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UNDERSTANDING THEOLOGY AS UNDERSTANDING

ABSTRACT

The article develops an argument for the radical hermeneutical nature of all theological knowledge. Drawing on Habermas and Dilthey, the nature of theology as a historic-hermeneutical science whose business and focus is *verstehen* (understanding) rather than *erklären* (explanation), is explored. Drawing on insights of HW Rossouw, in turn, this is followed by the delineation of a number of elements that are formally equivalent in all processes of hermeneutical conceptualization and their specific application to theological knowledge. The implications of this are discussed. In the last part, the author concludes with a number of remarks that are implicated by the argument. The first deals with the rationality of theological knowledge, the second with the metaphorical nature of theology as hermeneutical knowledge, and the last with the legitimate place and role that theology deserves in the corpus of disciplines offered at the university.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, I would like to address the question about the way in which insight is attained in theology. If we assume the subject matter of Christian theology is God's revelation through the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, as is witnessed in Holy Scripture and made accessible through faith, the methodological question about the way this knowledge is grounded and legitimized remains. How do we attain knowledge in theology, if by "knowledge" is understood a rationally disciplined and inter-subjectively accountable understanding of the subject matter? If such an enterprise is attainable for theology, how does it compare with and differ from other methods of conceptualization, as is prevalent in the empirical sciences, for instance?

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In answering these questions, I would like to argue that theological insight is largely attained through the act of *hermeneutical understanding*.¹ The “method” of theology is an act of interpretation mediated by faith. To the extent that theology comes to an accountable version of its manner of conceptualization, it does so on the basis of a process of interpretation that, if understood correctly, is a completely legitimate form of knowledge, distinct from that of the empirical sciences, yet justifiable by comparison to a number of related, significant sciences.

2. THEOLOGY AS HISTORICAL-HERMENEUTIC SCIENCE

Where does Christian theology fit into the canon of justifiable sciences that we study at the university and that provide intelligible access to the various dimensions of the knowable reality? To answer this question, I would like to draw on a set of distinctions first suggested by Jürgen Habermas. In his book *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Habermas 1978), Habermas approaches this question from a fundamentally anthropological angle. What are the most basic characteristics of the species *Homo sapiens*? These characteristics spring from two original human activities, namely *labour* and *communication*. In turn, labour and communication as species-typical activities are the outcome of two fundamental interests that we adopt towards our world: the *technical* and the *practical* interest (Habermas 1978:308 et seq.). Labour – the creative human impingement on our environment for the sake of bodily survival – is the activity that flows from the technical interest. By this, Habermas means the interest that all of us have in deciphering the regularities that govern our natural environment – an interest that results in our ability to predict these regularities/laws and to apply them in practical projects, such as technology. In brief, the technical interest refers to a striving towards the attainment of control over the forces and processes in our natural environment – a control that enables us to survive biologically in this environment and to adapt or organize this environment optimally for our mutual benefit. The empirical-analytic sciences (by which Habermas means the natural and applied sciences) are the systematic formation of the execution of technical interest (Habermas 1978:302 et seq.).

However, humankind is more than a mere labourer – even if that labour results in culture formation. Man does not realize his identity only based on technical interest. Simply put, we do not live only from the bread produced

1 My argument is a re-uptake of a similar claim that has often been made in the past. See, for example, Ebeling (1962), Fuchs (1968), Rossouw (1974) and Smit (1987).

by our labours. To be human, we also have interests other than the provision of food and other materials for biological survival. We are human on another basis than that of labour and technology. This other manner of existence is the search for meaning, which is the outcome of the second interest on the basis of which we produce culture. Habermas calls this second interest the *practical interest*, i.e. the interest that we have, based on continuous inter-subjective dialogue, to come to a mutual understanding or consensus about the kind of life that is worth our while and the values that ought to inform that life. In view of this second ideal/interest, humankind creates symbolic forms (i.e. works of art, texts, artefacts, values, political systems, ideologies, etc.) that are expressions of the ways in which we, in consultation and collaboration with fellow human beings, make sense of our world and ourselves. Humankind sees itself “doubled”² (Marx) in the symbolic forms of her culture and continues to enquire whether these forms are still important and whether they continue to articulate the values, norms and ideals by means of which we preferentially live – in brief, the kind of life that is worth our while to pursue.

For Habermas, the “historical-hermeneutic” (we could translate it with “the human”) sciences, which would include theology, are the systematic formation of practical interest, i.e. of the second, equally important and unavoidable way in which we are what we are and in which we realize our particular identity as a species (Habermas 1978: 309 et seq.).

3. THEOLOGY AS *VERSTEHEN*

Fundamental to theology, as to related sciences such as philosophy and literature, is the orientation from which knowledge is formulated and attained. Following Wilhelm Dilthey, we may call this orientation “understanding” (*verstehen*) as opposed to “explanation” (*erklären*).

For Dilthey, this distinction constitutes a clear epistemological alternative: Either you “explain” in the manner of the natural scientist, or you “understand” in the manner of the historian. The natural sciences differ from the *Geisteswissenschaften* in more than their subject matter; we cannot restrict ourselves simply to stating that the former explores nature whereas the latter studies culture. Dilthey emphasizes that the sciences of the mind practise a *different method*.

2 “Der Gegenstand der Arbeit ist daher die Verständlichung der Gattungsleben des Menschen: indem er sich nicht nur wie in Bewusstsein intellektuell, sondern werktätig, wirklich *verdoppelt*, und sich selbst daher in einer von ihm geschaffenen Welt anschaut” (Marx & Engels 1981:517, my italics).

The context of nature is abstract; the mental and historical contexts are alive, they are saturated with life ... the sciences of the mind ... integrate the phenomena by first of all retranslating the infinitely extended exterior human-historical-social reality into the mental vitality from which it has originated (Dilthey 1914-74:119).

Such a “retranslation” is possibly attributed to the human scientist’s ability to understand the feelings, thoughts and motives of those who act or acted in the realm of the social-historical reality in question. *Verstehen* is a method specific to the sciences of the mind. It must be distinguished clearly from explanation that, as a method, serves the natural sciences that study nature: the region of the objects of scientific observation, subsumed since Galileo to the enterprise of mathematisation and since John Stuart Mill to the canons of inductive logic. *Verstehen* is the method by which the *Geisteswissenschaften* study the mind, i.e. the region of psychological individualities into which each mental life is capable of transposing itself. An enquirer attains understanding only when an intimate experience (*Erlebnis*) of someone in history is re-enacted or re-executed in his own mind. Understanding is a *Nacherleben* (re-experiencing) of an original *Erlebnis* (i.e. an intimate experience of meaning). In a *Nacherleben*, the enquirer subjectively appropriates for himself a meaning that once has been expressed, assimilates this meaning in his own mind and makes it relevant to his existential concerns (Rossouw 1980:35). Understanding is transference of previously established meaning into another mental life.

It could be well argued that *verstehen* is also the “method” of theology. Theology does *not explain* in the manner of the natural sciences, i.e. by identifying the mutual relations between externally observed facts in terms of law-like regularities and as the outcome of the standardized procedures of experimental observations. On the other hand, theology *interprets* in the manner of the human sciences. This will be explained further in due course.

4. FIDES QUAERENS INTELLECTUM

Before we come to that, another preliminary question presents itself. What, namely, is it that we *know* when we practise theology? I prefer the notion of theology offered by, amongst others, Karl Barth, who understands theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith in search of understanding (Barth 1975). Theology is the meta-activity in and by which we take a step back from the actual life of faith (a life that comes to expression in acts of prayer, doxology, confession and witnessing) and through which we reflect on what exactly it is that we do when we take part in the life of faith. Through and in actual faith, we know God – but not God as He is in Himself or as the contents of religious

emotions or experiences. We know God as the correlate of revelation, the origin of His Word that comes to expression in the life of His only-begotten Son and thus in the articles of faith, as these are formulated on the basis of the authoritative testimonies of that revelation that are assembled in the Holy Scripture. While faith is the actual encounter with the acts of revelation of God who meets us in the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, theology is the interpretation of the content of that meeting. That content is not something that becomes accessible for empirical registration or that is the outcome of logical argumentation or deduction. That content is a *message* that, we believe, originates with God Himself and that is to be learnt, heard or acquired (“verneem”) through a willed and conscious act of interpretation. Of necessity, through the message of revelation, theology is a hermeneutical enterprise in that we are confronted by a set of symbolic forms whose meanings are not self-evident but require a conscious act of interpretation.

Theological conceptualization is an act of interpretation, and theology as hermeneutics is the theory in terms of which the process of interpretation and its conditions, possibilities and rules are to be understood. Our view of theology as hermeneutics presupposes our involvement in a communication process with three components: 1. *God*, as the origin of the communication; 2. the to-be-interpreted *message* of God, as contained in the Holy Scriptures; and 3. *we*, as *interpreters* of the message, as concrete, existing subjects that live their lives in a specific historical situation. Viewing theology as hermeneutics presupposes our participation in a communication process in which the conveyance of the message is distorted in some way, and that provokes uncertainty in the interpreter(s). In turn, this uncertainty can be transcended only through a willed and conscious act of interpretation in an effort to overcome the uncertainty. Interpretation is the conquest of the strangeness that is provoked by the situation of disturbed communication.

5. FORMAL ELEMENTS OF HERMENEUTICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION

A number of elements that are formally equivalent in all processes of hermeneutical conceptualization can be identified, although time will not allow me to deal with them in any detail.³ First, the hermeneutical process of conceptualization has a *circular or spiral structure*. It never encounters its to-be-interpreted symbolic form from a zero position of complete ignorance, but always embarks on interpretation in the light of some measure of provisional familiarity with what is to be interpreted. Thus, interpretation involves sustained

3 In listing these characteristics of hermeneutical conceptualization, I draw strongly on an unpublished paper by Rossouw (1984).

correction, enrichment, nuancing, deepening or enlargement of this original familiarity. That this circle ought rather to be seen as a spiral suggests that this enrichment occurs ever so often on an elevated level of insight; it does not have the character of a vicious circle in which pre-knowledge and prejudice are simply re-affirmed continuously.

Second, *directive interests* play an important role in hermeneutical conceptualization. Engagement with a text or symbolic form often serves (a) certain expectation(s), which in turn relates to the interests of the interpreter. It is important that these interests actually relate to the matter that is at hand in the complex symbolic form that is being questioned in the interpretation process. Third, the criterion of *topical validity* (“saakgetrouheid”) must be applied to interpretation. That implies that the intentions of the original author must be reconstructed as reliably as possible, particularly when the object of interpretation is a text or historically produced symbolic form. Fourth, in interpretation, the *meaning focus* of the text must also be delineated carefully. A text is not simply the sum total of its constituent parts. It is a whole or a totality that is constituted with reference to a central idea or train of thought that synthesizes the constituent parts into an inner coherence or unity. The search for such a meaning focus implies that core and periphery can and must always be distinguished.

The last aspect of a general understanding of hermeneutical conceptualization is the need to *translate* the to-be-interpreted text or symbolic form into the *interpretative horizon of the present*, based on which interpretation necessarily occurs. In this context, “translation” does not primarily mean expression of the text in a familiar language. It rather involves exposition of the alien textual content in such a way that its relevance for the questions and uncertainties of the reader in his/her historical situation will be illuminated. This exposition does not aim to *adapt* the meaning of the text to requirements of the present or to render the message of the text acceptable to the present. However, it does mean the *application* of the text to that situation. Only when the relevance of a message for the present can be ascertained fully can it be accepted or rejected as a claim to meaning with the potential to direct people’s lives fundamentally.

Until now, general characteristics of a hermeneutical process of conceptualization have been dealt with. It is to be expected that the unique character of the theological terrain of inquiry might well have implications for the contents of its hermeneutical procedure. This warrants more elucidation.

First, theology is not engaged in interpreting just any text. Theological interpretation occurs on the basis of a fundamental presupposition. This presupposition is that the text that informs its hermeneutical enterprise is God’s redemptive revelation in Christ, as reliably witnessed in the Scriptures. What

counts as “Scriptures” is the outcome of a historical decision of the Christian church that, so it is believed, was taken under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Christian theology interprets these events on the basis of a commitment to these events and this text as containing the “Word of God”, which maintains a special validity and authority that is not invalidated by historical changes. Second, the hermeneutical interpretation of theology occurs within the ambit of a sustained expectation that its results will facilitate the attainment of faith; it is interpretation “from faith in view of faith”, (“uit geloof tot geloof”) whereby the term faith is understood as the encounter or meeting and relation with God through Jesus Christ that comes into being and is sustained through the Word of God in the answering engagement with God (i.e. through liturgy and diaconia).

6. THEOLOGY AS HERMENEUTICAL UNDERSTANDING

Consequently, I will make a few remarks about the way in which the abovementioned presupposition modifies the structural characteristics of the hermeneutical procedure that was discussed earlier.⁴ As regards the *circle or spiral structure of that procedure*, it must be noted that Christian theology departs from an already attained knowledge of the Word of God in its correlation with faith. This comes about because of a variety of factors, e.g. the personal biography of the theologian (who has been educated in faith and has had his/her own faith-related experiences and reflections), the tradition of a certain Christian group or denomination to whom the interpreter-theologian belongs, the general confessional tradition in which the theologian has been socialized, as well as the Christian life-world and value system of the theologian’s social and cultural environment. As foreseen in the notion of hermeneutical spiral, much of the contents of these factors may be challenged, corrected or deepened. However, the possibility that this spiralling re-uptake of faith contents might lead to a complete loss of faith is not part of the self-understanding of theology in this sense.

Theology also has *directive interests*. Their relevance and reliability also depend on whether they embody questions and issues that feed into the fundamental interest of theology in and its concern with the Word of God. Examples of such interests are the concern to understand one’s own faith optimally, the ecclesiastical concern about the orthodoxy of a confession that unites a community of faith or the ecclesiastical interest in the most efficacious way of ministering to the contemporary world.

4 For this purpose, I again draw strongly on the insights of Rossouw (1984).

To remain faithful to the central message of the Word of God, it is self-evidently necessary to reconstruct the situation from which the Biblical text originated historically to establish its original impact and significance. To enrich this process, an in-depth study of other central texts from the tradition that facilitated our understanding of Scripture is also called for. In this respect, we might refer to Gadamer's notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (Gadamer 1965:283 et seq., 323, 328, 343, 366). The interpretation of texts, including the Bible, necessarily and inevitably forms part of a tradition process from which we as interpreters cannot divorce ourselves and that has to be considered when we try to understand a text. This tradition process represents what Gadamer calls the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text, and the consciousness of which he calls the *wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstsein* (the consciousness that is effected by history).⁵ These concepts try to convey his idea that, when we interpret a text (e.g. the Bible), our interpretation necessarily will be influenced radically by other readings of that text that precede our own and that have attained a certain credibility and authority in history (Van Niekerk 2002:232).

Fourth, as was argued, the general structure of hermeneutical interpretation requires the discovery of the *central focus of the text*. This focus represents a centre of gravity that bestows coherence, order and unity to the whole. In Christian theology, it is widely agreed that, in some way or another, this focus has to do with the person, message, events surrounding and significance of Jesus Christ as the culmination and summation of God's redemptive revelation to humankind. This focus has been understood in a variety of ways in the tradition of theological interpretations. For Gnosticism, God's engagement with Jesus implies the elevation of human nature to participation in divine nature. In Lutheranism, it was understood as the justification of the sinner by grace and through faith. In Calvinism, it was taken to be the process of establishing and maintaining God's justice in and in relation to creation, as well as confirming God's sovereignty and glorification. These various interpretations do not necessarily exclude one another. However, essential elements in the Scriptural message about Jesus cannot be ignored in our efforts to establish the focus of Scripture without the risk of the entire process losing its identity as an instance of Christian theology. This shows the necessity of ecumenical dialogue to establish core and periphery in this regard.

Finally, theology, like all hermeneutical enterprises, is compelled to *translate* the Word of God as contained in the Scriptures for *present-day men, women and children*. Therefore, theology as hermeneutics needs first-hand knowledge of the value systems, expectations, action patterns and cultural

5 Some interpreters of Gadamer regard Gadamer's exposition of this idea as his main contribution. Cf. the article by Fouché (2002) and the doctoral dissertation on which it is based (Fouché 2001), in which it is argued that the whole of Gadamer's oeuvre ought to be understood in view of his idea of the *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

orientation of contemporary people. In the final analysis, to interpret and eventually understand is to not only try to establish the “original meaning of the text”, but also to make the life-world and experiences of the interpreter relevant to the meaning that the text may have for us here and now. For someone like Gadamer, to understand the same is necessarily to understand differently, i.e. to understand in view of the changed circumstances and context of every new act of interpretation. To understand is also to be changed by the application of an interpreter’s range of experiences that is infused by the meaning that the interpreter finds in the text; for Gadamer, understanding is a “new way of being”.

In addition, for Gadamer, the meaning that is the outcome of any process of interpretation, including that of theology, is not ever a completed matter of fact that is finished once it has been accomplished. This meaning is much rather a *course of events* or, better, a *process* that, as far as contents is concerned, can change to the extent that the historical situation or framework from which we question the text changes or shifts. Therefore, a text does not have one completed or fixated meaning, and, most emphatically, the meaning of a text does not necessarily coincide with the intention of its author(s).⁶ The meaning of a text is the result or outcome of the “fusion of horizons”, the one horizon being the context in which the text originated, and the other the context constituting the interpretive possibilities, concerns and questions of the interpreter and his/her historical community.⁷ The implication of this

6 For a discussion of a constructed debate on this issue between Gadamer and E.D. Hirsch, cf. Warnke (1987:42-72).

7 Cf. Gadamer’s own exposition of this idea: “In fact the horizon of the present is being continually formed, in that we have continually to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present that there are historical horizons. Understanding, rather, is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves....Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of the tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutical task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting naïve assimilation but consciously bringing it out. This is why it is part of the hermeneutical approach to project an historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present ... The projecting of the historical horizon then, is only a phase in the process of understanding, and does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon of understanding. In the process of understanding there takes place a real fusing of horizons, which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously removed. We described the conscious act of this fusion as the task of effective-historical consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtlichen Bewusstsein*). Although this task had been obscured by

insight is that *application* is an essential part of interpretation. It is a fallacy to work with the construction that the text has some meaning of its own and that the act of interpretation at best can seek out that original and complete meaning and afterwards apply it to the situation, needs or questions of the interpreter. According to Gadamer, rather, there is no interpretation that is not, from the outset, also an application to the concerns contained in the horizon of the interpreter. To reiterate, the text has no “fixed meaning” – also not in its context of origination. The meaning of the text is established through the fusion of horizons, which implies that its meaning is shifting constantly, since the outcome of the fusion every time is a blending of two or more different concerns in diverse, distinguishable, historical situations.

To summarize, theology entails understanding. When we practise theology, we always and inevitably are engaged in a process of understanding. This paper is an effort to understand the enterprise of theology as understanding. The insight that the entire theological project, as it plays out between the Scripture text as it reaches us from the past and the actual preaching of that text in the present is a hermeneutical affair at heart is the pivotal insight yielded by the contributions of great hermeneutical theologians of the 20th century, such as Bultmann, Ebeling, Fuchs and Tracy.⁸ In his article about the “new theological hermeneutics”, Rossouw points out that this new hermeneutics simply can be circumscribed as “the exposition of the Scripture text” (Rossouw 1974: 48). This designation turns out to be ambiguous, however. The genitive “of” can be taken as both a subjective and an objective genitive.

The task of theology, to formulate it pointedly, is to serve the exposition of the Scripture text (subjective genitive) through an exposition of the Scripture text (objective genitive) (Rossouw 1974: 48, my translation).

In this context, Gadamer’s idea of interpretation as the “fusion of horizons” implies that the text of Scripture, in its historical reception, must be interpreted so that the possibility and space are created for that text to become the subject of interpretation, i.e. the interpretation of our present-day situation and experience.

Therefore, theology provides hermeneutical service, but not only in the limited sense of developing and justifying exegetical methods. Put differently, theology is not only hermeneutics insofar as it facilitates the actual exegesis of the Scripture. As hermeneutics, theology is the interpretation of the Holy Scripture, but then always in correlation with the possibilities of understanding

aesthetic historical positivism in the train of romantic hermeneutics, it is, in fact, the central problem of hermeneutics. It is the problem of application that exists in all understanding” (Gadamer 1975:273-274).

8 In this regard, see Tracy (1981).

and the sense of reality of present-day men and women who are the addressees of the exposition. In fact, theology as such serves the Word of God, where the latter no longer is to be understood as an object of theological interpretation (neither in the sense of a compendium of doctrines nor a series of historic facts). Drawing on Ebeling and Fuchs, Rossouw argues that “Word of God” in this sense much rather must be understood as the necessary redemptive series of events (*Wortgeschehen*) or language event (*Sprachereignis*) that is the foundation of the text of Holy Scripture. In this sense, the Word of God is not understood, but it enacts understanding. It has its own hermeneutical function and potency (Rossouw 1974:48).

Hence, through the interpretation of the text of Scripture, the hermeneutical task of theology is to remove any obstacles to enable the Word of God to fulfil its hermeneutical function in our lives. According to Rossouw, theology on the one hand has the task of ascertaining the word events in the language of the first witnesses of faith. On the other hand, theology is called to justify or account for the ability of these word events to be mediated as a source of faith in the language of modern man:

Theology has fulfilled its hermeneutical task when it has in fact made itself obsolete and has made the actual proclamation of the Word in the present inevitable and clear (Rossouw 1974:49).

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The following remarks must be made to conclude my argument:

1. Theology as a discipline practised at (also) modern universities is legitimised by the practical interest (in Habermas’s sense, as explained earlier) as ground for a special, legitimate kind of knowledge. Theology is an expression of the conversation of humankind in which we, via an inter-subjective dialogue, try to reach consensus on the values that render our lives in the world meaningful. In Tillich’s phrase, theology is our response to the interrogation of what “concerns us ultimately” (Tillich 1968:13-33, 131-141, 162-165, 234-238). This interrogation is a quest for knowledge that cannot be satisfied by discovering and predicting laws of nature and applying the verifying procedures of the natural and applied sciences. In fact, as Paul Ricoeur has argued (drawing on some insights of Hart), we must distinguish between a *logic of verification* operative in the natural sciences and a *logic of validation* operative in the social sciences (Ricoeur 1981:215).⁹ Juridical argumentation, according to Hart, is not

⁹ For a discussion of the significance of this distinction for understanding the rationality of the human sciences, see Van Niekerk (1990:18-19).

simply deductive-nomological; it is not simply a matter of the application of general laws to specific cases. It has to do with decisions that have to be taken in view of specific circumstances. Similarly, the “findings” of a court of law are not made with the definitiveness of a “scientific verification”. Much rather, they are the outcomes of validation procedures that yield validation as something “beyond reasonable doubt”. Hart explains with reference to the law of contracts:

There *is* a contract in the timeless sense of ‘is’ appropriate to judicial decisions. Secondly, since the judge is literally deciding that on the facts before him a contract does or does not exist, and to do this is neither to describe the facts nor to make inductive or deductive inferences from the statement of facts, what he does may be either a *right* or a *wrong* decision or a *good* or *bad* judgement and can be either *affirmed* or *reversed* and (where he has no jurisdiction to decide the question) may be *quashed* or *discharged* (Hart 1949:182, his italicization).

This represents a kind of rationality that is polemical in nature; in principle, each finding and decision is challengeable in the form of an appeal. When knowledge claims (including those of theology) are tested in the human sciences, it seems to me that the validating evidence often has this characteristic, which makes this kind of testing significantly different from the case in the natural sciences. In addition, validation is never definitive. Like a judgement in a court of law, it is always open to revision in the sense of an appeal, as is implied by the hermeneutical spiral that always reflects critically on what has been found as insights and, through continued engagement with the source of theological knowledge, yields insight on a higher level of understanding.

2. Theology, like all forms of hermeneutics, is born from failed communication (as argued by Schleiermacher¹⁰). Yet, at the same time, we must acknowledge that failed communication is recognisable only because of some prior, primordial, already existing understanding, as Gadamer has shown persuasively. Only because we are always and already provisionally familiar with the to-be-interpreted text, can we recognise confusion and failure in our efforts to understand more fully. In this sense, theology as hermeneutics is a dialectic of familiarity and strangeness. As such, it reflects a core aspect of human life itself. In this respect, the cognitive status of theology is akin to that of metaphorical language, not only because theology relies heavily on the expressive force of metaphors, analogies, symbols and models. Metaphors and models occur abundantly in the language of the natural sciences, as has been argued persuasively

10 For an enlightening discussion of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, see Rossouw (1980:22-32).

in a substantial amount of literature. The point is rather that the cognitive status of the expressive force in metaphors is similar to the hermeneutical character of theological knowledge claims: It is a dialectic of familiarity and strangeness. Philip Wheelwright has argued that all metaphors have epiphoric and diaphoric elements (Wheelwright 1962). The epiphoric component relates to what is familiar in a metaphoric expression; e.g., the metaphor “there comes a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune” (claimed by Brutus, in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*) can be understood because all of us know what men, tides, floods and fortune mean. The diaphoric component, on the other hand, is the suggestive force of the metaphor – the aspect that suggests a juxtaposition of and relation between concepts that are not self-evident. Although we know what men, tides, floods and fortunes as such mean, the diaphoric thrust of the metaphor is to combine these elements in a way that nobody else has thought of and, in the process, reveal a new dimension of reality that is new and surprising and that is accessible only via the metaphor. The point is that no successful metaphor is either purely epiphoric or purely diaphoric. A pure diaphor would be pure suggestion with no basis of familiarity, and would thus be incomprehensible. On the other hand, a pure epiphor would be a new addition to the lexicon; because it is so familiar, it has lost all suggestive power leading to new insight. All successful metaphors, i.e. metaphors that yield new insights that cannot be accessed independently from the metaphor, are thus a mixture of diaphors and epiphors.¹¹ That means they express a dialectic of familiarity and unfamiliarity or alienation, like the interpretations of theology. Of necessity, as an effort to understand, theology is couched in this dialectic, and thus reflects life as we know it: an exasperating to-and-fro movement between what has been established and the unfamiliarity that lies beyond.

3. Emphatically, theology is not the only discipline at the university that has a hermeneutical methodology. Formulated brutally, if theology is not to be tolerated because of its hermeneutical method of conceptualisation and argumentation, then a significant part of the disciplines in the so-called humanities are to be dismissed with it, e.g. philosophy, literature, fine arts, music, drama and history.¹² Such a dismissal is certainly possible and, as all of us know, has been attempted at a variety of universities all over the world. The fact that it always backfires and always results in a return of these disciplines is not only testimony to their general intellectual

11 For a comprehensive discussion of this insight, see Van Niekerk (1983:231-234).

12 For a more comprehensive argument in support of this claim, see Van Niekerk (1983:277-292) and Van Niekerk (1985).

resilience, but also to the fact that, hermeneutical as they may be, they are the source of some of the most innovative and influential ideas that we have seen in the course of history.

In addition, we live in a world that has been profanitized relentlessly; in other words, a world where our sense of the religious dimension of the world becomes blunted and where we increasingly believe and live in the moment and the pleasure that the present brings. Theology, religious studies, philosophy of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion and the study of ancient languages and cultures are all disciplines that enable us to understand our sense of religion and religious awareness better. We cannot deny that religion plays a very important role in most human societies – especially in Africa. For a moment, think of the influence and effect of religion on most countries in the Near East, and the effect it currently has on world politics. Then we are not even talking about the influence of religion on the history of Western Europe and, therefore, on Africa. Theology and the other disciplines mentioned above have a place at universities not only to train clergy, but also because religion is an important part of people's lives and, therefore, an integrated part of the human reality that human and social sciences are trying to understand.

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