



## Public Theology and the linguistic turn

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### Abstract

In response to Dirkie Smit's inaugural lecture at the University of Stellenbosch, *In Diens van die Tale Kanaäns: Oor sistematiese teologie vandag*, the question is raised: what is the relationship between language and theology? Traditionally theology subsumed rhetorical language under confessional language, but this shifted in the twentieth century as theologians started to pay more attention to the ways in which even confessional language shapes human experiences and actions and reflects and constitutes power relations. This linguistic turn has implications for public theology, i.e., theology done for the sake of the public good. First, it relates to the question of the role of culture and the reality of pluralism in theology, pointing to the need for careful balance between the emphasis on the church's own historical language, and the need for critical and pluralistic perspectives to engage that language. At the same time, while the linguistic turn rightly points to the relationship between language and violence, care should be taken not to confuse the two and, in the process, ignore concrete concerns.

### Public Theology and the linguistic turn

In his lecture, *In Diens van die Tale Kanaäns: Oor sistematiese teologie vandag* (transl. *Serving the Language of Canaan: On systematic theology today*), Dirkie Smit presents the task of systematic theology in terms of a linguistic metaphor: theology, he says, speaks the language of Canaan, the language of faith.<sup>1</sup> Deceptively simple in style and structure, the

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1 D.J. Smit, "In Diens van die Tale Kanaäns? Oor Sistematiese Teologie Vandag", *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif*, 43, no. 1&2 (2002):94–127. This was his inaugural lecture at the University of Stellenbosch. Quotes will be from his unpublished translation of the essay, with page citation referring to the formal Afrikaans version.

lecture brings together almost the entire modern theological conversation in order to outline the work of systematic theology, supplemented by extensive footnotes. The choice of the metaphor of language for thinking about theology is rooted in his identification with “a tradition in which the confession of hope is seen as liberating truth”, the tradition of Luther and Calvin, of Barth and Bonhoeffer, of Barmen and Belhar – although his take on that confessional tradition is broad, enabling him to incorporate insights from Catholic thinkers, liberation theologians, and political theorists.<sup>2</sup> As such, his linguistic metaphor derives from a long-standing interest in expressive-confessional language in the Christian tradition. This is distinct from the so-called (post)modern “linguistic turn”,<sup>3</sup> which understands language as primarily rhetorical rather than expressive.<sup>4</sup> While not denying the validity of the latter’s emphasis on the way language shapes or even creates reality and praxis, the emphasis here is on language that follows revelation of the religious truth in which hope is invested. Because faith sees the world differently, the “language of Canaan” also *names* things differently.<sup>5</sup> From this vantage point, he then proceeds to make four comments about the nature of theology.

His first point is that theology as the language of Canaan gets its grammar from the church – in other words, it is rooted in the life of a human community centred on worship, faith, and life together. As such, second, the truth that theology proclaims is embodied and contextual truth. To put it in the language of Aristotelian rhetorical theory: it is not just *logos*,

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2 Ibid., 118.

3 Ibid., 97. Later in the lecture (p. 119) he rejects the concept of postmodernism, suggesting (rightly in my view) that the current moment is better described as modernization.

4 The well-known debate between David Tracy (“Chicago school of thought”) and George Lindbeck (“Yale school of thought”) is illustrative of this the tension between theological language as at least partially expressive of pre-linguistic religious experience and as formative of religious experience.

5 Smit, “Tale Kanaäns”, 95. Interestingly enough, in the Afrikaans text there is a more dialectical tone than in the English text, since Smit suggests in the Afrikaans that the language of Canaan, in confessing its hope, *constructs* a strange new world (which suggests a more rhetorical view of language), but in his English translation, Smit uses the word, “depicts”, which suggests pre-linguistic revelation (the truth of which is then confessed in the language of Canaan, even if that language indeed also depicts a strange new reality). Overall the context of the lecture as a whole suggests that the latter emphasis is more central to his lecture. See also footnote 16 on p. 99 in the essay for references on the rhetorical nature of theological language.

the word, that matters, but *ethos*, the whole life of the speaker, and finally also the *pathos* of the audience, which means using the right language in the right time, the *Kairos* time.<sup>6</sup> Third, there is no standard version of the language of Canaan – it exists only as multiple dialects. In other words, theology is inevitably pluralistic, and efforts to find a single truth by recourse to experience, reason, tradition, or Scripture, are doomed to fail.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the language of Canaan is a strange language, not quite of this world, but living from hope, and therefore easily dissatisfied with the state of the world. This dissatisfaction opens up to the prophetic, critical task of theology in the interest of the common good, in short, public theology. As Smit notes, the “language of Canaan is the language of dialogue, of conversation, about the catholic fullness of reality”, and it “wants to serve the public church, and is interested in the public life of the city and the welfare of the world.”<sup>8</sup> In summary, the subject matter of the lecture is the nature and task of theology as the ongoing reflection of a community of faith which must proclaim its message not only with words, but with praxis and awareness of the moment, with a recognition of theology as a pluralistic and at times ambiguous task, and finally, with responsibility towards the common good.

Despite the linguistic metaphor, the lecture is actually not that concerned with language itself. Even the use of rhetorical theory is for the purpose of emphasizing that words are not sufficient (as rhetorical theory indeed argues!) However, the linguistic metaphor does bring up the question of the relationship between theology and language, and in particular the relationship between public theology and the issue of language. In fact, if theology is to speak the “language of Canaan” today, two decades after Dirkie Smit’s lecture was written, it needs to recognize the extent to which our current *Kairos* time is impacted by continuing questions about the nature of language, and especially about the relationship between language

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6 The concept of *Kairos* usually refers to “the right time”, but in modern rhetorical theory it can refer more broadly to the situation in which rhetoric originates.

7 Experience is highly subjective, reason often blind to its own prejudices, traditions often reflect only those who have taken central stage in the past, when in fact the purest speech often comes from those who had been marginalized, and Scripture, of course, being complex and pluralistic itself, evokes the task of hermeneutics.

8 Smit, “Tale Kanaans”, 120.

and power. There is a certain duality in the latter. On the one hand, the linguistic turn that has marked philosophy, critical theory, and theology in the last century, allows for the critical interrogation of the relationship between language and power. In the field of theology, it contributes to an important hermeneutic of suspicion against ways in which theology has served not the common good, but the interests of elites. On the other hand, if language is constitutive rather than expressive of the world, the question arises: where does truth lie? If all semblance of objective truth is lost, then all that remains is power, and that, in turn, and indeed ironically, reifies the very power structures that critical theory seeks to interrogate. This dilemma was at the root of Socrates and Plato's rejection of the Sophists in ancient Greek philosophy, and it shaped the church's traditional stance on language. In our era of "truthiness", "speaking your truth", "alternative facts", and the moral cacophony of the online world, theology, if it is to truly speak the language of Canaan, also needs to take the question of the nature of language seriously in new ways. This is, of course, a monumental and complex task far beyond the scope of this essay, so a few preliminary remarks must suffice. But first, a brief overview of some of the central elements in the history of the relationship between theology and language.

## **Language and theology: A brief historical overview**

Dirkie Smit is right in noting that language and speech acts have always preoccupied the Christian imagination. The opening narrative of our Holy Scriptures tells of a God who creates through neither battle nor birth, but through speech.<sup>9</sup> This is the same God who is said to speak in the Torah, through the sages and the prophets, in letters and gospels and apocalyptic fever dreams in the Scriptures, and above all, in the incarnate Word. In the 2,000 years of our existence, Christianity, emulating the God Who Speaks, has built up an impressive linguistic heritage: massive theological tomes, multiple creeds, confessions, and catechisms, canon law and liturgies and poetry and hymns, and of course, sermons, reflecting the fact that the proclamation of the Word is often central to Christian worship.

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9 Of course, already in the second chapter of Genesis, the Scriptures bring us back to the clay, the earth, to farming and creatures, providing some balance to the Jewish and Christian imaginations.

Not only is our religious imagination informed by the metaphor of divine speech and responded to by our words, but as a tradition we have insisted on the importance of accurate language. Most famously (or infamously), in the fourth century the church fought a fierce intellectual battle ostensibly centred on a single letter. Bishop Arius, seeking to defend the unity of God, argued that Jesus Christ was the first and greatest of God's creatures, a divine emissary who delivers the definitive Word of God to humans, but certainly not equal in divinity to God the Father: he was *homoiousios*, of like substance to God, the way a child shares DNA with a parent without being the same as them. Athanasius of Alexandria, fearing that our salvation is at stake if the full divinity of Jesus Christ is not recognized, since only the one who is truly and fully God can take our sins upon himself and can overcome death and hell, argued, against Arius, that Jesus is in fact *homoousios*, of the same substance as God the Father; he is the incarnation of the living God, and not a mere emissary. *Homoiousios* vs. *homoousios*: what a difference an “i” makes! What might initially appear to the uninitiated ear to be an almost comical argument about linguistics turned out to be crucial in reflecting on the foundational question of the Christian faith, the question Jesus himself asked his disciples: “who do you say that I am?”<sup>10</sup> In its varied response to that question, Christianity has confessed its hope in Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, and has said that, in confessing the faith, accurate language matters. Yes, there are, as Dirkie Smit says, various dialects of the language of Canaan, but in all these dialects there remains an emphasis on clear and precise language in the interest of confessing our faith with as much clarity as possible.<sup>11</sup>

When it comes to the rhetorical, rather than the confessional role of language, Christian theology has traditionally tended to proceed with caution. Here, as in many other instances, Augustine of Hippo set the tone: despite, or perhaps because of being a professional rhetorician in his pre-conversion life, Augustine was nervous about confusing the truth of faith

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10 This question is present in all the synoptic gospels, in Matthew 16:13–16, Mark 8:27–29, and Luke 9:18–20.

11 Karl Rahner expresses this well in his consideration of the Chalcedonian formula as boundary language that can encompass a wide variety of viewpoints, but that places boundaries, across which heresy lies. See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Volume I (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1961), 149–155.

with the persuasiveness of language. Recognizing the power of language to sell lies rather than to seek truth, he set parameters for the Christian use of rhetoric: language was to be utilized in the service of the truth of revelation, but not confused with it. That meant, in practice, that language was primarily theological (confessional, expressive of Christian hope) and only secondarily and subserviently rhetorical (shaping of the faithful's ethics and praxis). As such, language-as-rhetoric tended to be limited to Christian ethical writing and preaching that deliberately sought to shape Christian spirituality and praxis, and it remained secondary to language-as-confession-of-truth. This general orientation in which the rhetorical use of language is secondary to its confessional use largely remained the status quo in Christian theology until the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

The 20th century linguistic turn with its emphasis on the reality-shaping power of language, brought a shift in the Christian conversation on language, and in particular on language-as-rhetoric as part of theological reflection, as some theologians turned their attention more explicitly to the ways in which language is related to power and praxis – in other words, to the rhetorical element in theology. A significant example of this shift can be found in George Lindbeck's postliberal model of theology, in which doctrines are described as grammatical rules that shape the life of the community.<sup>13</sup> This kind of emphasis is echoed in Serene Jones' phrase "Rhetoric of Piety", or David Cunningham's language of "Faithful Persuasion."<sup>14</sup> While this approach is in some ways close to the classical Christian perspective of deliberate rhetoric in service of Christian praxis, Lindbeck takes it a step further by arguing that religious truth itself cannot be experienced without language, that "it is necessary to have the means of

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12 One exception was John Calvin, who, as a humanist lawyer well trained in classical rhetoric, brought an awareness of the rhetorical nature of theological language into his thinking, albeit without abandoning the Platonic focus on objective truth. See, e.g., Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), and Don H. Compier, *John Calvin's Rhetorical Doctrine of Sin* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001).

13 George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1984), 37.

14 Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*; David Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991). Both note Lindbeck's influence, although neither should necessarily be described as postliberal theologians.

expressing an experience in order to have it.”<sup>15</sup> As such, he blends religious experience with language to the extent that language becomes constitutive of truths confessed instead of being prior to it. In short, Lindbeck presents an interesting twist in the story of theology and language, essentially collapsing confessional and rhetorical theological language.

As such, Lindbeck is clearly influenced by the philosophical linguistic turn. He rejects what he calls an experiential-expressivist model of theology, which in his view seems “to maintain a kind of privacy in the origins of experience and language that, if Wittgenstein is right, is more than doubtful.”<sup>16</sup> In contrast, David Tracy, who was initially erroneously called just such an “experiential-expressivist” by Lindbeck (a classification rejected by Tracy), recognizes a more dialectical relationship between religious experience and language. Like Lindbeck, Tracy rejects the idea that theology is merely expressive of pre-linguistic theological experiences, and he recognizes the hermeneutical nature of theology, i.e., the ways in which it is imbedded in language. However, says Tracy, “this critical insight does not mean that we should, in effect, abandon half the dialectic by simply placing all experience under the guardianship of and production by the grammatical rules of the codes of language.”<sup>17</sup> In short, while Tracy acknowledges the role of language in mediating religious experience, he leaves space for the apophatic, for the breaking through of divine revelation that is not tied up with language. Furthermore, in contrast to Lindbeck’s focus on the specific language game of the confessional tradition as it functions rhetorically in the lives of the community of believers, Tracy’s theology is more explicitly concerned with the public nature of theology, and as such, with the issue of pluralism, and the way the latter calls up the question of truth. His inquiry eventually leads him to a conversational approach to theology that seeks

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16 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 38. His evocation of Wittgenstein of courses places Lindbeck’s model squarely within the linguistic turn. As such, his confessional theology is quite distinct from that proposed by Dirkie Smit.

17 David Tracy, “Lindbeck’s New Program for Theology: A Reflection”, *The Thomist* 49(1985):464.

truth (understood phenomenologically as event rather than proposition) that occurs in the intersubjectivity of multiple conversation partners.<sup>18</sup>

Both Lindbeck and Tracy's models blend the traditional confessional and the rhetorical perspective on language in ways that transcend the traditional approach, but they do so in different ways. Lindbeck's model emphasizes the ways in which the confessional language of the church is also its rhetorical language, shaping Christian consciousness and praxis.<sup>19</sup> As mentioned, Tracy's model is more aware of the ways in which the "language of Canaan" participates in pluralism – the pluralism of its own dialects, but also, potentially, the pluralism of finding itself alongside other theological "languages" in the world.<sup>20</sup> However, neither of them analyses the relationship between language and power to a great extent, although Tracy shows more awareness of the issue, as can be seen when he warns against a pluralism just for the sake of enjoying ever-new possibilities at the exclusion of "any particular vision of resistance and hope."<sup>21</sup>

The task of critical rhetorical interrogation of the relationship between language and power has fallen to various liberation theologians, in particular feminist and womanist theologians. One can more easily trace the difference between an approach to rhetorical theology such as that of Lindbeck, and the kind of critical rhetorical inquiry found in liberation theology by noting the shift in the secular field of rhetorical theory that occurred in the 20th century (as part of the linguistic turn): whereas classical Greek and Roman rhetorical theory was interested in the ways in which public speakers might *persuade* an audience, the (post)modern "New Rhetoric" is interested in how language *identifies* some as members of the in-group while simultaneously "othering" others - as such, the New

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18 See, in this regard, David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), and *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 2000). For a helpful secondary source, see Stephen Okey, *A Theology of Conversation: An Introduction to David Tracy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018).

19 Lindbeck's approach of course echoes Karl Barth's view that theology *is* ethics.

20 Tracy has done extensive work on interreligious dialogue, especially with Buddhism.

21 Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 90.



Rhetoric is a critical mode of inquiry into power.<sup>22</sup> There was, in short, a shift in focus, from language as persuasion to language as identification,<sup>23</sup> which enables the kind of critical interrogation of the theological tradition that liberation theologians are interested in, and that someone like Lindbeck leaves little room for (Tracy represents an interim figure with his hermeneutical inquiry and his recognition of pluralism). A few examples of feminist and womanist scholarship (biblical scholarship as well as practical and systematic theology) serve as illustration of the influence of critical “New Rhetoric” in theology.

Feminist biblical scholar Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has been an important pioneer in examining the ways in which the foundational texts of the Christian faith are “neither reports of events nor transcripts of facts but rather rhetorical constructions that have shaped the information available to them in light of their religious or political interests.”<sup>24</sup> As such, she develops a model of “critical rhetorical inquiry” that seeks to show how texts reflect the power relations in a patriarchal society, and in turn serve to uphold similar patriarchal structures. Similarly, but also bringing the rich Jewish tradition of midrash to her biblical scholarship, womanist scholar Wilda Gafney seeks to bring the lens of women’s lived experience to the retelling of biblical narratives as well as to the work of translation.<sup>25</sup> In the field of practical theology feminist scholars like Carol Lakey Hess have noted the ways in which the rhetoric of humility and submission traditionally aimed at women serve to undermine female resistance to violence, while Marie Fortune has focused not so much on the language of the church, but on its silence when it comes to violence against women and girls.<sup>26</sup> In systematic theology one of the main conversations has been

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22 On “critical rhetorical inquiry”, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992).

23 See Kenneth Burke, “Rhetoric – Old and New,” *Journal of General Education*, 5 (1951):203–5.

24 *Ibid.*, 41

25 Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017); *A Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church: Year A* (New York: Church Publishing, 2021); and *A Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church: Year W* (New York: Church Publishing, 2021)

26 Carol Lakey Hess, “Reclaiming Ourselves: A Spirituality for Women’s Empowerment”, in *Women, Gender, and Christian Community*, ed. Jane Dempsey Douglass and James

about traditionally male language for God. As Mary Daly once quipped, “if God is male, then the male is God.”<sup>27</sup> In her now-classic work, *She Who Is*, Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson suggests that the symbol of God as male figure functions culturally in support of “an imaginative and structural world that excludes or subordinates women.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, rhetorical analysis of some aspects of the church’s traditional “sin-talk” shows how careless theological language on sin (sloppy interpretations of the concept of the sin of pride, and associating women’s bodies with sin, in particular) has often served to dehumanize women in ways that contribute to making women “quintessential victims” of male violence.<sup>29</sup> The critical lens of the New Rhetoric is illustrated, therefore, in the work of feminist and womanist theologians, who analyse how androcentric language about God, misogynist associations of women with sin, or ideals of femininity as reinforced by the rhetoric of humility and submission in Christian moral teachings, identify women as the Other or the Victim.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, the history of the relationship between theology and language has been a somewhat complex one. For most of its history, Christian systematic theology has emphasized the confessional nature of theological language and kept the rhetorical to the realm of explicit ethical teaching. In the 20th century, however, theology has been influenced by the linguistic turn that emphasizes the world-creating power of language, giving rise both to theological emphases on the persuasive power of confessional language (an approach that echoes the focus on persuasive language in classical rhetorical theory), and the ways in which religious teachings have been intertwined with power and praxis in sometimes problematic ways (an approach that

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F. Kay (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). 147; Marie Fortune, “The Church and Domestic Violence”, *TSF Bulletin* 9, no. 2 (1984): 17.

27 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), 3.

28 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 5.

29 Rachel Sophia Baard, *Sexism and Sin-Talk: Feminist Conversations on the Human Condition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 73.

30 One of the best examples of this is Elizabeth A. Johnson’s *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1995) which argues that the symbol of a male God functions to sustain patterns of male domination. For an explicit discussion of feminist theology through the lens of rhetorical theory, see Baard, *Sexism and Sin-Talk*.

echoes the critical mode of the New Rhetoric). What are the implications of this linguistic conversation for public theology, that emerging and still to be fully defined form of theology that deliberately seeks to engage various publics, whether ecclesial, academic, societal, or, these days, digital, in the service of the public good?

## Language and Public Theology: Two preliminary observations

Public theology, i.e., theology that is done for the sake of the common good, always engages the Kairos moment in which it finds itself, one way or the other. And language itself, in particular the question of how language relates to power and reality, is central to our current Kairos moment. From academia's interrogation of the relationship between power and language, to social media twittering about language and identity, hate speech, or freedom of speech, it seems that the questions brought to us by the linguistic turn and the critical theories to which it gave birth, cannot be avoided. In light of this recognition of the centrality of language and power in our current Kairos moment and based on the preceding overview of the theology/language conversation, let me make two concluding observations regarding public theology and the question of language.

First, the question of language and public theology is related to the twentieth century debate about the role of culture and human experience in theological reflection. Those theologies (correlational, liberal, and liberationist) that aim to answer "the questions asked of, and the criticisms directed against, a concrete religion" are more obviously public in tone.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, neo-orthodox and postliberal theologies generally focus on the confession of the classical Christian tradition, and the rhetorical impact of that confession in shaping piety, but leave little room for either the engagement of pluralism (Tracy's emphasis) or the critical interrogation of the tradition (such as is seen in the work of feminist and womanist scholars, among others).<sup>32</sup> In

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31 Paul Tillich, "The Problem of Theological Method", *Journal of Religion* XXVII, I (January 1947): 25.

32 Postliberal theologies often lean towards the theology of Karl Barth, although not all do, and although not all theologies that build on Barth are necessarily postliberal. As a school of thought one can trace it back to the 1980's, and it is represented by theologians like Hans Frei, Paul Holmer, George Lindbeck, David Kelsey, and Stanley Hauerwas.

fact, as Hak Joohn Lee suggests, postliberal theologies might be seen as the nemesis of public theology, since their primary concern is “neither social change nor improvement, but rather safeguarding the distinctiveness of a Christian tradition from liberal cultural influences and protecting the church from their fragmenting and disintegrating forces.”<sup>33</sup> However, postliberal theologies have a point about the risk of public theology (in the form of theologies of culture) becoming mere surrender to public opinion. If the theologians of crisis from the Second World War Era have taught us anything, it is that finding common ground with whatever is popular in any given cultural milieu runs the risk of betraying the message of the gospel and collaborating with evil. So, the postliberal theological impulse occupies an important, if somewhat paradoxical, space in public theology, by suggesting that the church’s mistrust of the cultural fashions of the day has an important role to play in thinking about the ways in which faith engages our various publics.

Of course, this need not be an either/or situation. In his lecture, Dirkie Smit rightly cautions against both sectarian withdrawal from public life, and, conversely, “total surrender and merely repeating public opinion.”<sup>34</sup> While the postliberal approach has the merit of offering up a warning to public theology not to succumb to the fashions of the day, the refusal to allow human experiences to challenge the kerygma of the church allows for little challenge to the power relations inherent in that kerygma. Public theology cannot ignore the ways in which our language of Canaan itself has often reflected unequal and oppressive power relations (sexism, anti-Semitism, racism, etc.). As such, postliberal theologies, in withdrawing from cultural entanglement, risks doing what it fears: supporting a potentially problematic status quo. It is also not the case that the correlational approaches found in liberal and liberationist theologies necessarily suggest that human

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They reject notions of universal rationality and instead emphasize how religious experiences and truth claims are embedded in particular traditions – or as Lindbeck would suggest, in particular language games.

33 Hak Joohn Lee, “Public Theology”, *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 57–8. Lee argues that postliberal theology tends to be confessional or fideistic in nature, refusing public adjudication of Christian truth and moral claims. His focus is particularly on Stanley Hauerwas.

34 Smit, “Tale Kanaäns”, 120.

experiences or cultures are revelatory in themselves (that would indeed be idolatrous). Rather, as Tillich states it, it is not “experience, but revelation received in experience, [that] gives the content of every theology.”<sup>35</sup> These correlational approaches have the merit of making space for pluralism, for the “new” voices in the global church who bring their cultural riches to the ongoing Christian theological conversation, as well as for the critical interrogation of power relations (both those power relations that influenced our discourses and those influenced by our discourses).<sup>36</sup> In short, a careful balance is needed between the emphasis on the church’s own historical language, and the need for critical and pluralistic perspectives to engage that language.

The second observation relates to questions of truth and reality. The linguistic turn in its various forms has shown that language plays a significant role both in shaping our perception of reality (the hermeneutical emphasis) and indeed in shaping reality itself (the rhetorical emphasis). However, this focus on language risks becoming the denial of material reality if the latter is made completely subject to language. This has a host of overlapping theological, philosophical, ethical, and epistemological implications, all of which need more fleshing out than can be provided here. On a theological level, the subjugation of material reality to language presents a problematic neglect of the doctrine of creation, and it might even be argued that it carries a faint resemblance to the ancient heresy of Gnosticism. Particularly problematic is that this undermines the material analysis (e.g., Marxist analysis of class conditions, or feminist analysis of the exploitation of women’s reproductive capacity) that has often been at the root of liberative political work. Furthermore, while these (post) modern discourses rightly point to the links between language and power or language and violence, it sometimes risks confusing language with violence. As much as language might play a role in violence, it is not in fact the same as violence against human bodies and confusing the two can lead to problems (for example, it might lead to curbing freedom of speech,

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35 Tillich, “The Problem of Theological Method”, 23.

36 See, on the topic of how rhetoric both participates in existing power structures and shape it in return, Baard, *Sexism and Sin-Talk*, p. 10, 18–23.

or the focus on language might take the focus off concrete problems that need attention.)

Most importantly, public theology needs to be careful about the question of truth. It behoves us to hear the cautionary note coming to us through the centuries, from Socrates and Plato, who were concerned with the Sophists' abandonment of the idea of truth in favour of their emphasis on the power of language to persuade. As we shift our gaze to the tasks ahead for 21st century public theology, we should be particularly cautious not to get so caught up in thinking about language that we abandon truth: if there is no truth beyond what we can convince others of, then we are subject to the power of "persuasion" by the person with the loudest voice or the biggest gun. (There is of course a certain irony here that the very discourse that would interrogate power itself risks becoming a tool for power and dominance.)

Therefore, theology that serves the common good can never abandon the ideal of truth. To be sure, Modernity's "Masters of Suspicion" have shown how the Enlightenment ideal of access to objective truth via reason masks our class interests, psychological needs, etc., but that should not mean that we can simply abandon the idea of truth in our postmodern/late modern era. As suggested earlier, David Tracy offers us one way of thinking beyond this dilemma of finding ourselves between the illusion of objective truth attainable by reason, on the one hand, and the chaos of pure subjectivity, on the other hand, by focusing instead on conversation, where truth is the event that happens in intersubjectivity as we open ourselves up to the Other. Here language returns to the scene, not as enemy of the truth but in service to it. After the hermeneutic of suspicion that critically interrogates language and power, also comes the hermeneutic of retrieval, of standing on truth even amidst suspicion, of confession of the hope that is in us in Jesus Christ. In short, after critical rhetorical inquiry comes confession.

To conclude, in his reflection on theological education, Dirkie Smit argues that merely learning the knowledge and skills to be a religious professional is not enough, but that what is needed is spiritual formation that would shape "believers, critical thinkers, people searching for truth, who want to learn a grammar in order to be able to confess the hope that lives in them, with humility, gently and respectfully, but also with confidence and

courage.”<sup>37</sup> This emphasis on spiritual formation provides a key for finding a way out of the dilemma of either withdrawal into the language game of the church or surrender to the cultural whims of the day, and it brings to mind what the rhetorical theorist Scott Consigny says about Aristotle’s view of rhetoric as an art. The art of rhetoric, he says, requires two attributes: integrity, i.e., the knowledge and skills that are ready to engage any situation (this is the universal element), and receptivity, i.e., the ability to become concretely engaged in specific situations (this is the particular, concrete element).<sup>38</sup> What this boils down to is holding on to what is true and real, on the one hand, and being open to change, on the other hand. This artistic nimbleness is needed for public theology to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of withdrawal from or surrender to the fashions of the day – including those fashions of the day that confuse language and power even as it seeks to critically interrogate the relationship between language and power. In short, in an era in which much of the public debate struggles with truth, caught up in late modernity’s linguistic fluidity, its multiple claims of truth and simultaneous denial of truth, its valid critique of power games and inequities, but also its struggle to move beyond the hermeneutic of suspicion, the public theologian must be spiritually formed into an artist, or perhaps a skilful artisan, who continues to search out truth amidst the chaos and cacophony of our Kairos moment.

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37 “Tale Kanaäns”, 124.

38 For a discussion on this, see Baard, *Sexism and Sin-Talk*, 32–3.

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