Religious discourse, power and the public

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ABSTRACT

Three kinds of discourse are distinguished: premodern, modern, postmodern. The emphasis is placed on postmodernism by mentioning the (positive) characteristics of (affirmative) postmodernism. This is followed by a conceptual analysis of the main concepts entailed by the theme of the paper, namely, rhetoric, language/discourse, religion, power and the public. The relevance of the theme is demonstrated by relating religious discourse to the notions of secularisation, plurality (with special reference to multi-culturalism), intertextuality, ideology and public opinion.

1 INTRODUCTION

It came as a pleasant surprise to be invited as a philosopher to read a paper at this meeting organised by the New Testament Society of South Africa. My reluctance to take part in such a venture was overcome when I was convinced that my task is precisely not to speak as an insider, but as an outsider, and to ascertain to what extent philosophical analysis can contribute to our understanding of the meaning of the terms highlighted by the theme of this conference. I sincerely hope that my analysis of terms contribute to a realisation of the importance of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to problems.

As a philosopher I also want to bring to your attention a useful distinction between three kinds of discourse which plays an important role in some of contemporary thinking. I mention this since it can, consciously or unconsciously, play a role in the way in which we articulate our problems. The three kinds of discourse I have in mind are the following: premodern, modern and postmodern discourses.

Premodern discourse is characterised by an absence of a self-critical approach to one's understanding of the world which is structured by the language of the community to which one belongs. It is typical of so-called 'primitive' or 'preliterate' cultures in which the discourse of the community is said to move within 'a socio-mythic orbit'—a term which emphasises the role of myth in language and the collective nature of this kind of understanding.

Modern discourse is rooted in a critical attitude towards the assumptions of a premodern socio-mythic order. It strives towards a rational explanation
of the world, assuming that rationality—the modernist view of what constitutes rationality—has a universal validity which enables us to develop a Grand Theory about reality and a Grand Narrative of human progress. The notion of progress is based on an imperialism of reason which tends to disqualify premodern discourse as backward and outdated.

Postmodern discourse manifests itself in an ironic relationship towards all claims to finality whether produced by myth or by reason. Both these claims to finality are based on the assumption that there is only one correct way of understanding the world. Postmodernism assumes that there is a plurality of ways of understanding and that a more tolerant approach to differences are called for. The mere existence of premodern, modern and postmodern discourses already illustrates the availability of alternative ways of structuring and articulating human experience.

Since postmodernism has transformed the way in which we traditionally formulate problems, I mention a few characteristics of this discourse.

1. The insight that not reason, but language as a system of signs, constitutes the relationship between human beings and reality.

2. Scepticism with regard to a fixed point of reference which could function as a foundation of knowledge enabling one to develop a Grand Theory about reality.

3. Acceptance of the coexistence of a plurality of narratives allowing for a plurality of meanings that can be attached to a sign.

4. The contextualisation of meaning: the meaning of a word is the use of a word in a context but the context is never saturated.

5. An acknowledgement of the complexity of a network of signs in which one inevitably becomes involved in one's endeavour to understand a text.

6. A sensitivity for the use of metaphorical language. Metaphor celebrates concrete language and describes something in terms of something else. This entails exploring the whole world as source of meaning, while demonstrating the dynamic nature of understanding by utilising the strategy of the crossing of boundaries.

7. The broadening of the notion of intertextuality to refer not only to the relationships between written texts, but to all phenomena which are relevant for the understanding of a text. The word text as a set of relationships between signs that has to be interpreted is used metaphorically to cover all objects of understanding, for example, a book as text, the writer as text, the historical situation as text, the socio-economic-political world as text, the reader, the interpretive community and the public as texts, et cetera. In this manner intertextuality overcomes the limitations of the apartheid assumption of the autonomy, not only of
the book as text, but also the autonomy of any other component of a communicative situation.

(8) The view that meaning should not be divorced from the process that brings it forth. This entails the important recognition of the *historical* context in which communication takes place.

(9) The realisation that not only do we speak a language, but that a language also speaks us. Therefore, the need to bring to consciousness the hidden assumptions of our discourses.

(10) Awareness of the role of power relationships which condition meaning in the network of signs. Discourse is ideological to the extent that the meaning of signs is in the service of power. With regard to the role of power in communication the difference between domination and emancipation is of crucial importance.

Although the term postmodernism is an umbrella term which covers a plurality of approaches, I propose that we distinguish between negative and affirmative forms of postmodernism. Negative postmodernism advocates an 'anything goes' approach with regard to the interpretation of signs and absolutises the strategy of irony to such an extreme that taking up a position and acting on one's insight are disqualified. Affirmative postmodernism, on the other hand, reminds us of the provisional nature of our insights but encourages us not only to produce interpretations, but to take responsibility for our production of meaning and for the action that flows from that insight, reminding us all the time that, since we lack the luxury of a privileged position, we have to involve ourselves in the agonistics of the network of signs.

On the basis of these insights¹ I intend giving a short conceptual analysis of the main terms of the congress-theme,² namely, rhetoric, discourse, religion, power, and the public. This will be followed by a discussion of some issues which contribute to a better understanding of the theme.

2 RHETORIC

The term *rhetoric* refers to the art of the persuasive use of language. It is used for both the practice and the theory of persuasive discourse. In the first case the focus is on the application of the art while in the case of theory the reference is to the discipline which treats this art as object of study. In

¹ My remarks on postmodernism, culture and ideology are based on research published previously.

² This paper was read at the annual meeting of the New Testament Society of South Africa at the University of Stellenbosch, 1-4 April 1997. The main theme was *Johannine Theology* and the parallel theme *Rhetoric and Religion*. 
premodern discourse which is qualified by the absence of theory, the participants are involved in the persuasive use of language without being able to study this linguistic phenomenon by means of critical reflection. Modern discourse gives birth to the study of rhetoric and in this context the contribution by Aristotle is of prime importance. Unfortunately the tendency in modernism is to deny the rhetorical dimension of its own writing because of the rational fiction of pure language. Various thinkers have undermined this myth of objective knowledge which was assumed to be possible on the basis of objective empirical facts made accessible through the medium of neutral language. Thomas Kuhn, for example, has pointed out to what extent doing science amounts to acquiring fluency in a dominant language transforming scientific language into 'the current interpretation of particular experience that a community of scientists has come to consider persuasive' (Clark 1990:5). This emphasis on the role of persuasive language in our interpretation of the world is characteristic of postmodernism which has generated a new interest in the role of rhetoric. This so-called new rhetoric (Nel 1996) has broadened the traditional triad of rhetoric, namely, logos, ethos and pathos by focusing not only on the role of argumentation, on the importance of the performances of the speaker and the audience, but also on praxis, the rhetorical context in which speaker, argumentation and audience operate.

Smit and Wessels (1996:129) formulate this position as follows:

The recent rhetorical turn in (human and social) sciences has again made us more aware of precisely those (Aristotelian) aspects of ethos and pathos involved in writing activities. Since the Enlightenment, we have focused on the third aspect, namely logos. We focused on the argument, the text, the document, the product. Rhetorical theory reminds us that pathos, i.e. the audience, the readers, and ethos, i.e. the author, the character, the integrity, the motivation, the interests, are important as well.

Taking this broad application into account, Kennedy (1992:2) refers to rhetoric as 'the energy inherent in communication.' A crucial question in this regard concerns the content of the term energy which characterises a communicative situation. Why would energy only refer to author, document and audience, but exclude the cultural context of author and audience and the cultural contexts of readers at a later stage? Why should one not add praxis to the triad of logos, ethos, and pathos? Perelman (1975:764) points out that the new rhetoric has enabled philosophers to realise that 'each philosophy reflects its own time and the social and cultural conditions in which it is developed.' The importance of the concrete moment of history for an understanding of a communicative act should, however, not only refer to the so-called original situation but also to all subsequent situations of understanding.
By introducing the role of the cultural context in the understanding of a communicative situation one runs the risk of doing this in an abstract manner which leads to the exclusion of social, political and economic relationships. These are the power relationships that a reference to the concrete moment in history should include, whether the participants are conscious or unconscious of this influence. I have detected an uncertainty regarding the extent to which the new rhetoric should include this crucial aspect in its analysis. The view has been expressed that power play is not the domain of rhetoric since it is the task of discourse analysis to focus on the relationship between language and power. Whatever one decides on this score, the fact remains that within postmodernism contextualisation of language is of prime importance and the inclusion of power relationships as inherent to context is inevitable.

A view of rhetoric which represents this transformed nature of rhetoric, taking the ideological aspect of communication into account, is expressed by Eagleton as follows:

Rhetorics must be concerned with the kinds of effects which discourses produce, and how they produce them; ...(it is) the theory of discursive practices in society as a whole with special attention to such practices as forms of power and performance; ... (it sees) literary forms as forms of activity inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers; ...rhetorics (has a) preoccupation with discourse as a form of power and desire (quoted by Smit 1990a:23).

In the context of biblical studies Wuellner (1987) argues for a broader scope for rhetoric and points out how rhetorical criticism delivers the goods in this regard. Rhetorical criticism demonstrates how all literature is social discourse and how texts are not timeless artefacts but products of time. Wuellner (1987:462) concludes his positive evaluation of rhetorical criticism by asking the question: ‘Where, then, is rhetorical criticism taking us in biblical studies in the years ahead?’ The first answer is that biblical scholars are taken into interdisciplinary studies since not only their faith in systems has been challenged, but also ‘the increasing isolation and departmentalisation of exegetes working scientifically, whether individually or in learned societies and guild-sponsored seminars.’ Secondly, rhetorical criticism is taking ‘biblical exegetes at last out of the ghetto of an estheticizing preoccupation with biblical stylistics which has remained for centuries formalised, and functionless, and contextless.’ They are taken into a new domain in which biblical literature is also viewed as social discourse. Scholars become involved in a dynamic process of interpretation which not only reveals the politics of writing in texts but also the politics of interpretation in the act of understanding those texts.
I can go along with the broadening of the range of rhetoric. In a sense it is inevitable viewed in the context of postmodern thinking.

3 LANGUAGE/DISCOURSE

There is a tendency to view language as a neutral instrument to convey insights from one person to another. This view is based on 'the deluded sense of the mastery of concept over language' (Norris 1982:29). Fortunately postmodern discourse has liberated language from this imperialism of thought. This liberation enables us to discover the creative nature of language as expressed by the dynamic view of rhetoric (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969), the insights of deconstruction (Derrida 1976, 1978), and the power of invention typical of metaphoric language (Ricoeur 1978).

Thanks to these insights, we do not speak of the mind as mirroring the world in acts of perception and thinking, nor of language as representing the world. The mind and language are said to construct semantic and social-worlds. Postmodern discourse highlights the plurality of ways of understanding the world and of influencing people, and therefore of constructing social spaces and directing behaviour. This insight goes against the common view that language is a system of signs with 'a large, overarching, communal vocabulary' (Rorty 1982:15). The assumption made by the common view is that speakers have immediate access to meaning since language creates a common homogeneous sphere of understanding by providing all participants with an overarching vocabulary. Postmodernism undermines the myth of universal meaning by emphasising that the meaning of a word is the use of a word in a context and by drawing our attention to the plurality of contexts in which words operate.

One should keep in mind that, although we are keen on saying that we speak a language, it is also necessary to say that a language speaks us. By placing the emphasis on the individual we forget that language also determines the way in which the individual speaks and acts. This implies that the individual is conditioned by a system of signs with meanings which represent power relations. For language is not a neutral vehicle of representation and communication but a value-laden sign-system. Words operate within a structure, that is within a set of relations which manifests appreciation and depreciation. And this hierarchy of affirmation and condemnation cannot be divorced from the hierarchy of power relations operative within society. In this context one can also speak of the politics of language. The term politics is here used not in the narrow party political sense but in the broad sense of the structure of asymmetrical relations of power in which meaning also functions in the service of power.
The term *discourse* refers to language in action—an expression which has the advantage of contextualising language and of including its rhetorical functions. For this reason the term is used to remind us of the social and historical conditions that play a role in the functioning of language. A system of language has the possibility of producing an infinity of meanings but, what is achieved, is limited by the power relationships of the given context. O'Sullivan (1983:73-74) reminds us that discourses also become institutionalised:

Discourses are the product of social, historical and institutional formations, and meanings are produced by these institutionalized discourses. It follows that the potentially infinite senses any language system is capable of producing are always limited and fixed by the structure of social relations which prevails in a given time and place, and which is itself represented through various discourses.

Since discourse not only enables us to think but also exert power over our minds, we should constantly be reminded of the influence of language in action. We should realise that if we are victimised by a discourse, we are in need of a new discourse and that we ourselves are responsible for creating a liberating language which structures the world in which we live in a new way. Alexander (1985:24) formulates this point as follows:

What has to be stressed...is the vital political and social importance of creating a new discourse, the urgent need to realise that language is much more than a passive reflection of a pre-existent, autonomous reality, that indeed, the language we use, by virtue of the fact that it is the medium through which the historical subject is constructed, helps to construct the reality within which we act and to which we react.

This insight that we not only use language but that language also uses us and that language in this way is a medium through which the historical subject is constructed, highlights the hegemonic role of discourse. The term *hegemony* is of crucial importance for our understanding of the power of language or of any other symbolic system. Cochrane (1996:3) defines hegemony as follows:

Hegemony is the “assertion of control over various modes of symbolic production” such that what might at one time have been a conscious strategic propagation of a particular world-view or ideology, now gradually takes on sufficient sense of naturalness that it becomes part of a background understanding of the way things are. The “repetition of signs and practices” leads to habituation, and they become “so deeply inscribed in everyday routine, that they may no longer be seen as forms of control—or seen at all”.

Crucial to the notion of hegemony is the characteristic that language as a symbolic system takes on a sufficient sense of naturalness with the result that
the speakers of the language do not see the discourse as a form of control. Fortunately this is not the last word, for 'hegemony is never total... It is always threatened by the vitality that remains in the forms of life it thwarts.' For this reason discourse is caught in the tension between domination and liberation and the participants should remain conscious of this fact and accept their responsibility in this regard.

4 RELIGION

One could, of course, hope that these unsettling ideas on rhetoric and language can be side-stepped by introducing the notion of religion. This, however, is not the case since religion is an historical phenomenon with many manifestations, and one can expect religious language to be equally characterised by historicity, contingency, provisionality, contextuality, et cetera. Whether one defines religion, firstly, as 'a particular system and practice of faith and worship' or secondly, in more general terms, as 'the human recognition of a superhuman controlling power' one cannot escape the role of the context in which faith and recognition of transcendence function.

One should also keep in mind that the term religion can be linked etymologically to both religare (to bind) and relegere (to read again). The notion of binding oneself to a transcendent power corresponds to the second definition mentioned, namely, the human recognition of a superhuman power. The notion of religion as an act of reading again introduces a new perspective. It suggests that transcendence is present in the willingness not to rest satisfied with one reading of the text of life but continually to read again and explore new meanings by opening oneself to the interrelationship of signs. Needless to say that this religious involvement in the interminable play of language is also contextually conditioned. Therefore, whether one focuses on the language of faith and worship, or the language of the recognition of transcendent power or the language of imaginative re-reading, in all cases history, context and power should be taken into account.

The advantage of understanding religion in terms of acts of reading again is that it is capable of destabilising religious discourse as fixed, established and essentially determined. In the previous section on discourse I referred to the fact that the hegemony of language tricks one in thinking that a particular use of language is 'natural' and that this calls for a critical and imaginative liberation from predetermined meanings. If we apply this insight to religious discourse, one can say that, if religious discourse takes on a sense of naturalness, the participants should be made conscious of this fact and encouraged to become creatively involved in the production of meaning of well-known words. If we apply the third meaning of the term religion as 'the act of reading again' to this endeavour, then we can say that the speakers of religious
discourse must take the nature of religion seriously, that is, they must critically re-read the signs which enslave them because these signs have become hegemonic and taken on a sense of naturalness. In this way religion involves human beings in the continual rebirth of meaning.

5 POWER

The term *power* can be defined in various ways. For the purpose of this discussion we can start with a minimal definition, namely, power as the ability to act and to direct action. This quality of directing actions can be ascribed to persons, governments, institutions, and to (hierarchical) structures which determine relationships between people, and also to cultures, traditions, religions, and to language.

Foucault defines power in terms of ‘an action over actions’ as follows: ‘It is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it contains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action’ (quoted by Bayart 1993:267).

What strikes one in this quotation is that Foucault refers to power as ‘the total structure of actions’ which is involved and that this structure is imbued with the following characteristics: it enables and disables; it includes and excludes; it incises, it induces, it seduces. This characterisation can also be ascribed to language: to the speaker of language as well as to language itself as a structure of speech acts and to the context in which it operates. It is one of the contributions of rhetoric to our understanding of language in action that these characteristics are discussed as everyday components of discourse. One of the advantages of this way of looking at the phenomenon of power is that it is not limited to the sphere of the state but distributed over the whole range of human actions.

6 THE PUBLIC

Rhetoric highlights the fact that in speaking about the communicative nature of language we should pay attention to *logos* (the nature of argumentation), *ethos* (the intention of the speaker), and *pathos* (the receptivity of the audience). To this we can add a fourth aspect *praxis* (the socio-political context). In this section the focus will be on the audience. The formulation of the theme of this paper does not use the term *audience* but the term *public* and although these two notions are not identical, there is a logical link. The advantage of the term *public* is that it opens up a wide range of problems worth taking into account. With regard to the definition of the word *public*
one should not be misled by the description of it as 'a reference to the members of the community in general.' In such a case we run the risk of focusing on homogeneity at the loss of heterogeneity. Analogous to the idea that language is not a system of signs which gives one access to an overarching communal vocabulary which provides common meanings, is the notion that the public is not identical with society as a large homogeneous group of people sharing the same kind of receptivity for the behaviour of words. The notion of the public requires a more nuanced approach.

A useful way to explore the notion of the public is to follow Tracy (1981) in distinguishing three major kinds of public, namely, academy, church and society. Typical of the academic public is the fact that, since confined to an intellectual elite, it places a high premium on rationality in theological discourse. The church public, while constituted by those people who share the same signs of faith and worship, nevertheless claim that they are involved in a religious discourse which has meaning for a universal audience. The third public, namely, society at large, is a more problematic concept because of the extreme heterogeneity of various kinds of public involved.

If one makes use of the distinction between academy, church and society as three kinds of public one should pay due respect to each sphere and to the role that religious language plays in each of them. We could raise the question about the appropriate relationships between these three spheres. Are they autonomous to such an extent that a form of apartheid can be maintained between them or should they be integrated and if so, in what way and to what extent?

One can of course use the term public in a general sense to refer to all the members of a society, but in case one addresses problems such as the relationship of religious discourse to society one has to be clear in one's mind about which sections of society are involved. In a postmodern world the plural nature of society is one of its prominent characteristics. The plural nature of the public includes, firstly, a plurality of religions, cultures, subcultures and ethnicities; secondly, the differences regarding class, race, gender and age, and thirdly, the diversity in which society organises itself, namely, in the spheres of politics, economy, religion, education, sport, art, leisure, et cetera. In speaking about the plurality of society one should keep in mind the rich variety covered by the term public. This entails that due respect should be given to the particularity of subjects in a plurality of roles in society. This would enable us to pay attention to the particular potentialities of the human spirit in a plurality of contexts and to the imaginative ways in which language—including religious language—adopts itself to a variety of communicative situations. With regard to the understanding of documents written in a previous age, one should be clear about the nature of the particular public at that time, and about the nature of the public addressed in the present.
West (1996), for example, discusses the example of Bible studies conducted with marginalised voices. He points out that religious language communicated in this manner is an enriching experience for all participants—for the privileged critical scholars who assume that they already possess the knowledge and for members of the marginalised community who are not conscious of the contribution they can make to the dynamics of the communicative situation. West (1996:13) describes this dynamics as follows:

The Bible studies...are themselves sites “in which communicative practice engenders democratic values through the enhancement of communicative competence (in Habermas’ sense of these terms)”. Contextual Bible study, where forms of community consciousness and critical consciousness find moments of intersection and transaction, provides resources and a place where members of poor and marginalised communities can meet, communicate, construct knowledge and coordinate their actions.

What strikes one in this context is that the power implicit in the religious language manifests itself in the empowerment of the members of the marginalised community only on the conditions that they creatively involve themselves in the act of understanding the religious signs.

Since the particular public plays a crucial role in the understanding of religious language the speaker of the language must be clear in her mind that her choice of a particular community to speak to, is at the same time, a choice for a particular interpretation. Therefore West can state that in the context of the South African society the biblical scholar can seriously be confronted by the important choice whether to read the biblical text with a white bourgeois public or with marginalised blacks.

7 ISSUES
In the light of these remarks on some of the crucial terms with regard to our theme, I intend discussing some relevant issues demonstrating the importance of the topic by situating it in a broader context.

7.1 Secularisation
The notion of secularisation is one of the important contributions of Christianity to human understanding. This notion entails that the term God should primarily be explored, not in terms of a Father in heaven or a Son in Jerusalem, but rather in terms of a Spirit which is available to all human beings. Secularisation transforms the other-worldliness of religious discourse into a disposition of this-worldliness. This disposition enables the Christian to discover the importance of human experience, ordinary language, the earth, bodiliness, time, space and place. The saeculum provides the time and
place for the functional and liberating use of religious language with regard to the third public in whatever form or context. Although the process of secularisation has not always been appreciated in Christian religious discourse, postmodernism has fortunately rekindled a new interest in the secular domain of life. One example of this shift in religious discourse is the emphasis placed on the third public, namely the diversity of society at large, which makes its own contribution in a variety of ways in a variety of contexts.

Religious discourse has much to gain from taking the secular world seriously and allowing the members of the third public to take the initiative and the responsibility for what the signs of religious discourse mean and how they make a difference in the contexts in which they operate. Lategan (1996:144) correctly states that if religious discourse intends ‘to contribute to the establishment of a new public ethos in civil society’ it cannot depend on a privileged position but will have ‘to move beyond its preoccupation with itself.’ This entails that religious discourse must be non-prescriptive in order to involve itself in the joint discovery of meaning by allowing the participants in the public arena to articulate from their own experience in their own language, allowing in this manner, the secular and plural nature of the public to operate freely. In order to remind us of the rich variety entailed in the notion of the public, I intend looking at the nature of the plurality involved with special reference to multi-culturalism.

7.2 Plurality

In merely speaking about the process of secularisation in general one runs the risk of not acknowledging sufficiently the diversity of society as the third public. The best way to counter the effect of generalisation is to look at specific examples which can illuminate the rhetorical dimension of religious discourse. Examples can be taken from a wide range of areas in which a plural society manifests itself. In a previous section I divided the plurality into three groups: Firstly, a plurality of religion, cultures, subcultures and ethnicities; secondly, differences regarding class, race, gender and age; thirdly, the diversity of organisations in the spheres of politics, economy, religion, education, sport, art, leisure, et cetera. In discussing problems regarding discourse and the possibility of communication in and between discourses, the existence of this plurality should be clearly kept in mind.

To illustrate the complexity involved in taking plurality seriously I propose that we look at one example, namely culture, from the first area distinguished by me. Various kinds of culture can be distinguished (Degenaar 1993:52).

(1) Culture as the form of life of a community viewed as a group of people sharing certain characteristics and interests.
Culture as the form of life of an ethnic community. The term ethnicity refers to a group of people sharing a common ancestry, language and history.

Culture as a form of life of a national community in which a uniformity of culture is achieved by the imposition of either a dominant ethnic culture or a common culture brought about by the processes of industrialisation and modernisation.

Culture as a form of life of society as a whole which accommodates a variety of ethnic communities. In this context one speaks of a democratic culture based on a constitution which protects the rights of individuals and ethnic communities.

Culture as a form of life of a larger society which includes a plurality of nations and ethnic communities, for example, European culture. The term Eurocentrism has been introduced to depict the influence of European culture on Western thinking.

Culture as a dynamic system of knowledge, values, actions, artefacts and articulations of a community in particular historical contexts. Culture in this sense refers to all meaningful expressions and symbolic formations by a community. In this context further distinctions such as dominant culture, subculture and counter culture are possible.

Culture as the general process of spiritual development of humanity as a whole. Alexander (1989) utilises this meaning in speaking of culture in the singular as opposed to culture in the plural. Culture in the singular is said to refer to 'the core of what is common to all humanity' while culture in the plural designates the form of life of a particular community.

The term multi-culturalism usually refers to the co-existence of a plurality of ethnic communities in the same country, but one should also keep in mind that there is a greater complexity entailed by the term since it includes the cluster of meanings depicted above. People can be said to be multi-cultural in many ways and to be involved in the rhetoric of a variety of cultures. Religious discourse should not be unconscious of this variety.

One aspect of the complexity of multi-culturalism which deserves constant attention is the tension between Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism. The introduction of this distinction raises many questions, and we should at least be clear in our minds which meanings we attach to the terms. We should also ask ourselves how they can be used appropriately in the South African context and assess the implications of these deliberations for religious discourse.

7.3 Intertextuality
While the notion of secularisation entailed a positive stance towards the concrete situations in which we are living, the notion of plurality entailed the diversity of groupings involved in these situations. In this section I introduce the notion of intertextuality to draw attention to a different kind of diversity which inevitably plays a role in the discourses which structure our lives. The notion of intertextuality is important, inter alia, since it highlights not only the interrelationships between texts but also the interrelationships between different kinds of texts which, for example, include the textuality of life, world and history. This line of thinking enables us to overcome the apartheid introduced between different spheres of life erroneously ascribing sovereignty to them.

Rhetoric has, in its own way, succeeded in contextualising discourse to such an extent that the role of power relationships in communicative situations are acknowledged. In postmodernism this insight has been reached by different routes. Poststructuralism, for example, criticises structuralism for viewing a text as autonomous by introducing the notion of context as precondition for text. The term textuality is introduced to refer to the broader context in which texts operate. The notion of textuality in which the text operates is expressed in various ways, for example: ‘There is a textuality in which the text resides, a setting that is tissue-like, with relations extending in all directions’ (Barry 1986:19). Abrams (1979:567) formulates this idea as follows: ‘The text is an episode in an all-encompassing textuality.’

The notion of textuality is also important in the sense that it deconstructs the notion of context as being a fixed final point of reference. Derrida states that ‘Meaning is context-bound but the context is boundless’ (Culler 1982:13). This entails that context is also a text—a set of relationships between signs in need of interpretation as parts of a general textuality. Henning (1982:170) links text, context and general textuality as follows: ‘Neither text nor context is ever an unproblematic given. Both must always be defined, delimited, “read”, and interpreted. Hence, each always poses broader “textual” problems, whether or not one chooses to recognise them.’ Whatever context is provided for interpretation, the fact remains that no context can claim to be a fixed point of reference or a privileged authority. Each context can be deconstructed into a part of a general textuality.

This textuality can be approached in two ways. On the level of literature the signs of a text can be interpreted in terms of their links with the signs of other written texts. On the social-historical level literature itself is linked to social context, world, life and history which are all viewed as texts which equally stand in need of interpretation. In both cases of general textuality the term intertextuality is introduced in order to emphasise the importance of the relationships between texts.
The notion of intertextuality has undermined the assumption of the autonomy of a text in whatever form. This entails also a criticism of the concept of interpretive community. Fish (1980) introduced this idea in the context of his well-known subversion of the theory of the autonomy of the text and the placing of the text within a tradition of interpretation by a group who share the same assumptions. The autonomy of the interpretive community, however, should also be problematised. Not only the social and political interests of the writer and his community should be taken into account but also the social and political interests of the reader and her community. Said (1984:26) criticises Fish as follows:

If, as we have recently been told by Stanley Fish, every act of interpretation is made possible and given force by an interpretive community, then we must go a great deal further in showing what situation, what historical and social configuration, what political interests are concretely entailed by the very existence of interpretive communities. This is an especially important task when these communities have evolved camouflaging jargons.

The notion of intertextuality has enabled us to contextualise interpretive communities and to realise that the context includes the concrete socio-historical life-contexts of the communities involved. Interpretive communities are inevitably linked to interpretive interests. In the context of biblical scholarship a further distinction is made between the following kinds of communities: believing communities, scholarly communities, and politicising communities. Interesting to note is the fact that each of these communities produce their own variety of interpretations. In all these cases interpretive interests play a role and should be taken into account.

This plural state of affairs has a liberating effect on one's thinking and is only experienced negatively by those who deny that the act of understanding is an act of interpretation inevitably intertextually structured. The modernist totalising tendency towards unity, however, remains and not only philosophers and politicians but also theologians search for this unity. It is ironic that these attempts to reduce differences always end up by producing new variations. I am personally interested to know how biblical scholars at this workshop argue in favour of unity in face of the differences which prevail. Or do they agree with the view that discourses are always agonistic?

7.4 Ideology

In contemporary thinking the term ideology is used in a variety of ways and since references to the ideological nature of discourses, including religious discourse, are commonplace, we should be clear in our minds which meanings are utilised in particular contexts. For the purpose of our discussion I distin-
guish the following six definitions: (1) Ideology is a set of beliefs enabling one to understand the world. (2) Ideology is an action-orientated set of beliefs. (3) Ideology is a set of beliefs in which value judgements are presented as factual statements. The third definition introduces a negative connotation since it introduces the notion of concealment. (4) Ideology is a set of beliefs which reflects and conceals the interests of a privileged group. The group is usually unconscious of this fact. Marxism emphasises the role of economic interests in the process of concealment but the interests can be of various kinds. In all cases values are used to justify group interests. (5) Ideology is a set of beliefs in which meaning functions in the service of power. This can take place in two ways. In a negative sense, meaning is in the service of the power of domination while in a positive sense it is in the service of the power of emancipation. Thompson (1990:7) formulates the negative sense of ideology as follows:

Ideology, broadly speaking, is meaning in the service of power. Hence the study of ideology requires us to investigate the ways in which meaning is constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms of various kinds, from everyday linguistic utterances to complex images and texts; it requires us to investigate the social contexts within which symbolic forms are employed and deployed; and it calls upon us to ask whether, and if so how, the meaning mobilised by the symbolic forms serves, in specific contexts, to establish and sustain relations of domination.

Although the tendency is to opt for the negative sense of the term ideology, the positive sense should be kept in mind. This inclusive approach, which allows for both meanings, enables us to remain conscious of the fact that all symbolic forms are involved in processes of evaluation and relations of power, and that they cannot escape the struggle between domination and emancipation.

These insights regarding the role of ideology are not only to be found in philosophy but also in literature and biblical criticism. In both disciplines scholars pay attention to ideological and socio-political aspects of both texts and the interpretations of texts. Expressions such as ‘ethics of interpretation’ and ‘rhetorical ethical turn’ are introduced to describe the new strategy whose aim is ‘to display how biblical texts and their contemporary interpretations involved authorial aims and strategies, as well as audience perceptions and constructions, as political and religious discursive practices’ (Smit 1990a:26).

A question that can be raised in this context is whether religious discourse, inevitably involved in secularisation, plurality, intertextuality and ideology, can in any way play a meaningful role in influencing public opinion. This is the theme of the next and last section.
7.5 Public opinion

The notion of the public in the context of the theme of this paper gives rise to problems related to the possible role that religious discourse can play in influencing public opinion. Keeping in mind the many distinctions already made and the diverse kinds of public involved, one runs the risk of oversimplification by discussing in general terms what the possible role of religion is with regard to public opinion. To the diversity of audiences one can also add the diversity with regard to religious discourse itself. If we limit ourselves to Christian religion, we must at least distinguish between Christian traditions, the Church, theology, Biblical scholarship, the religious community, and so on, as sources of religious discourse. In each case the problem of influence will have to be treated differently.

In the light of the points made in the previous sections, it is clear that religious discourse can only meaningfully be discussed concerning its possible influence on public opinion if the variety of discourses and the variety of audiences are adequately taken into account. The lack of a Grand Theory has changed the role of intellectuals working in the spheres of religion, philosophy, history, politics, science, et cetera. They have to speak in terms of the particular and not in terms of the universal. The position of postmodern intellectuals is formulated by Foucault as follows: 'A new mode of connection between theory and practice has been established. Intellectuals have got used to working, not in the modality of the "universal", and the "exemplary"... but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life and work situate them (housing, the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, family and sexual relations)' (quoted by Kearney 1988:458-459).

If religious discourse is expected to play a role in influencing public opinion, it has to be realised that religion can claim no privileged position. The speaker of religious language will have to direct himself to a particular situation and discover what the contribution of his insights could be in a specific context. This point has also been made by me in the section on secularisation in which I referred to the challenging plurality of a secularised world. In all cases the religious speaker has to join other speakers in negotiating the meaning of terms and in assessing the appropriateness of arguments through ongoing dialogue.

But it is not only the particularity of situations which exposes the limits to the power of religious discourse. The society in which religious discourse has to function in aiming to influence public opinion is qualified by a complexity of a high degree of which discourse is but one component. And since 'non-linearity, asymmetry, power and competition are inevitable components of complex systems' (Cilliers 195:129), one should not underestimate
the difficulties involved in understanding situations, in conceptualising problems and in pronouncing judgements. In the face of complexity, at least one thing is clear, and that is that there is no privileged position for a religious speaker to operate from. She has to enter the complexity of the network and has to guard against all forms of domination. Her task is the same as the task of every human being, namely, to cultivate critical awareness which enables her ‘to discriminate between a liberating and incarcerating use of images, between those that dis-close and those that close off our relation to the other, those that democratise culture and those that mystify it, those that communicate and those that manipulate’ (Kearney 1988:390). Postmodernism does not only point to powerplay in the sphere of discourse. It appropriately turns the whole of life into a site of struggle since no aspect of life can escape the threat of manipulation.

This point is also made by Cilliers (1995:129) in his discussion of society as a complex system which entails the inevitability of asymmetrical relations of power from which intellectuals, including theologians, cannot divorce themselves.

The fact that society is held together by asymmetrical relations of power does not mean that these relationships are never exploited. To the contrary, they are continuously exploited by parents, by lecturers, by the state and by men, but also by children, by students, by citizens and by women. The point is that the solution to these forms of exploitation does not lie in some symmetrical space where power is distributed evenly. Such spaces cannot exist in complex systems that are driven by non-linearity. The hope that such spaces could be created in any enduring fashion is false. To combat exploitation, as a matter of fact, to fulfil any ethical obligation, you cannot rely on some form of universal, a priori discourse. There is only one option: you have to enter into the agonistics of the network. You have to make your hands dirty.

WORKS CONSULTED


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