practices in the public square.

It is important to mention that some people do not see the need to translate their ideas in a publicly accessible language, or who regards any form of translation as treason³. This resistance to translation is apparent amongst fundamentalist groups and those who consider their views as 'the truth'. They do not enter the public sphere with the intention to discuss and to dialogue with other views and convictions. The resistance to enter into dialogue means that they do not look for a language that is accessible to others. Listening to and learning from the other are not options for them. The identity of those following this approach may be protected (as in the case of the Amish people) – a closed identity we might add – but they speak a foreign language that is either ignored or ridiculed in the public sphere. The demands of a contextual hermeneutics are ignored and their participation in the public sphere is limited to a monologue.⁴

A communicative approach in the public sphere in a multicultural and multireligious democratic society requires something more. It requires a translation of our Christian language in a language that is understood and accessible in the public sphere. It requires a willingness to listen to others and to reflect critically on one's own position. The position taken in this article is that a contextual hermeneutics requires such an inter-linguistic translation. Our religious ideas have to be translated in a language that is potentially accessible to all participants in the public sphere. This view on the demands of a contextual hermeneutics for communicating religious values is shared by many, if not most, academic public theologians. Let me mention a few examples.

Storrar (2008) refers to the dilemma that we face when we meet the other and the foreign in the public sphere when he asks:

Do Christians only speak their own strange language or can they learn the language of strangers and find in the conversation mutual understanding, common ground, a common humanity and the possibility of making common sense on public issues?

(Storrar 2008:5)

Kim (2007:1), in the first editorial of the newly established *International Journal of Public Theology*, describes public theology as 'a deliberate use of common language in a commitment to influence public decision-making, and also to learn from substantive public discourse'.

3. Brinkman (2007:112) writes: 'It cannot be said of any culture that it is the bearer of the gospel *par excellence*. It must also be said that every culture can also obstruct the conveyance of the gospel. Therefore, the question must always be raised of what has perhaps been lost in the course of time – lost through human limitations and imperfections to which the New Testament writers and church fathers were also subject, for even then it was already the case that *traduire est trahir* (translation is treason).'

4. Junker-Kenny (2004:179) says that '[a]s long as otherness is not allowed to appear in dialogue, it is only as good as a monologue for Ricoeur'.

South African public theologians such as John de Gruchy, Etienne de Villiers and Bernard Lategan also emphasise the importance of using comprehensible language in the public sphere. De Gruchy (2007:39) says that 'good public theological praxis requires the development of a language that is accessible to people outside the Christian tradition, and is convincing in its own right ...'. De Villiers (2005:530) refers to the challenge to translate the Christian vision of a good society in order to reach a wider audience. Lategan (1997:121) laments the lack of theological engagement in the public arena (Tracy's third public) after the dismantling of Apartheid, and continues that where theology did address the public arena, it was usually in the language of the university (first public) or the believing community (second public). He concludes:

It is becoming increasingly clear that a discourse capable of communicating effectively in the third public is of critical importance to meet the challenge of developing values in civil society that will sustain a democratic dispensation in the long run. A hermeneutical framework that provides for the differentiation of audiences and their distinctive discourse could provide the basis needed to meet such a challenge.

(Lategan 1997:121)

Agreement on the necessity of translation amongst public theologians does not mean that they agree on the practice of translation, on how this translation should be done. The translation of the Christian language in the public sphere in a language that is accessible to people outside the Christian tradition seems reasonable and fairly straightforward at first sight. In practice it is, however, much more complicated. Who is responsible for this 'translation' of the Christian language? Is this a task for academic public theologians, or should we leave it to the people in the public sphere themselves? Is there a 'common language' in the public sphere that is accessible to all? Is this common language some version of a 'secular language'? If so, what do we mean by secular language? How should this translation be done? What are the criteria for a good translation? Who will decide whether it is a good translation or not? What do we do with resistance against any translation? What must be translated? Only truth claims, or also beliefs and values? How will we know whether a translation is accessible to all? The complexity of translation is taken further when we consider that there is not one standard 'Christian language' that needs to be translated. The diversity of 'Christian languages' and faith traditions does not easily lend itself to a 'standard translation'. Do we strive to find a lowest common denominator for all the different Christian voices in the public sphere? The public sphere is also a contextual space. Do we have to translate differently in different contexts? If so, how will we do that? These questions point to the complexity of and tensions regarding the translation of the Christian message in the public sphere.

Two examples, one from the inside of Christian theology and one from the outside, illustrate some of the complexities of translation of religious convictions, beliefs and practices in the public sphere. The first example is Karl Barth's view on translation as analysed and discussed by Laubscher (2007). Karl Barth described the importance of translation as follows:

By the very nature of the Christian Church there is only one task, to make the Confession heard in the sphere of the world as well. Not now repeated in the language of Canaan, but in quite sober, quite unedifying language which is spoken 'out there'. There must be *translation*, for example, into the language of the newspaper. What we have to do is to say in the common language of the world the same thing as we say in the forms of Church language.

(Karl Barth as quoted in Laubscher 2007:234)

However, how this translation could be done is never explained or discussed by Barth. Laubscher (2007) makes a very important distinction in this regard between the *intention* and the *manner* of Barth's theology in and towards public life. Although Barth had the intention to communicate the Christian message in the public sphere, he did not really take 'the other' in the public square seriously. Laubscher (2007) thus concludes that:

Barth's primary interest is not to explain and express his arguments in general accessible terms, but to confess it ... He has no intention to make his language and point of departure open and accessible for others who are not part of it. It is difficult to see from this how he actually takes other non-Christians seriously in what they have to say with regard to public life.

(Laubscher 2007:245)

His intention to translate the 'confessional' language in the language of the newspaper was good, but the manner in which he wanted to do it was not with an openness to and equality with the other. It was thus a public monologue rather than a dialogue.

A second example is from outside Christian theology. I refer here to Habermas's well-known translation imperative (Dreyer & Pieterse 2010). The most important condition that Habermas sets for the participation of religious ideas in the institutional public sphere is that these ideas have to be translated in secular language, that is, 'from the vocabulary of a particular religious community into a generally accessible language' (Habermas 2008:131).

The translation of religious language in secular language or public reason⁵ certainly also has the intent to make it accessible to others in the public sphere. However, as in the case of Barth the *manner* in which it is done is problematic. Although it is important that public theologians put forward their best possible arguments in the public sphere, communication of the Christian message in the public sphere certainly cannot be reduced to that.⁶ Translation certainly cannot mean that all convictions, emotions, desires, rituals, and other communal aspects that are so important for religious life be filtered

5. Van der Ven has recently discussed religion's public role, in particular its political role, with reference to Rawls. He calls Rawls Habermas's 'co-founder of deliberative democracy' (Van der Ven 2011). Following Rawls's translation proviso, Van der Ven advocates 'playing a bilingual language game for religion to present its convictions to public debate and, in due course, translate them into the language of public reason'. He further specifies that '[s]uch translation requires deliberative rhetoric and argumentation, in accordance with the logical and epistemological rules of practical reason' (Van der Ven 2011).

6. Ricoeur (in Junker-Kenny & Kenny 2004:214) says: 'If we take the position of convictions seriously and you reduce them to the level of convention, you have to do with a ghostly society where people only have arguments.'

out in the public sphere.⁷ The powerful demonstrations by religious leaders and other Christians against apartheid and public rituals of resistance against the abuse of power testify to this (Van Aarde 2008:1228–1229).

These two examples illustrate that the *intention* to translate the Christian message in the public sphere is not sufficient. It is also important to attend to the *manner* in which this translation is done. The strengths and shortcomings of the above two strategies of translation can be described as follows. Translation of the Christian message from the view that you have the final truth may protect the identity of the Christian message in the public sphere, but it does not take 'the other and the foreign' seriously. It thus only leads to a monologue in public and raises many ethical questions. On the other hand we can say that translation of the Christian message in 'secular language' or public reason certainly takes 'the other' in the public domain seriously. However, excluding the particularities of the Christian religion, such as the motivations, passions, convictions, rituals, communality and so forth, in favour of abstract reasoning and arguments could easily lead to a loss of the Christian identity in the public sphere. To phrase it differently, religious communication may lose its distinctive and particular voice in the search for a common language, for common ground and only using one mode of communication. The particular and distinctive aspects of the Christian message may be lost in translation. The question thus remains: how can we translate the Christian message in the public sphere without losing our Christian identity on the one hand, or without speaking a 'foreign language' that is not understood on the other hand?

Translation: A Ricoeurian perspective

The thesis of this article is that Ricoeur's paradigm of translation provides important insights that could help us to deal with the dilemmas and challenges of translating the Christian message in the public sphere. In this section I therefore explore a few important aspects of this Ricoeurian perspective on translation.

The paradigm of translation arrived relatively late in the work of Paul Ricoeur. Kearney (2006:vii) writes in the introduction to Ricoeur's book *On translation* that translation has been a central feature of Ricoeur's philosophy, but that he only made it an explicit theme of his work in his later years. This paradigm of translation has thus to be seen against the background of his 'huge project of phenomenological hermeneutics as a way in which to help each to understand the other' (Scott-Bauman 2010:72).

7. Powell (2009:6) maintains that the requirement to translate religious communication in public reason violates the integrity of persons. He writes: 'Openness to theological reasoning is important for preserving individual integrity. Because many people arrive at moral and ethical conclusions derived from religious assumptions and use expressly religious discourse, a requirement to communicate deeply held values without regard for religion would be inauthentic. In an important sense, it encourages self-censorship and translation that conflicts with notions of free expression and limits the availability of potentially compelling arguments in the public square. Including theological arguments within public reason is important for religious communities. It encourages them to craft arguments (religious and nonreligious) in ways that are persuasive to the broader political community. Further, it requires communal reflection and prompts religious communities to consider outside intellectual challenges to their assertions. It also brings theology into dialogue with other forms of discourse. These moves provide opportunities to deepen theological understanding within religious communities' (Powell 2009:6).

Translation as a paradigm or theoretical model has to be distinguished from its literal meaning. Ricoeur says that translation can be seen as a model for the way in which we deal with 'strangeness', with what is foreign to us. The translator is a mediator who has to transfer the meaning of one language into another language. For the sake of the argument in this article I highlight a few key aspects of Ricoeur's rich philosophy of translation.

A first key aspect of Ricoeur's philosophy of translation is that he takes the diversity of languages as point of departure. It is due to this diversity that there is a need for translation. Translation does not, however, always involve two languages. Ricoeur distinguishes external from internal translation. Translation does not only take place between languages, it also takes place within a particular language. The reason for this is that there is no perfect language, and no perfect understanding. Sometimes we have to say something in a different way in order to try to make ourselves clear to others within the same linguistic community. This is due the indefinite diversity within all languages. Languages are full of life, and we can therefore always say the same thing in another way.

Ricoeur (2006:13–14) says that this diversity of languages gave rise to huge speculation with the 'paralysing alternatives' of radical heterogeneity (which implies that translation is in theory impossible) or there is a 'common fund' that makes translation possible (an original or a universal language):

I repeat the theoretical alternatives: either the diversity of languages is radical, and then translation is impossible by right, or else translation is a fact, and we must establish its rightful possibility through an inquiry into the origin or through reconstruction of the *a priori* conditions of the noted fact.

(Ricoeur 2006:14)

A second key aspect is thus that Ricoeur takes the practice of translation as point of departure rather than theory. Translation is not just a theoretical possibility. It is a part of our daily lives. Ricoeur (2007:107) thus stresses 'that one has always translated' and 'the very fact of translation'. Merchants and travellers, to mention just one example, engaged in the practice of translation for many centuries. This may seem trivial at first, but according to Ricoeur, it makes a very big difference whether one starts from a practical rather than a theoretical or speculative perspective. If one starts from a theoretical perspective about translation it always leads to an endless discussion about the theoretical alternatives of *translatable* versus *untranslatable* and a fruitless search for a common language. Ricoeur maintains that the theoretical alternatives of *translatable* versus *untranslatable* cannot be solved theoretically. He suggests that we therefore start with the practice of translation with the practical alternatives of *faithfulness* versus *betrayal*. From a practical perspective we can say that the alternatives are not *translatable* versus *untranslatable* (because we do indeed translate), but *faithfulness* versus *betrayal*. It is a struggle for an authentic translation. This makes every translation 'a wager' and a fragile enterprise.

Starting from the practice of translation, and this is a third point of Ricoeur's philosophy of translation, implies that we have to let go of the illusion of the perfect translation. Every act of translation is subject to a multitude of constraints, including the capacity of the translator, the restrictions inherent to language and cultural constraints. A good translation is thus a translation that aims for an equivalence of meaning rather than identity of meaning, '[a]n equivalence without identity', writes Ricoeur (2006:22). There are no absolute criteria for deciding whether it is a good translation or not.

A fourth key aspect of translation is that there must be a desire to translate. One has to overcome the resistance to translation and other constraints that make translation difficult. This is not possible without the desire to translate. With regard to constraint Ricoeur says that translation has always been necessary in order to travel, to negotiate, to spy and to trade. Translation is also useful because it saves us the necessity to learn foreign languages (without translation it would not have been possible for me to read the works of Ricoeur!). However, the desire to translate is not only due to constraint and usefulness. The desire to translate is also fuelled by the intention to discover the target language's own resources, and to expand one's own language. One thus benefits by learning from and through translation. It is by means of the recognition and acceptance of the irresolvable tension between a foreign language and one's own language, of the 'impassable status of the dialogicality of the act of translating as the reasonable horizon of the desire to translate' (Ricoeur 2006:10) that the translator can find a certain happiness. Ricoeur (2006:10) refers to this situation, 'where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign at home, in one's own welcoming house', as *linguistic hospitality*. The notion of hospitality also indicates that translation is always an ethical undertaking (Ricoeur 2006:23). To translate is to expose oneself to strangeness (Kearney 2006:xviii) – to oneself and the other. Treating the 'the other' as a host assumes taking the other seriously and implies a willingness and ability to learn from the other.

Fifthly, translation requires work. Translations are produced rather than reproduced. The work of translation is a struggle and requires courage. When confronted with the 'shock of the incomparable', one has to 'construct comparables' and accept 'creative betrayal' (Ricoeur 2006:36–37). The work of translation also involves attending to aspects such as style, metrics, and so forth. One has to overcome the resistance to translation and the impulse to reduce otherness. The resistance can be towards your own language, for example, by refusing to subject it to the test of the foreign, as well as to the foreign language, for example, by taking the position that something is untranslatable or fear of that which is foreign. To translate you have to mediate between two different languages. There must also be a willingness to take the risk to expose oneself to strangeness and to take the risk that it may pose to your own identity. To let go of the 'dream of perfect translation' (Ricoeur 2007:115) also requires an acceptance

of loss during translation. The fear of a bad translation also has to be overcome. There is an aspect of remembering and mourning in translation⁸. It must also be accepted that there is no final translation. The same thing can be translated in many ways. The incompleteness of translation has to be accepted. Every translation can be retranslated⁹. Translation is never finished, as the many translations of the Bible or classic literature indicate.

Public theology and the work of translation

Our argument so far is that a contextual hermeneutics requires the translation of the Christian message in the public sphere, but that the manner of translation is problematic. The danger, on the one hand, is that the translation could lead to a loss of some of the particularities of religion. This was illustrated with reference to Habermas's translation imperative and the requirement that religious aspects must be translated into secular reason. The danger, on the other hand, is that the translation is done in such a way that there is no real openness towards other perspectives in the public sphere. This translation takes on the form of proclamation rather than dialogue. This was illustrated with reference to Barth's view of translation of the 'Canaan language' into the language of the newspaper. The 'Habermasian approach' could lead to a loss of one's religious identity, but it aims to communicate with others in the public sphere. The 'Barthian approach' protects religious identity, but it does not facilitate a true encounter and dialogue with others in the public sphere. These two examples illustrate some of the difficulties regarding the translation of religious beliefs, convictions, identities and so forth in the public sphere. In this section we explore the significance of Ricoeur's paradigm of translation for public theology.

Before we do so, it is necessary to clarify our understanding of the notion of public theology. Although this notion has become quite popular in recent years, it is a very contested concept (Maluleke 2011; Van Aarde 2008). Concurring with De Gruchy (2007:40) I take as point of departure that public theology is the praxis of Christian witness in the public sphere. I therefore agree with Van Aarde (2008:1229) that public theology is about the role of *Christians in public* as well as *the public's theology*. It is not the exclusive prerogative of academic theologians. Academic theologians do, however, also practice public theology when they enter the public domain in order to contribute to or to influence public debate as academics. I also see it as the task of academic public theologians to study the presence of the Christian religion in the public sphere, whether practiced by academic theologians or any other person. I see this article as a contribution to such a study of Christian practices in the public sphere. The intention is not to exercise control over public theology from an institutional perspective or to claim superiority for

8. Ricoeur (2006:9) writes that the loss of the dream of the perfect translation, to gain without losing, must be mourned 'until we reach an acceptance of the impassable difference of the peculiar and the foreign'.

9. The reader of the translation also retranslates it in his own way. This is the task of critical appropriation (Ricoeur 2006:7).

the academic discourse, but to contribute to the continuing academic discussion about religion in public life and a contextual hermeneutics.

Before reflecting on what we can learn from Ricoeur's paradigm of translation we have to ask whether this paradigm of translation is appropriate for a reflection on the practice of the translation of the Christian message in the public sphere. This does indeed seem to be the case. Jervolino (2007) formulates the usefulness of the metaphor of language for dealing with 'the other' and with diversity as follows:

On the route towards a philosophy of translation inspired by Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics, my working hypothesis is that thinking about translation is fertile for a deeper understanding of the meaning of interpretation and of phenomenology. Language, languages, and translation enter into the very heart of the constitution of sense. The free gift of language and of languages permits us to have access to the world and to meet the other. In this way a phenomenological hermeneutics of translation can help us to realize that humanity, just like language, exists only in the plural mode.

(Jervolino 2007:269)

Ricoeur's paradigm of translation gives a useful conceptual framework for dealing with the challenges of meeting 'the other'. In the article "Reflections on a new ethos for Europe" Ricoeur (1996:4) proposes three models for the integration of identity and alterity, from a lower to a higher level of spiritual density. The first model is called the model of translation. Ricoeur maintains that a plurality of languages calls for translation. Transference of meaning from one language to another is, however, only possible if we take the other language (and all that that implies, for example, the foreign culture) seriously. In the words of Ricoeur, it 'is really a matter of living with the other in order to take that other to one's home as a guest' (Ricoeur 1996:5). This 'translation ethos', this spirit of translation can be extended to actual practices of religious communication in the public sphere.

Against this background I now reflect on the significance of the paradigm of translation for public theology. I take the five aspects that I highlighted in the previous section as the point of departure.

The first aspect of Ricoeur's paradigm of translation is the diversity of languages. Translation is an option because of the many languages. The significance of this for religion in the public sphere is that the Christian religion is only one 'language', amongst many 'languages'. Many different religions and worldviews are present in the public arena. It is due to this diversity that translation of the Christian message is an option. This diversity of religions and worldviews has to be acknowledged and respected.

The second key aspect of Ricoeur's paradigm of translation that we highlighted is that the practice of translation is taken as point of departure rather than theory. There *is* translation. Regarding religion in the public sphere one can say that the translation of the Christian message takes place regardless of our theoretical speculations. Following Ricoeur we can

thus say that the focus should not be placed on endless theoretical discussions about the possibility of the translation of the Christian message in the public sphere and the endless search for a common language. It is not a question of translatable versus untranslatable, but faithfulness versus betrayal. The focus of public theology should thus be on the question whether the translation of the Christian message in the public sphere is faithful to the understanding of the Christian message in particular traditions or whether it betrays that understanding. For example, if one understands the Christian message as a preferential option for the poor, it will be important to judge whether the communication of the Christian message in the public arena is faithful to this understanding.

A third aspect of Ricoeur's paradigm of translation is the importance of letting go of the idea of a perfect translation and the recognition of the many constraints that translation has to deal with. In the context of public theology this could mean that public theologians have to let go of the search for the perfect translation of the Christian message in the public sphere. Public theology has to recognise the many different ways in which the Christian message can be translated. It can be differently translated by 'film directors, artists, novelists, poets, and philosophers', to use the words of Van Aarde (2008:1213). The many cultural, linguistic and other constraints regarding every translation of the Christian message must also be recognised.

One of the most important insights of Ricoeur regarding translation is that there must be a desire to translate. The many resistances to translation must be overcome and there must be an openness to learn from the other language. What are the implications of this insight regarding the communication of the Christian message in the public sphere? The desire to translate can be related to the religious motivation to participate in the *mission Dei* and to be a Christian witness in the world. This desire must, however, also be tempered by a willingness to listen and to learn from the other and to respect the other. The translation of the Christian message must be done in the spirit of linguistic hospitality. This seems to me one of the most important insights regarding communicating one's faith in the public sphere. The desire to translate can easily lead to imposing one's faith on others in the public sphere. Following Ricoeur we can say that the desire to translate must be accompanied by the willingness to discover the limits of one's religious convictions and the willingness to truly listen to others. This means public theologians have to practice *linguistic hospitality*. The religious convictions of others have to be respected and welcomed as one will do with a guest in one's house. Hogue (2010) captures this well when he writes:

Put differently, students begin creatively to embrace the fallibility of their normative religious and moral commitments as an opportunity rather than a stumbling block to public theological engagements. Through contextual learning, they viscerally recognize, first, that no normative perspective exhaustively captures the whole truth of reality; second, that multiple perspectives together offer a more adequate interpretation of

specific contexts than a single privileged perspective ever could; and, third, that those vulnerable persons and communities whose lives and well-being are most directly at stake in a given moral situation should be granted a leading role in analyzing and responding to the conditions they face.

(Hogue 2010:348)

Another important insight from Ricoeur's paradigm of translation is that translation requires work. Translation is only possible if you are willing to do the work of remembering and mourning. With regard to the Christian witness in the public square one has to work towards overcoming bias towards the other, towards risking one's religious identity in encountering others, and towards accepting the incompleteness of one's translation. This work requires more than merely meeting the other with civility. Translating the 'good news' in the public sphere also requires that public theologians work towards eradicating the 'hard differences' of race, class and gender that exist in our midst (Maluleke 2011:86).¹⁰

Conclusion

The translation of the Christian message in the public sphere poses many challenges. The aim of this article was to contribute to the academic discussion on the inter-linguistic translation of the Christian message in the public sphere. We first explored the translation imperative. There seems to be consensus amongst academic public theologians that the Christian message has to be translated in the public sphere. However, the manner in which the translation should be done proved to be problematic. This was illustrated by contrasting a 'Barthian approach' to translation with a 'Habermasian approach'. The next steps were to describe a few key aspects of Ricoeur's paradigm of translation and to reflect on the significance of this paradigm of translation for public theology.

What can we conclude after this journey? I think Ricoeur's philosophy of translation provides an important framework for the academic discussion on the translation of the Christian message in the public sphere. Notions such as the tension between faithfulness and betrayal, the illusion of the perfect translation, striving for equivalence of meaning, the importance of the desire to translate, the work of translation and linguistic hospitality offer much insight in the complexity of the translation task as well as its ethical nature. A Ricoeurian perspective on translation certainly enriches a contextual hermeneutics.

10. Maluleke (2011:86) gives a vivid description of the 'hard differences' that public theologians have to engage with in the South African context: 'Our differences are not only soft but hard, not only horizontal but vertical. It is not merely that some are men and others are women, but rather that men are gods and women their dispensable temptresses; not merely that some are white while others are black, but rather that the whites are masters and the blacks are servants; not merely that some like wine while others like beer, but rather that some have much to eat and drink while others have nothing; not that some believe in hell and others believe in heaven but rather that some live already in heaven while others live already in hell. These are the real differences in our public sphere. They are not the differences between the prodigal son and the brother who stayed behind. Rather these are the differences between Lazarus with the dogs at the gate and the rich man living in luxury and happiness in the homestead. These differences will not be made to disappear by means of civility, courtesy and the portrayal of a benign public. These differences will not yield to poetry and metaphor. Something much more radical has to happen.'

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