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ETP: Prolegomena to a Course of English for Theological Purposes

«*How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*» *(Psalm 137: 4). Little effort has been made so far to develop a foreign-language course geared to the specific demands of religious and/or theological communication. Although an English course conceived along these lines would admittedly address only a small fraction of the ESP market, it could prove to be of interest inasmuch as it might give continental divinity students access not only to the important works published in English, but also to excellent and easily available translations of, say, French, German or Scandinavian theologians. Moreover, English would seem a sensible choice inasmuch as the fundamentals of that language are usually acquired to some degree during the students' secondary training, and also because the prestige and appeal of English as a world language adds substantial impetus to the students' motivation.*

The aim of the present paper, however, is not to construct a full-fledged course, but to draw attention to a number of problems which arise as soon as one starts giving serious thought to setting up a syllabus of this type; for the requirements of this particular audience are highly specific indeed: religious language functions according to rules which clearly demarcate it from what is usually referred to as «ordinary» language use — although the deep-rooted popular belief that everyday exchanges operate essentially by means of univocal statements of fact, and that religious language is totally divorced from reasonable discourse, reflects a blatant insight into both «ordinary» and «specialised» communication.

But it must be conceded that (at least in the Judæo-Christian and Islamic traditions) religious communication is subject to a number of particular constraints, *viz.* 1. its implicit or explicit reference to a putative mode of supra-empirical reality; 2. its dependence on, and constant reference to, a corpus of sacred texts considered (with varying degrees of intensity) as authoritative, and of traditional statements of faith and doctrine; 3. its use in religious situations which may confer «religious» status upon an otherwise neutral-looking utterance, and in a linguistic speaker-community where, perhaps, no general consensus exists on the meanings to be associated with the utterances, but where both training and practice strain towards the achievement of a «common language» shared by a body of believers.

These constraints cause the terms of religious language to appear in a number of patterns of reference, meaning and usage that may be qualified as «problematic» or «odd». While these patterns may be relatively familiar to students in their native language (if, as is likely, they belong to the religious community), it is important that they should be able to recognise and understand them in the foreign language, and -ideally- be able to produce them as well, if the course aims at active communicative competence. But let us at this point assume that a typical English course for budding theologians (rather than, say, future missionaries) would primarily aim at developing good reading knowledge, allowing students to deal with written sources ranging from Bible texts to academic debate on theological issues in a specialised journal.

A small pre-term course of this type used to be taught at the Brussels Faculty for Protestant Theology, where it was labelled *Introduction à la Terminologie Théologique Anglaise*: a name which clearly reflected the widespread belief that a language register is essentially defined by a set of specialised terms, and that it is sufficient to learn the proper words with their (presumably inherent) meanings to be able to communicate successfully with specialists in the field. This attitude calls for two remarks: First, the study of vocabulary may constitute an interesting point of departure, but here as elsewhere in ESP, the boundary line between common and specialised lexis is hard to draw, and the choice of the items to be included in a lexically oriented syllabus is likely to be arbitrary — especially when the span of time allotted for the course is short; and second, communicative competence in a given register requires more than familiarity with its terminology.

In constructing the lexical component of the syllabus, the technical vocabulary of theology would, on a *prima facie* basis, constitute an obvious first choice, insofar as it contains a number of specific terms

like *transsubstantiation, parousia* or *antinomianism* as well as polysemic terms such as *incarnation, transcendence* or *transfiguration,* which also appear outside the specialised context, albeit conceivably in different patterns and collocations. One may, however, wonder whether students with a minimum of theological training will not already have encountered these terms (or their French/German/Latin equivalents, which in the written medium at least feature minimal differences), and if they are not familiar with them, whether the foreign language class and the foreign language teacher are the appropriate place and person to help them acquire the notions.

The inclusion of more general «religious» vocabulary in the syllabus also entails a number of difficult choices. It would seem a plausible procedure to proceed from the centre, constituted by the obviously religious terms (*God, baptise, sin*) towards a periphery made up of items shared with profane forms of thought (*love, truth, fellowship*) and thence towards «ordinary» words used most frequently outside the religious register to refer to this-worldly objects, states and relationships, but which may be applied in an «extraordinary» manner to a divine or religious referent (*father, king(dom), shepherd, rock, vine,...*); and ultimately towards an outer fringe of vocabulary where the items are less explicitly religious inasmuch as they do not belong to «God-Talk», but bear some sort of relationship to religious situations, institutions or objects (*altar, matins, monk, presbytery, choir, nave, incense, ...*).

The first (and probably smallest) of these word classes poses few problems, since its terms are found primarily in religious contexts and situations, and even function as lexical markers of the religious register (except, say, in swear-words or humorous and transferred uses).

With regard to the second and conceivably larger set, it may be important to note the specific shift in intension that some of the terms undergo as they move from the realm of profane discourse into the religious belief system. Armin Ader (1975) has indicated that in an increasingly secular world, the religious dimension of meaning is handed down via religious practice within a community of believers, and that in this respect, religious language is becoming sociolectal. Since not all profane models are accompanied by a qualifier or other clue indicating that the meaning of a term should be sought beyond its usual reference with its this-worldly associations, the items should be approached in a context highlighting their particular value within the religious perspective. For the terms which enjoy biblical status this should not prove too difficult; but the teacher should be disposed to embark on a few hermeneutic detours which might take him quite outside the familiar paths of language study. For this reason, it might be wise to include in the corpus of texts to be studied not only instances of typically «religious» language, but also a few excerpts from books where this extra dimension of meaning can be ferreted out. Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* is a typical example of a foreign-language source that the students are bound to resort to at some stage in their careers.

For the third set -familiar words in a specialised context-, the problem is not merely one of size, but also of meaning. An exclusively lexical approach might overlook the problematic nature of certain statements, as their «oddness» resides not so much in the words as on the utterance level. Many of the terms employed to refer tentatively to human insight into the divine are chosen among the most frequent items in the language, and one might be tempted to consider the vocabulary as known. But here as before, the students' attention would need to be drawn away fromthe strictly terminological level towards the patterns of meaning and usage in which these familiar-looking terms occur: even from the lexical

perspective, it becomes apparent that on he level of synonymy and near-synonymy, not all terms are freely interchangeable. When *Father who dwelleth in heaven* is «translated» into *Daddy who lives in the sky,* the location is suddenly invested with misleading physical overtones: the second utterance somehow fails to strike the religious chord. To some extent, this phenomenon is determined by the fact that a whole section of religious vocabulary is traditional, i.e. conditioned by the formulations of authoritative biblical translations. But this should not detract from the fact that religious discourse is still a productive process. Present-day theographers may find in their contemporary environment a number of objects and relations which they feel constitute valid pointers towards a perceived or believed aspect of the divine (*magnetism, electricity, energy, telecommunication,* and the Secular City's *switxhboard* and *cloverleaf junction*), and use them metaphorically. In addition to a performance model working from utterances that have been actually produced and which may enjoy a certain degree of authority, students would then need a competence model enabling them to recognise and/or apply the process whereby such utterances may be created and interpreted.

The fourth class contains a number of useful items: it is clear that *Diet of Worms* should not be understood to be about a form of nutritional self-castigation where one feeds on invertebrates, nor *High Church* be held to refer to a tall building; but the problem here is one of economy, in which the investment in teaching time and effort must be balanced against the potential relevance of the vocabulary to be taught. The *Subject Analysis* of the Oxford *Advanced Learners' Dictionary*, which lists all the dictionary's terms that were tagged <religion> , aptly illustrates how inclusive a glossary conceived along these lines may become. The 2000- or so word list ranges from *abbey, belfry* and *catacomb* to *Xmas, yashmac* and even *zodiac.* The issue to be raised here is whether it is useful and practical to burden the students with a substantial load of terminology in relatively

specialised areas of thought and activity that they may never come in contact with. It may be wiser to devote more time focusing on the problematic set of utterances, and to teach the individuals requiring a higher level of specialisation how to use the dictionary intelligently if they are to cope with unfamiliar terms in, say, church architecture, church history or hymnology.

It must have become clear throughout the preceding paragraphs that even if one were able to effect a non-arbitrary choice among the various areas open to investigation, and within those areas, of terms that one deems should be known, the teaching of terminology *per se* offers no guarantee that the recipient is going to be able to use the terms appropriately, and will produce or understand them in their proper perspective. Nor is the problem one of «grammar» — although morphology and syntax are not to be excluded from the syllabus. Given the necessary terminology and the means to combine words and phrases correctly, the student will be able to process utterances *linguistically*. But in order to make a meaningful, appropriate and coherent use of them as a theologian, he will need to be made aware of the specific problems in religious communication. In an attempt to transcend the limitations of an exclusively lexical approach, we can within the confines of this short paper do little more than hint at a few parameters that might be usefully built into an ESP syllabus for future theologians. Obviously «built into» does not mean «taught» in the sense of providing a set of normative precepts. Teaching the rules of grammar does not guarantee correct usage, even if awareness of the rules may help; by the same token, command of the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features of theolinguistic interaction may be achieved without explicit reference to the theoretical premises. The following considerations, then, provide no more than a sketch, with a few illustrations, of some aspects that the course designer should keep in mind.

The most obvious of the specific problems is the archaic nature of many elements in traditional religious usage. These features, which are to be traced back to older versions of Scripture, liturgy and hymnology, persist by virtue of their belonging to the most significant sources of religious language in spite of the emergence of more recent translations and adaptations which seek to approximate the linguistic habits of the present-day public. The markers of this archaic usage, whether grammatical or lexical, are highly distinctive and easily recognisable; but for all their oddness, they can hardly be termed as problematic, and such scriptural/liturgical forms of the personal pronoun, of the possessive, of the verb phrase, of negation and word order, such lexical archaisms and typical collocations as the student may encounter in his readings can be dealt with in a short unit.

In my view, the unwary student is more likely to be confused by the distinctiveness in reference and use of religious language than by the archaisms which would, at a first sight, be felt to constitute a specifically «linguistic» obstacle to correct understanding.

As far as reference is concerned, the theologian's attempt to frame in human language -and not in some *ad hoc* tongue of angels- his insight into the utterly transcendent, i.e. into what is *per definitionem* not of this world, forces him to resort to a non-literal manner of speaking by means of which «human» utterances, i.e. statements and expressions recognisable and usable by humans in their world, come to refer to beings or entities in the «otherworldly», to relationships with the non-human and divine.

It may be illuminating to assimilate this mode of language use to the logic of metaphor, which is a known process of language increasingly open to investigation and description — and therefore a far cry from the mystery and obscurantism that religious language has

been charged with at the worst times of positivism. A metaphor theory of religious language must, however, be carefully qualified; nor should it be considered as a panacaea explaining all aspects of religious communication. But it may be useful in charting certain modes of meaning and reference, and aid in determining the extent and validity of the cognitive claims of religious utterances. Viewed not as a cumbersome ornament, but as a discrete mode of thought and speech allowing one to to transcend the limitations of univocal expression, the metaphorical process allows its user to tentatively define the unknown or ineffable in terms of the known — not unlike the child who describes a novel experience in terms of the familiar, or even scientists who seek to frame and organise observed phenomena in terms of models allowing them to conceptualise a number of useful aspects in their experience.

Viewed thus, theographic language brings the referent *God* within the purview of human expression, but by virtue of the similarity-in-difference and difference-in-similarity which presides over metaphoric association, it does not equate the otherworldly with thisworldly entities or relationships. The basis for the attempted assimilation is not a pre-existing resemblance, but an inferred relationship of similarity based on the author's perception and insight. This perspective has two important corollaries:

1. The metaphor remains subordinate to the insight which has framed it, and is therefore not open-ended in the manner that some poetic metaphors might be said to be. If (as is likely in Christian theography) the insight to be communicated has been gained within the prevailing belief system, the corresponding model must be interpreted within this theological perspective. This perspective is, in turn, gained with reference to the scriptural sources, which provide the root metaphors sanctioning at least the «orthodox» interpretations of Christian

utterances. Utterances about God that do not pertain to the traditional stock of theographic propositions (e.g. some mystics' and feminists' representations of God as *mother* rather than *father*) are theologically «grammatical», i.e. acceptable as valid pieces of discourse, only inasmuch as they are coextensive with meanings conveyed by the authoritative texts. In principle, if one feels that God-as-Mother aptly communicates insights into the lovingness, care, tenderness etc. which are recognised attributes of God, and unless it is felt that the image introduces unwelcome or irrelevant connotations, there is no reason why the metaphor should not be adopted alongside the father-figure, which may highlight a number of other attributes. The fact that the two metaphors are literally contradictory is, at this point, not relevant; or not any more, say, than the fact that God cannot literally be Rock of Ages and Good Shepherd at the same time.

The complex «belief system» underlying Christian discourse is not easily summarised in a few lines; but we may attempt to offer a summary in which the main root metaphors are highlighted: in the biblical framework, the notion of unity-in-difference, i.e. the essential oneness but not identity of creator and creature, the dependence of the latter on the former for its existence, the breaking of that unity through Man's sin and its restoration through Christ's sacrifice with its cycle of incarnation, death, resurrection and exaltation, plays a central role. Different, though related, are the notions of divine purpose and self-manifestation (materialised, among others, in an intricate pattern of OT and NT reminiscences and cross-references), and the universality of God's saving action and power, a concept reflected notably in the Bible's cosmological imagery, which is not to be understood as a pre-scientific account of the universe, but as a metaphorical form of «soteriological discourse».

This theological perspective also accounts for a number of typical

collocations that outside the Christian context would seem odd or unexpected: the combination of *precious* + *death* refers to the redeeming power of Christ's sacrifice; while *eat* + *body* and *drink* + *blood* have here no cannibalistic connotations, but point back to the biblical and liturgical root metaphor *hoc est corpus meum.*

2. If, as I suggest, human theography seeks to give linguistic form to man's insight into the divine, the cognitive value of the utterances is bound to be affected: statements about the divine are not to be understood as univocal constative descriptions in a narrow sense, i.e. they are not to be verified in terms of observational data corresponding to their literal extension, but must be evaluated with regard to their faculty to communicate more or less effectually what their author was seeking to express. (The same may be said about a great many presumably literal utterances, but references to the extensional world tend to be less obviously problematic). This imposes on the subsequent user of the image the obligation to hunt out the original truth «behind» each metaphor, and thus to recapture the genuine communicative intent of the message. Both Barr and Gibson have abundantly illustrated that this type of semantic investigation involves much more than what may be learnt from a merely lexical approach.

While a metaphor-theory view of religious language may be useful in accounting for much descriptive theological discourse, it tends to leave out a number of other important and interesting instances of religious language. A fair amount of devotional language use (praising, blessing, confessing, praying) contains a number of inevitable references to the belief system referred to above, but is not dealt with satisfactorily by focusing on meaning only: the emphasis must be shifted from reference towards use if one is to fully understand the function of these utterances in actual communicative

situations. In the communal use of creeds, for instance, (i.e. the act of confessing one's belief) and in prayer, one may discern various levels of linguistic activity.

Originally, the Christian confessions of faith were essentially expressive acts, which they consisted of brief and spontaneous utterances of joy, admiration and adoration (*Jesus is Lord! He is risen indeed!*); but as the events responded to receded in time, the exclamations crystallised into formulas which had the same locutionary force (since the facts referred to did not change), but which at the illocutionary level were given the shape of informative representations to be used, say, in the instruction of neophytes, while on the perlocutionary level they invited the addressee to adhesion, commitment and Christian witness.

Throughout the history of religious conflicts and controversies, the confessions subsequently came to be adopted as doctrinal propositions, which thus acquired -and often still have- a declarative, normative, or even polemical value: a given Church subscribes to a given confession; membership of a particular denomination entails adhesion to a particular creed; and one Church may distinguish itself from another by the adoption or rejection of a specific article of faith. Thus, from a range of spontaneous ejaculations, creeds have been progressively reduced to a set of authorised formulae, frozen at one stage of their historic evolution, and the various utterances have been handed down to later generations in this stereotyped form: since a Church's faith is defined through these propositions, a change, however slight, in the formulations entails the risk of altering the content and substance of a faith presumed to be immutable. For at the locutionary level, the creed claims to be the «systematic and objective repository» of the basic truths on which the faith is founded, i.e. the detailed (if not literal) description of the fundamental doctrine; and from this first function derives the creed's present-day illocutionary

force.

Within the Church as an institution, the creed may act as the «norm» with regard to which the degree of orthodoxy or heresy in thought and expression is defined. It is also the basic principle to be subscribed by those taking up office in the Church, who thus commit themselves to respect the faith and the doctrine, and to lead a life in harmony with the moral principles they entail.

In the Church community, the creed plays a role of praise and worship in the liturgical context, but also functions as the local community's act of adhesion to the Church at large; not only in order to distinguish it from non -Christian communities, but also as an affirmation of unity in a common faith- just as the unity of a nation is expressed through its flag and its national anthem: by their presence and their use, these symbols maintain and strengthen the unity for which they stand. The individual believers reciting their creed, however, affirm their allegiance to the Church as well as their obedience, if they commit themselves to act as a worthy members of the community. As the main emphasis thus shifts from locutionary *content* towards illocutionary *function,* the uncritical believers may actually adhere to the Church faith without understanding all the creed's (locutionary) terms, trusting that Church authorities will be able to elucidate its propositions at the locutionary level.

With regard to prayer, our imaginary ETP student will, of course, be more frequently confronted with public, i.e. liturgical prayer, which is highly stereotyped and conditioned by the traditional models, notably of the Book of Common Prayer; but here as before, awareness of meaning and structure are not sufficient, and the student must be conscious of an intricate bundle of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. In utterances such as the Gloria's «We praise thee, bless thee, we adore thee, we glorify thee», the act (in addition

to being performative) is more expressive than descriptive of discrete attitudes: even a serious, practising Christian may be at pains to explain what exactly he «means» by the four verbs, and what the difference between them is.

The fact that prayers are addressed to one not physically present, but overheard by others, is an unexpected but significant form of complex participation. Prayers may have informative content, i.e. apparently qualify as representatives, when worldly concerns are brought to the divine attention by means of some circumlocution like «O Lord, Thou knowest...»; but in terms of the conversational principles of quantity and relevance, it may seem rather redundant to inform an omniscient Addressee of a state of affairs which He must already be aware of. We may then, once again, seek the meaning at the illocutionary and perlocutionary levels, and presume that such utterances qualify as expressives of the speakers' concern for less fortunate fellow humans. Viewed as directives, they apparently seek to prompt the supernatural Addressee to some form of beneficial intervention at the perlocutionary level; one may wonder, however, whether the act of interceding does not involve a strong commissive element as well, inasmuch as showing concern for an unfortunate neighbour's plight may place the speaker under the obligation to act towards his fellow being in accordance with the precepts of neighbourly love. The issue, of course, is more ethic than linguistic: is prayer to be viewed as an incentive to action, or as a verbal substitute for it? The answer can be found only in the practical, extralinguistic situation: according to the speaker, «Teach us, O Lord, to be Thy faithful servants» may come to mean «I must leave my mistress and return to my wife», «I should go to choir practice instead of watching the football game» or «I really ought to send the kids to Sunday School» ... or mean very little at all. Perhaps the Christian who sings «The Lord is my shepherd», «Let me hide myself in thee», «Give me love in my heart» or «Thou art acquainted with all my ways» does not

simply repeat a familiar formula, offer a metaphoric description of a perceived relationship, or express religious emotions (although all three of these may to some extent be part of his speech act); in principle he also commits himself to a way of life in accordance with the God / Man relationship metaphorically expressed in those utterances. The actual commissive power of a prayer can only be assessed in full knowledge of the speaker's situation and sensitivity — an area well beyond the reach of the linguist's investigation —. But again, the «meaning» of the utterance involves more, much more, than can be construed on the basis of the lexical meaning, however specialised, of the words involved, and the student of this register of language should be made aware of the various levels of use.

Deliberately mixing two metaphors, we might represent language for theological purposes as a jigsaw puzzle representing a map, where the individual pieces of the puzzle stand for the lexical items, and the rules for assembling the pieces for the principles of syntax, but where the rules for meaningful use are represented by the key allowing users to «read» the map whenever they are expected to travel by it.

An example in the form of an exercise might help to clarify my point. Among the possible applications of the principles outlined above, let us choose the question of truth. Labelling a statement as «true» may mean different things: the truth of «there is a cat on the mat» can be assessed by means of empirical verification; the interlocutor who agrees to the truth of «Bach is the greatest composer of all times» feels the same way abut Bach as the speaker; while saying that «all mean are created equal» is «true» denotes the conviction that the statement should be obeyed as a directive. The truth of «John is a pig» must be processed metaphorically, in terms of the real or intended analogy between a certain view of John and a traditional, culture-bound belief about pigs. Finally, «$(a+b)^2 = a^2 + 2ab + b^2$» is «true» only by virtue of a system called algebra.

Having been made aware of these different acceptations of truth, the students might be asked to determine in which respect each statement in a set of religious utterances might be tagged as «true»:

1. Christ died on the cross.
2. Christ ascended to heaven.
3. Christ died for our sins.
4. God is in heaven.
5. God loves me.
6. Since God has blessed you with a homeland, it is a sin to dodge the draft and refuse to give your life for your country.
7. Since the body is the temple of the soul, it is a sin to defile one's body by premarital sex, smoking, alcohol or drug abuse.

Clearly, the issue of «understanding» these statements «correctly» is not basically a question of words (although even as simple a term as *in* in proposition 4 should be carefully charted, cf. van Noppen 1988); the perceptive student should observe that only statement 1 can be historically documented, while biblical evidence for 2 as a physical event is subject to controversy. Yet this does not reduce the utterances 3-7 to «non-sense arguments»: surprisingly, the truth-value of 3-5 might be closest to the «algebraic» form of truth, inasmuch as their acceptance as pieces of possible communication is dependent on adhesion to a belief system and a world-view which, as pointed out before, provide the root-metaphors with regard to which subsequent utterances are evaluated. Statements 6 and 7 would require a more ideologically-oriented, critical-linguistic approach, inasmuch as religious language here seems to be used as a vehicle of ideology to legitimise existing relations of political and/or moral dominance.

If the student has learnt the terminology but does not learn how to operate with these different modalities of meaning and use, from which religious discourse derives its meaning in religious situations, i.e. in its natural habitat, then he or she has no access to the register. Theology operates at the «edges» of language, and the conditions for meaningfulness may seem a far cry from what the linguist can and should describe. Yet unless parameters like metaphor logic and illocutionary force are built into the language system, and incidentally into the ETP course, the puzzle will remain a puzzle, even if all the pieces fall into place.

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