

The (Un-)translatability of Religions? Ricœur's Linguistic Hospitality as Model for Inter-religious Dialogue

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Abstract

The contemporary theology of inter-religious dialogue is marked by a debate between pluralism on the one hand and post-liberal particularism on the other. According to the first, religious identity implies an openness for religious otherness. Post-liberal particularists, in contrast, draw attention to the value of identity. What matters in the context of plurality is to show more commitment and to stress the particularity of the irreducible difference between the religious languages. From this perspective post-liberal particularism claims an untranslatability of religions. This claim appears to construct a serious barrier within the dialogue between religions. Recently, this discussion between pluralists and post-liberalists has reached an impasse. In this article I set out to give this impasse a new turn. With this view in mind, I am inspired by Ricœur's latest publication *On Translation* (2006), which is dedicated to the enigma of linguistic diversity and the question of the (un-)translatability of languages. Beyond the mesmerizing discussion concerning the *theoretical* possibility or impossibility of translation, Ricœur states that the appropriate attitude of a translator is one of linguistic hospitality. Ricœur suggests that this linguistic hospitality can model for inter-religious dialogue. However, he does not elaborate on this thought and challenges others to think through his suggestion. In this article I gladly accept this challenge, hoping that this will throw new light on the current discussion between pluralists and post-liberal particularists. In line with Ricœur's position, I argue that religious languages are *not* untranslatable and that inter-religious dialogue is possible, provided that the *ethical* posture of hermeneutical hospitality for the religious other is adopted.

Keywords

inter-religious dialogue, Paul Ricœur, translatability of religions, linguistic hospitality

This article addresses the dialogue between believers belonging to various religious traditions and the so-called 'dialogical tension' between openness and identity. Can one maintain one's religious identity without closing oneself toward the other? How can one open oneself for the other without losing one's

identity? The contemporary theology of inter-religious dialogue is marked by a debate between pluralism on the one hand and post-liberal particularism on the other. Both positions give a different interpretation of the aforementioned tension between identity and openness. According to the first, religious identity implies an openness for religious otherness. What is religiously meaningful is not to be sought in the provincialism of one's own religious tradition, but rather in what transcends that tradition, namely the ultimate Reality. Post-liberal particularists, in contrast, draw attention to the value of identity, stating that the pluralists have gone too far in their plea for openness and dialogue.¹ What matters in the context of plurality is to show more commitment and to stress the particularity of the irreducible difference between the religious languages. From this perspective post-liberal particularism claims an untranslatability of religions. This claim appears to construct a serious barrier within the dialogue between religions.² As a consequence the question concerning either the possibility or the impossibility of translation has surfaced in the theology of inter-religious dialogue.³ Accordingly, the pluralist hypothesis presents the religious traditions as different translations of one and the same ultimate reality, and thus, in light of the common ground underlying all religions, inter-religious dialogue is both necessary and meaningful. Post-liberalists, however, deny that there is such a common ground allowing for inter-religious translation, hence depicting the religions as incommensurable and untranslatable.

Recently, this discussion has reached an impasse.⁴ In this article I set out to give this impasse a new turn. With this view in mind, I am inspired by Ricœur's latest publication *On Translation* (2006), which is dedicated to the enigma of

¹ William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation*, Westminster: John Knox Press 1989, 149.

² Jeannie Hill-Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation: A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism*, New York: Continuum 2005, 75.

³ Joris Gielen, 'Translating Religions: Comparative Study of Religions as a First Step towards a Full Understanding and Appreciation of Other Religions', *Vidyajyoti. Journal of Theological Reflection* 69 (2005), 183-196; Norbert Hintersteiner, 'Dara Shukuh's Search for Muvahhidan-i-hind: Liminal Religious Identity and Inter-Religious Translation', in: Freek L. Bakker and Jan Sihar Aritonang (eds.), *On the Edge of Many Worlds*, Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2006, 263-275; Owen Thomas, 'Religious Plurality and Contemporary Philosophy: A Critical Survey', *The Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994), 197-213, 208-210.

⁴ Marianne Moyaert, 'Interreligious Dialogue and the Debate between Universalism and Particularism: Searching for a Way out of the Deadlock', *Studies for Interreligious Dialogue* 15 (2005), 36-51.

linguistic diversity and the question of the (un-)translatability of languages.⁵ Beyond the mesmerizing discussion concerning the theoretical possibility or impossibility of translation, Ricœur states that the appropriate attitude of a translator is one of linguistic hospitality.⁶ His reflections on translation not only apply to natural languages, but are also relevant for inter-religious dialogue. Three remarks illuminate this point. First of all, there is an analogy between the challenge central within inter-religious dialogue and translation. For in translation too, the tension between openness and identity is at stake. Secondly, Ricœur does not limit translation to its narrow sense — the translation of natural languages — but suggests that it is also a paradigm for hermeneutics. Thus linguistic hospitality is equivalent to hermeneutical hospitality.⁷ Thirdly, Ricœur suggests that this linguistic hospitality can model for inter-religious dialogue.⁸ The translation of religious languages is a metaphor for the hermeneutical undertaking in which religious meanings are explained to ‘outsiders’. Ricœur does not elaborate on this thought and challenges others to think through his suggestion. In this article I gladly accept this challenge, hoping that this will throw new light on the current discussion between pluralists and post-liberal particularists. In line with Ricœur’s position, I argue that religious languages are not untranslatable and that inter-religious dialogue is possible, provided that the ethical posture of hermeneutical hospitality for the religious other is adopted.

Essentially, I establish my argument as follows. I first elucidate both the pluralist and the post-liberal positions. To sharpen the terms of the discussion, I analyse what both translation and the (un)translatability of religions mean in this discussion and the consequences of each for inter-religious dialogue and the dialogic tension between identity and strangeness. Once this point has been reached, I turn to Ricœur and his model of linguistic hospitality in order to explain how this model throws new light on inter-religious dialogue and the relation between identity and religious otherness. Though this model of linguistic hospitality is fruitful as a model for inter-religious hermeneutics and points beyond the impasse between pluralism and post-liberalism, I close this

⁵ Translation has been a central feature of Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy, though it was not until his later years that he actually formulated it as an explicit theme of his work. See Richard Kearney, *Introduction: Ricoeur’s Philosophy of Translation*, in Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*. Translated by Richard Kearney (Thinking in Action), London: Routledge 2006, vii-xx, vii.

⁶ Ricœur, *On Translation*, 10.

⁷ Domenico Jervolino, ‘L’homme capable et la traduction’, *Rue Descartes* (2007), 165-175, 168.

⁸ Ricœur, *On Translation*, 23.

article by going beyond Ricoeur's reflections, indicating, from a Christian theological perspective, the limits of this model by recalling how much more is at stake in inter-religious dialogue than in hermeneutical translation. For Christians, indeed, God is at stake.

1. Pluralism versus Post-liberal Particularism

During the past decades both the possibility and desirability of inter-religious dialogue have been fiercely debated and criticised, especially regarding the attempt to ground inter-religious dialogue in a pluralist theology, which traces all religions back to a common foundation. The critic has often read the pluralist hypothesis of a common ground as amounting to the excavation and removal of the specificity of a particular religious tradition. The reaction to this homogenising tendency is a growing emphasis on the particular nature of religious commitments and on the tradition-specific character of religious meanings and practices.⁹ The so-called post-liberal theologians especially have resisted the universally coloured theological agenda of pluralism and argue that religions are particular, untranslatable and incommensurable language games. Both positions form themselves antithetically, and thereby force a choice: either an open inter-religious dialogue grounded in pluralism or a commitment grounded in post-liberalism. In what follows, I clarify both the pluralist and the post-liberal positions and the often sharp discussion developing between them.¹⁰

The core of the pluralist hypothesis is that the various religious traditions 'constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to a transcendent divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it.'¹¹ Epistemologically speaking, the pluralist theory is inspired by the Kantian distinction between the 'noumenal' and the 'phenomenal'. The pluralist philosopher of religion, John Hick, applies this distinction to the religious sphere, making a distinction between the divine Transcendent *an sich* and the way it

⁹ Terrence Merrigan, 'Jacques Dupuis and the Redefinition of Inclusivism', in: Daniel Kendall & Gerald O'Collins (eds.), *In Many and Diverse Ways: In Honor of Jacques Dupuis*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis 2003, 60-71, 60.

¹⁰ Peter Slater, 'Lindbeck and Hick and the Nature of Religious Truth', *Studies in Religion* 24 (1995), 59-75.

¹¹ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New Haven CT: Yale University 1989, 235-236.

is expressed within the various religious traditions. As such, transcendent reality is ineffable, mysterious, unreachable and transcategorical.¹² Each and every attempt to imagine it falls short. Hence, the different religions do not 'describe the transcendent as it is in itself but as it is conceived in the variety of ways made possible by our varied human mentalities and cultures.'¹³

Hick's position is a form of unitive pluralism.¹⁴ The religious differences are secondary compared to the deeper level of unity. It seems the pluralist hypothesis assumes that the different religious traditions are somehow about the same religious truth. On the one hand there is the assumption of a common ground — the ultimate Real — whereas on the other hand there is the pluralist presupposition that all religions participate in the same soteriological process. Despite their differences all religious traditions aim at the transformation from ego-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.

According to Hick, this 'pluralist hypothesis may provide a framework for inter-faith dialogue and an explicit basis for the hope that each tradition may learn from and be changed by its encounter with the others. For if each represents a different human perspective on the Real, each may be able to enlarge its own vision by trying to look through the lenses that others have developed.'¹⁵ This common ground makes inter-religious dialogue both meaningful and desirable. Moreover it solves the dialogical tension between openness and identity. Accordingly, the religious perspective of the other is not a threat for one's own religious identity, but rather supplements and completes it. This makes inter-religious dialogue religiously meaningful. It is in the openness for inter-religious differences, in the preparedness to be challenged by the religious other, in the courage of running the risk of losing oneself and in the strength to convert oneself to the truth, shared by all, that one finds oneself and gains insight into one's religious destiny. Identity thus becomes an inter-religious project.

In view of the question regarding the (im-)possibility of inter-religious translation, it is important to note that the pluralist hypothesis of a common ground also plays an important hermeneutical function. Because the religions

¹² Hick, *The Fifth Dimension. An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*, Oxford: One World 1999, 8.

¹³ Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, London: MacMillan 1993, 165.

¹⁴ Paul Knitter, *No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, American Society of Missiology Series 7, Maryknoll NY, Orbis Books 1985, 7; Monique Aebisscher-Crettol, *Vers un œcuménisme interreligieux: Jalons pour une théologie chrétienne du pluralisme religieux*, Cogitatio Fidei 221, Paris 2001, 407.

¹⁵ Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 178.

are related to the same ultimate Reality, the religious other is never completely and utterly strange. Deep down the religions are related and this enables a correlative dialogue. Inter-religious dialogue is then possible because of the assumption of a common religious framework, which makes inter-religious translation possible. Thus the common ground is 'hermeneutically meaningful' because it enables followers of different religious paths not just to feel the need for each other but to talk and understand and engage each other as never before.¹⁶ There is a religious interconnectedness making way for inter-religious translation.

As promising as pluralism may seem in view of inter-religious dialogue, it is criticised for several reasons. The main criticism is that the pluralist hypothesis reduces religious differences to appearances (phenomena) of the same. The religious traditions are mere diverging interpretations of the same common ground and variations on the same soteriological theme.¹⁷ The emphasis lies on unity, universality and commonalities, rather than plurality, difference and particularities. What the pluralists do not sufficiently take into account, then, is the possibility that the religions do not point in the same direction, that is, that the religions do not pose the same soteriological question, and that religious plurality will not be, or better still, cannot be transcended in a form of unitive pluralism. According to the critics, the hypothesis of the common ground actually forms a hermeneutical stumbling block for inter-religious dialogue.¹⁸ This means that while the pluralists of course hear what is said to them, it is grasped or understood as the other's contribution to their pluralistic conversation. 'Even before dialogue takes place, the assumption is that all are alike. One anticipates what the eventual conclusion must be, and that kills any real discussion.'¹⁹

¹⁶ Knitter, 'Interreligious Dialogue and the Unity of Humanity', *Journal of Dharma* 17 (1992), 282-297, 286.

¹⁷ John Cobb, 'Dialogue Without Common Ground', in: Imelda Abbt & Alfred Jäger (eds.), *Weltoffenheit des christlichen Glaubens*. Fritz Buri zu Ehren, Tübingen: Katzmann 1987, 145-154; Gavin D'Costa (ed.), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of Pluralistic Theology* (Faith Meets Faith), Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1990; Joseph DiNoia, 'Varieties of Religious Aims: Beyond Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism', in: Bruce Marshall (ed.), *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1990, 249-272; Mark Heim, 'Thinking about Theocentric Christology', *Journal for Ecumenical Christology* 24 (1987), 1-16.

¹⁸ Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism*, Philadelphia: Fortress 1982.

¹⁹ Arnulf Camps, *Partners in Dialogue: Christianity and Other World Religions*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1983, 30.

In reaction to the pluralist 'indifference' for inter-religious differences a new model appeared within the theology of inter-religious dialogue.²⁰ This model aims at ending arguments for openness which are seen as turning away from real inter-religious differences. This model sets out to 'save the particulars',²¹ hence I call it 'particularism'.²² The most important particularist authors are Joseph DiNoia,²³ Garret Green²⁴ and William Placher.²⁵ Because particularism draws heavily on the post-liberal Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck, it is appropriate first to analyse the latter's criticism of the pluralist hypothesis, before I then elaborate on the way post-liberal particularism views inter-religious dialogue.²⁶

According to Lindbeck pluralism leads to the erosion, and even the bargaining of religious particularities. The reason for this is straight-forward: pluralism is based on a wrong theory of religion, which Lindbeck calls experiential-expressivism:

(1) Different religions are diverse expressions or objectifications of a common core experience. It is this experience which identifies them as religions. (2) The experience, while conscious, may be unknown on the level of self-conscious reflection. (3) It is present in all human beings. (4) In most religions, the experience is the source and norm of objectifications: it is by reference to the experience that their adequacy or lack of adequacy is to be judged.²⁷

The pluralist hypothesis tallies with the experiential-expressivist theory of religion. Lindbeck summarily calls this hypothesis nonsense.²⁸ His main

²⁰ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 2002, 173-190.

²¹ Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, Sacra Doctrina, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2000, 17-45.

²² Knitter calls it the acceptance model. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 173.

²³ DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective*, Washington: Catholic University of America Press 1992.

²⁴ Garret Green, 'Are Religions Incommensurable? Reflections on Plurality and the Religious Imagination', *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002), 218-239.

²⁵ Placher (ed.), *Essentials of Christian Theology*, Louisville: Westminster John Know Press 2003, 297-302.

²⁶ George Lindbeck, 'Relations interreligieuses et œcuménisme: Le chapitre 3 de la nature des doctrines revisité', in: Marc Boss, George Eméry & Pierre Gisel (eds.), *Postlibéralisme? La théologie de George Lindbeck et sa réception*, Lieux théologiques 37, Genève: Labor et Fides 2004, 183-203.

²⁷ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1986, 30.

²⁸ Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation*, Louisville: Westminster Knoxville Press 1989, 162.

objection is that experiential-expressivism, and hence pluralism, misunderstand the relation between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of religion.

According to experiential-expressivism there is first an 'inside' and only then an 'outside'. Put otherwise, there is first an experience and only later a linguistic or cultural expression. Lindbeck objects to this ordering.²⁹ It is not the 'inside', which precedes the 'outside', but rather the other way around.³⁰ Lindbeck calls his alternative theory of religion the cultural-linguistic model, because it entails an analogue between religion, culture and language.³¹ The way people become 'religious' is comparable to the way they learn a language or interiorise a culture.³²

'Religion is a comprehensive interpretive scheme, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structures human experience and our understanding of self and world.'³³ Each religion has a specific vocabulary, which is both discursive and non discursive, as well as a grammar determining how that vocabulary can be used meaningfully.³⁴ Becoming religious is a long process of interiorisation, in which people acquire the religious language and learn to perform the religious practices and rituals in an appropriate and meaningful way.³⁵ Religion as a sort of cultural/and or linguistic framework enables the description of reality, the formulation of convictions and the experience of religious feelings. Only when people speak a religious language and obtain particular religious skills does it become possible for them to have religious experiences.

The cultural-linguistic theory contradicts the pluralist hypothesis. Different religious traditions form different religious contexts and thus different religious languages. Thus it is rather unlikely that believers belonging to different

²⁹ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 34.

³⁰ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 30.

³¹ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 17-18.

³² When Lindbeck compares religion to language, he does not intend to espouse a narrow view on language and he does not reduce religion to a mere linguistic system. With the analogy between religion and language he merely wants to draw attention to the way religion functions in the life of believers, illustrating that language, like religion, is: a communal phenomenon (ND 33), a comprehensive system (ND 114), and a reflexive system (ND 114); noting also that language and religion share a similar stability (ND 84), that the formation of religious identity is analogous to learning to speak a language and that it is a process of interiorisation and socialisation. A Christian, thus for Lindbeck, is someone "who is skilled in speaking and living its language (ND 101).

³³ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 32.

³⁴ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 33.

³⁵ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 34.

religions share the same religious experience. 'Different religions are not exterior manifestations of the same fundamental experience, but like cultures and languages they rather manufacture the rough material of the human possibilities and the different experiences — which sometimes exclude each other — of themselves, the community and the world.'³⁶ Being religious is being particular. 'It is just as hard to think of religions as it is to think of cultures or languages as having a single generic or universal experiential essence of which particular religions — or cultures or languages — are varied manifestations or modifications.'³⁷

2. Intratextuality, Incommensurability and Untranslatability

Lindbeck not only objects to experiential-expressivism, but also to the liberal revisionist theology emerging from it. Over against liberal theology Lindbeck places the alternative of post-liberalism in line with the above-mentioned cultural-linguistic model. The chasm between liberal and post-liberal theology is especially relevant because it forms the background of Lindbeck's claim that religions are untranslatable.

The liberal revisionist theology is both correlative and apologetic.³⁸ According to Lindbeck, by way of the method of correlation, liberal theology sets out to build a bridge between Christian tradition and the contemporary context. The plausibility of the Christian tradition is defended through grounding the Christian message in universal structures of experience, rationality and ethics. This apologetic and correlative founding enables the translation of traditional Christian categories in terms understandable and meaningful for the modern world.³⁹ That is why Lindbeck also calls liberal theology translation theology. In this context, translation means the attempt to unlock the Christian world of meaning for outsiders by use of non-Christian or extratextual categories. Thus liberal translation theology follows the methodology of an extratextual hermeneutics.⁴⁰

Lindbeck does acknowledge the attractiveness of extratextual hermeneutics, as it often seems easier and more conducive to 'translate the religions in

³⁶ Lindbeck, *Relations interreligieuses et œcuménisme*, 190.

³⁷ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 23.

³⁸ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 125-126.

³⁹ William Werpehowski, 'Ad Hoc Apologetics', *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986), 282-301, 282.

⁴⁰ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 129.

popular or familiar categories than to understand them in their own intrinsic meaning.' The very attempt to make one's faith credible and intelligible to outsiders will 'continue to favour experiential-expressive translations into contemporary idioms.'⁴¹ This is certainly also the case in the context of inter-religious dialogue.⁴² In view of religious plurality it seems almost 'essential to adopt an apologetic approach that seeks to discover a foundational scheme within which religions can be evaluated, and that makes it possible to translate traditional meanings into currently intelligible terms.'⁴³ The same goes *mutatis mutandis* for the attractiveness of the pluralist discourse within inter-religious circles, which is in essence a form of apologetical theology. It rescues the plausibility of Christianity and other religions by grounding them in a universal religious experience, which they translate each according to their historical and cultural origin.

Nevertheless, Lindbeck is very critical of such translational attempts, which are accompanied by the search after universal points of contact with an extra-textual reality. His first worry concerns the particularity of Christianity, which is threatened by translation. For it is not unthinkable that the 'outer-Christian context' will wind up dominating the agenda of Christian theology. The result is the excavation of the particularity of the Christian tradition.⁴⁴

Over against the accommodating tendency of extratextual hermeneutics, Lindbeck explores the principle of intratextuality, which focuses on the irreducible particularity of the inside-perspective and recoils from any attempt to make tradition-specific meanings depend on an outside-perspective. The aim of this intratextual hermeneutics is first of all to understand and describe the internal grammar of a particular religious language. Religion can only be understood from the inside. 'To the degree that religions are like languages and cultures, they can no more be taught by means of translation than can Chinese or French.'⁴⁵ To determine the meaning of 'God' implies investigating the way it functions within the Christian religion and how it shapes Christian reality and experience.⁴⁶ For, 'nothing can be translated out of the idiom into

⁴¹ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 134.

⁴² Lindbeck, 'The Unity We Seek: Setting the Agenda for Ecumenism', *Christian Century* 121 (2005), 28-29.

⁴³ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 129.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Goh, *Christian Tradition Today: A Postliberal Vision of Church and Word*, Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs 28, Leuven: Peeters 2000, 189.

⁴⁵ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 129.

⁴⁶ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 114.

some supposedly independent communicative system without perversion, diminution or incoherence of meaning.⁴⁷ Intratextuality means secondly that one does not try to explain the meaning of a religion by way of extratextual categories, but rather that one sets out to explain and analyse the 'world outside' by way of intratextual categories. Lindbeck speaks in this perspective of the metaphor of absorption. 'It is the text so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text. A scriptural world (...) is able to absorb the universe. It supplies the interpretive framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality.'⁴⁸ For Christians this means that they will not read the Bible in light of contemporary challenges, questions or experiences, but rather the other way around. The bible sheds light on the world and sets the agenda of the world, not the other way around.⁴⁹

Lindbeck strives to extend his critique of translation to the challenge of religious plurality and inter-religious dialogue. The cultural-linguistic model denies that there exists a sort of universal extra-linguistic experience, structure or ethics which gives the different religions their final meaning. There is no such thing as a universal extratextual foundation enabling meaningful inter-religious translations. Adherents of different religions do not diversely thematise the same experience, rather they have different experiences. 'Buddhist compassion, Christian love and (...) French revolutionary fraternité are not diverse modifications of a single human awareness, emotion, attitude, or sentiment, but are radically (i.e., from the root) distinct ways of experiencing and being oriented toward self, neighbour, and cosmos.'⁵⁰ To say that all religions are about the same thing, namely 'love', equals saying nothing at all. If there are similarities and commonalities between the religions, then these are merely superficial.⁵¹

Especially in view of inter-religious dialogue, caution is necessary, for inter-religious translation leads to meaningless generalisations. With regard to the cultural-linguistic model, Lindbeck prefers the reinstatement of 'the rich particularities of native tongues above the impoverished abstractions of translation.'⁵² The different religious traditions are to 'cultivate their native tongue'

⁴⁷ Lindbeck, 'The Gospel's Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability', *Modern Theology* 13 (1997), 423-450, 429.

⁴⁸ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

⁴⁹ Lindbeck, 'The Unity We Seek: Setting the Agenda for Ecumenism', 28-31.

⁵⁰ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 40.

⁵¹ Lindbeck, 'The Gospel's Uniqueness', 433.

⁵² Lindbeck, 'The Gospel's Uniqueness', 426.

and are 'to act accordingly'.⁵³ Incommensurability, intratextuality and untranslatability form one cluster within the cultural-linguistic model, and which also form a heavy burden for inter-religious dialogue. Lindbeck's position actually amounts to stating that the different religions are talking next to each other. The religions are related to each other like poetry and mathematics. 'Thus when affirmations or ideas from categorically different religious or philosophical outlooks are introduced into a given religious outlook, they are either simply babbling or else, like mathematical formulas employed in a poetic text, they have vastly different functions and meanings than they had in their original settings.' Lindbeck speaks in this context of the Balkanisation of dialogue:⁵⁴

Not only do they no longer share a common theme such as salvation, but the shared universe of discourse forged to discuss that theme disintegrates. (...) Those for whom conversation is the key to solving interreligious problems are likely to be disappointed.⁵⁵

The only solution for untranslatability in the context of inter-religious dialogue is bilingualism, this is the learning of a second first language. However, Lindbeck admits that this is difficult and that real bilingualism is relatively rare, and thus the difficulties for inter-religious dialogue will remain.

Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model is not in itself unproblematic either. Lindbeck has a point in his criticism of the pluralist assumption that all religions are mere expressions of the same religious experience. However the cultural-linguistic alternative is also one-sided, for it tends to absolutise the differences between the religions. Lindbeck's theory presupposes a concept of religion that 'implies the inevitability of a solitary world, divorced from other cultures with other values, convictions, feelings and habits: a humanity divided in discontinuous blocks, another culture as another planet.'⁵⁶ Religions are seen as independent, self-interpreting incommensurable semiotic systems. As a consequence there is practically no attention paid to the overlaps and commonalities between the different religious languages. The history of religions as a history of encounter, interaction, interrelation, synthesis and

⁵³ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 134.

⁵⁴ Lindbeck, 'The Gospel's Uniqueness', 427. 'Conversation between religions is pluralized or balkanized when they are seen as mutually untranslatable.'

⁵⁵ Lindbeck, 'The Gospel's Uniqueness', 426.

⁵⁶ Bart Van Leeuwen, *Erkenning, identiteit en verschil: Multiculturalisme en leven met culturele diversiteit*, Leuven: Acco 2003, 187.

conflict, adaptation and rejection, exclusion and inclusion is not sufficiently accounted for:⁵⁷

The outcome is a somewhat rigid view of religion, leading to the devalorisation of inter-religious dialogue.

Lindbeck's description of relations between Christian and other religions is of synchronic wholes, each using a completely different set of language-games, such that we cannot know whether we mean the same or not when we engage in interreligious dialogue. He cannot tell us whether or not people are referring to the same reality or realities, speaking the truth or uttering conflicting truth-claims, when they compare notes on what is 'most important' in their lives.⁵⁸

From Lindbeck's claim that the religions are untranslatable, it follows that 'a person cannot understand religious statements unless he or she is immersed in that religion's life-world and understands the rules of the practices.'⁵⁹ Thus within the cultural-linguistic model each believer is at home in his/her own particular religious community but unable to understand the religious language of others.⁶⁰ Without denying the real difficulties related to inter-religious dialogue, the outcome of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory does not correspond well with the concrete experience of people involved in inter-religious dialogue.

3. Beyond the Deadlock: Ricœur's Model of Linguistic Hospitality

The debate between pluralists and post-liberal particularists thus ends in deadlock. The pluralists, on the one hand, state that inter-religious dialogue is both possible and desirable, and this is because of the underlying universalism of the pluralist hypothesis. The different religions correlate with a common religious experience, enabling inter-religious translation. Pluralism exudes an atmosphere of trust — the trust that it is possible for believers belonging to

⁵⁷ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985, 9.

⁵⁸ Slater, 'Lindbeck, Hick and the Nature of Religious Truth', *Studies in Religion* 24 (1995), 57-75, 69; Stephen Ruparell, 'A Methodology for Interreligious Theologizing: Toward an Interstitial Theology', *ARC. The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies* 23 (1995), 58-74, 62.

⁵⁹ Hill-Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation*, 75.

⁶⁰ Alain Thomasset, *Paul Ricœur: Une poétique de la morale aux fondements d'une éthique herméneutique et narrative dans une perspective chrétienne*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 124, Leuven: Peeters 1996, 293.

different religious traditions to understand one another and to engage in a meaningful conversation.

Post-liberal particularism, on the other hand, points out how the phenomenology of the common, which forms the basic condition for inter-religious correlation, is what precisely is problematic, because it does not take the inter-religious differences seriously or sufficiently enough. Post-liberal particularism reacts to what they call the pluralist indifference and focus on religious particularities. There is no common religious language underlying the different traditions. The religions are incommensurable and untranslatable. Post-liberalism saves religious particularities from the pluralist homogenisation, though this also spells the end of inter-religious dialogue. So post-liberal particularism leaves us with the following choice: either we follow the cultural-linguistic focus on particularities and accept the incommensurability and untranslatability of religions, or we follow the pluralist hypothesis of the common ground, leading to the excavation of inter-religious differences.⁶¹ The question remains, however, of whether the recognition of religious particularities necessarily implies the untranslatability of religions, or, put otherwise, of whether translation necessarily leads to the erosion of particularities. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur would dispute this post-liberal dichotomy.

In his little study *On Translation*, he looks for a way to recognize the particular without getting stuck in the same problematic. In this regard, he searches for an alternative to the paralysing dichotomy between translatability and untranslatability. What interests him most is how the tension between strangeness and identity dominates the discussion on (un)translatability. Ricoeur pointedly analyses the presuppositions of both the advocates and opponents of translation. By revealing the underlying presuppositions, he is able to challenge not only particularist (he calls them relativist) claims to untranslatability but also the universalist position grounding translation in an original common ground. This enables him to move beyond the deadlock and towards a new hermeneutical way of looking at translation. Important for our thematic is that Ricoeur regards the challenges, possibilities and difficulties of inter-religious translation as analogous to the translation of natural languages.

3.1. *A Paralysing Theoretical Dilemma*

The diversity of language is a strange fact. It is an enigma, which has provoked various theories concerning the possibilities of translation. Each time these

⁶¹ Goh, *Christian Tradition Today*, 523.

theories confirm two contrary tendencies, namely universalism and relativism, which amount to a paralysing antithesis between translatability and untranslatability. One side posits linguistic diversity as radical, implying both linguistic incommensurability and the impossibility of translation, though, indeed, if different languages establish as many different worlds, than 'we must conclude that misunderstanding is a right, that translation is theoretically impossible and that bilinguals have to be schizophrenic.'⁶² The other one starts from the assessment that translation does happen and one tries to explain this occurrence in reference to the hypothesis of common linguistic structures or of an original common language though this hypothesis requires an obligation to show what these common linguistic structures are or what this original language might have been. Up until today this undertaking has been unsuccessful. This failure is seen by the relativists as further proof for their rejection of translation.

The debate between universalism and relativism, and thus between translatability and untranslatability, seems endless and has borne little fruit. This is precisely why Ricœur distances himself from the discussion and follows a more pragmatic approach. Perhaps translation is theoretically impossible, but the practice of it continues unabatedly. Therefore, theory has to listen to practice. Reality teaches that there is enormous linguistic diversity in our world and that translation presents itself as the answer to this given. The experience shows that it is possible to understand foreign speakers, to learn different languages and to start a translation process.

But if translation is possible in practice, whence comes the ever-recurring discourse on untranslatability? According to Ricœur statements concerning the impossibility of translation — irrespective of its concerning natural or 'religious' languages — express the real resistances a translator encounters. Translators are a go-between, constantly moving between the familiar and the foreigner. They serve two masters: the foreigner with his work and the reader with her/his desire for appropriation, dwelling in the same 'familiar' language as the translator.⁶³ The translator must bring the author to the reader and the reader to the author.

Thus translation is a constant mediation between the foreign and the familiar. This mediation is far from self-evident and the translator runs into resistances, which mostly flow from a desire for perfection and purity. These

⁶² Ricœur, *On Translation*, 15.

⁶³ Ricœur, *On Translation*, 4.

resistances play both on the side of the reader (familiar language) and on the side of the author (foreign language).

The resistances on the side of the reader relate to a strong desire to sacralise the mother tongue nervous to lose its own identity. The refusal of translation equals the refusal to recognise what is foreign as a challenge and a source of nourishment for one's own 'linguistic identity'. One sets out to keep their own language pure, though this self-sufficiency has secretly nourished 'numerous linguistic ethnocentrism, and more seriously, numerous pretensions to the same cultural hegemony.'⁶⁴

The resistances on the side of the foreign language flow especially from a certain conceitedness: the foreign language is so exceptional that it is untranslatable. The foreign thus presents itself as a 'lifeless block of resistance to translation.'⁶⁵ The claim of untranslatability shows what Ricoeur calls the banal insight 'that the original will not be duplicated by another original.'⁶⁶ The desire for a perfect translation is an illusion. A translation can never result in an identical equivalence, because there is no reservoir of meaning which can be pulled away from one context and inserted into another without changes in meaning. However, 'to dismiss the validity of translation because it is not always possible and never perfect is absurd.'⁶⁷ The foreign and the familiar do not relate to each other in a symmetrical way. Rather there is an irreducible asymmetry between them. It will never be possible to be completely at home with the foreign.

Translation only becomes possible when the translator both recognises and overcomes these resistances. Thus translation has to be

won on the battlefield of a secret resistance motivated by fear, indeed, by hatred of the foreign, perceived as a threat against our own linguistic identity. And it implies a labour of mourning, applied to renouncing the very ideal of the perfect translation.⁶⁸

Only when the translator succeeds in acknowledging this irremovable gap or fissure between the familiar and the foreign, without inflating it into 'ethnocentric fatalism', will the road be made clear for the happiness of translation. This happiness exists in 'equivalence without identity'.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 4.

⁶⁵ Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 5.

⁶⁶ Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 11.

⁶⁷ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, London: Oxford University, 1975.

⁶⁸ Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 23.

⁶⁹ Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 35.

Ricœur's reflections on the theoretically paralysing alternatives of translatability and untranslatability shed new light on the discussion between pluralists and post-liberalists and the presuppositions dominating the antithetical nature of both positions. Following Ricœur, one can detect in both pluralism and post-liberalism a nostalgic longing after purity and unity — an assessment which tallies with our earlier formulated criticisms. Neither pluralism nor post-liberalism handles the tension between 'the foreign' and the 'familiar' in an appropriate way. Pluralism tends to look away from the asymmetry between the foreign and the familiar, whereas post-liberalism follows the opposite direction by inflating this asymmetry.

Within pluralism, the belief in inter-religious dialogue is grounded in the hypothesis of commonality, and is therefore universalist in its set-up. The pluralists state that the power and attractiveness of their approach exists in the recognition of the symmetry between the religions. The various religious traditions find themselves more or less at an equal distance in relation to the shared common ground. The problem is that the pluralist phenomenology of the common, which is said to enable inter-religious translation, also promotes an assimilation. The religious other is never really foreign. His or her religious perspective is always merely an affirmation, or perhaps a completion, of the familiar. Following Ricœur, it could be said that it is precisely the pluralist assumption of and focus on inter-religious symmetry which is problematic. The discourse on the ineffable common ground sustaining all religions reveals a nostalgic longing for convergence, with little room for strangeness. Translation, in contrast, can only start with the recognition of asymmetry. The strange will never be completely familiar. The asymmetrical relationship will never be transcended.

Though the post-liberal discourse rightly criticises pluralism, here too we find a certain desire for purity, though under a different expression. Post-liberal particularism leads to a dichotomy between insiders and outsiders, or 'good fences make good neighbours'.⁷⁰ This saying is meant to 'protect' the rich religious particularities and differences against assimilation and excavation, and thus flows from a tremendous respect for otherness. However, viewed from a somewhat different perspective, the post-liberal claim of incommensurability and untranslatability tallies with the ethnocentric hosophobia,⁷¹ described by Ricœur. Thus the claim of untranslatability is inspired by a fear of contamination.

⁷⁰ Lindbeck, 'Relations interreligieuses et œcuménisme', 188.

⁷¹ e.g. compulsive avoidance of pollution.

3.2. *A Fruitful Alternative: Faithfulness versus Treason*

Over against the theoretical contradistinction between translatability and untranslatability, Ricœur places the pragmatic tension between faithfulness and betrayal. This tension corresponds with the somewhat uncomfortable situation of the translator who serves two masters: the foreign and the familiar. Berman, an important inspirational source for Ricœur, explains this situation as follows:

If the translator chooses exclusively the author, the work and the foreign language as master with the ambition of enforcing them in their pure strangeness to his own familiar cultural space, then the translator runs the risk of coming over as a stranger and a traitor in the eyes of his own. Moreover, it is not sure, that this radical attempt does not emerge into a text, bordering on the incomprehensible.

If the translator limits himself to simply adapting the stranger's work, then he will have probably succeeded in satisfying his not so demanding public, but he will also have betrayed the strange work and obviously also the essence of translation.⁷²

It is well known that translators often feel the need to apologise for their translation. In a sense, they mourn over what is lost in their translation. They feel guilty because of the way they have 'violated' the foreign or the familiar and feel ashamed for their treason despite their promise of faithfulness. All of these 'negative' feelings actually reveal a very positive commitment, namely the translator's commitment to faithfulness. The only reason why the translator feels sadness and guilt is because s/he experiences a calling to be faithful to both particularities of the familiar and of the foreign. To not feel this guilt implies the absence of this promise of faithfulness, and for this rather awkward situation, there is no solution. That is why it is appropriate to designate the space between the familiar and the foreign as fragile. This notion not only refers to the constant tension between treason and faithfulness but also assumes the concrete practice of translation in which the translator has to come to terms with the fact that there are no absolute criteria by which to determine a 'good translation.' There is no original language, no third term and no common ground which enable us to assess in a final way the equivalence of a translation. 'The equivalence can only be sought, worked at, supposed.'⁷³ Working within this fragile condition, the translator accepts, in place of verification, only the work of retranslation.⁷⁴

⁷² Antoine Berman, *L'épreuve de l'étranger: Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique. Herder, Goethe, Novalis, Humboldt, Schleiermacher*, Parijs: Gallimard 1985, 14.

⁷³ Ricœur, *On Translation*, 22.

⁷⁴ Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 10.

Seen in this light, the translator's exclamation concerning the untranslatability of the foreign receives a different connotation than within post-liberal particularism. Here the discourse on untranslatability becomes a way of expressing the inevitable loss paired with translation and the fear of treason toward both the original text and the native tongue. It is a way to give expression to the irreducible value of both the foreign and the familiar. It conveys the recognition that the original cannot be reproduced in translation. It also voices the acceptance of the asymmetry between the foreign and the familiar. This acceptance then precisely forms the condition for translation. What is at stake in this exclamation is not an a priori form of untranslatability but rather the acknowledgement of the untranslatable in every translation. The translation itself reveals what is left behind: that which cannot be translated. But this untranslatability is not a drama, but rather that which keeps the translation going. Thus what drives the foreign and the familiar apart also keeps them driving towards each other.

3.3. *The Ethical Dimension of Translation: Openness as Linguistic Hospitality*

Translation assumes the acceptance of asymmetry. This crucial idea points toward the ethical dimension of translation.⁷⁵ Translation is a reciprocal process, though in this reciprocity attention must be given to the asymmetry between the familiar and the foreign. Both the desire for purity and the fantasy of the perfect translation bear witness of the incapacity to recognise the impassable difference between the foreign and the familiar. The recognition of the asymmetry between the familiar and the foreign entails the recognition of the non-interchangeability of both 'perspectives'.⁷⁶ To ignore this difference is a form of misrecognition. Ricoeur contrast this attitude with an attitude of openness for the foreign, but an openness that ought not imply that translators start with a *tabula rasa*, leaving their own linguistic context behind. Translators always start in *medias res*, in the middle of a linguistic, cultural and religious context, to which they are deeply connected and to which they

⁷⁵ Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 35.

⁷⁶ I note in this perspective the difference between Gadamer's hermeneutics, which speaks about the fusion of horizons, and Ricoeur's, which claims hermeneutics to be a never-ending enterprise because of what he calls *la fuite des horizons*. There is always something which escapes hermeneutics. The difference between the familiar and the foreign will thus not be resolved in a fusion. Moreover, it is precisely this difference, which keeps hermeneutics going. See Ricoeur, *La mémoire, histoire et l'oubli*, Paris: Seuil 2000, 656.

are profoundly committed. Translation does not require detachment, but rather love for one's own linguistic setting. For it is this setting which entails the capacity to open human beings to the world around them. Language — whether natural, religious or cultural — is as a *corps verbal*. It is not a place of closure and retreat; it rather constitutes the always finite anthropological commitment to the world. The mother tongue does not lock people in an exclusive ethnic belonging, but rather potentially opens them to the whole of humanity.⁷⁷

Following this line of thought, Ricœur argues for a translation ethics, which he names linguistic hospitality, 'where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming home.' It is not possible nor is it desirable to remove the asymmetry between the familiar and the foreign, and it is hence not possible to be ever fully at home in a foreign linguistic context:

To accept this impossibility implies a mourning. But this mourning opens the gates of the happiness of translation. In spite of the agnostics that make a drama of the translator's task, one can find his happiness in linguistic hospitality, in which the foreign is hospitably welcomed in the familiar.⁷⁸

On the one hand, this linguistic hospitality refuses to inflate the differences between the foreign and the familiar and resists the ethnocentric tendency of good neighbours make good fences. On the other hand, it also objects to each attempt to dominate or absorb the foreign, thereby neutralising the asymmetrical in-between.

For Ricœur, translation runs counter to the ethnocentric sacralisation of one's own language and by doing so it also rescues language from a lack of oxygen.⁷⁹ To translate means to nourish the familiar with the unknown, and hence to keep the familiar alive. It means giving the necessary oxygen to meanings. This is the gain of translation. In contrast to Lindbeck, Ricœur thinks of translation in terms of enrichment. Translation enables one's own language to rediscover forgotten dimensions of their own language. For it is always possi-

⁷⁷ Jervolino, 'Pour une philosophie de la traduction', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 2 (2006), 229-238, 233. 'Faire appel à la langue ou bien aux langues ne signifie pas se renfermer dans les particularités, dans l'idiotisme de chacune d'elles. (...) La langue maternelle ne nous renferme pas dans une appartenance ethnique exclusive mais nous ouvre potentiellement à l'humanité dans son ensemble.'

⁷⁸ Ricœur, *On Translation*, 10.

⁷⁹ Ricœur, *On Translation*, 10.

ble that translation reveals a meaning which was concealed in the original language.⁸⁰ Thus translation has the potentiality of opening people to new horizons of meaning.⁸¹

This model also acknowledges human finitude: it is not possible to fill in the gap between the familiar and the foreign just as it is not possible to transcend one's own roots and enter the foreign *tabula rasa*. One's linguistic horizon is always at stake. As a consequence, no two translations are the same:

Just as in narration it is always possible to tell the story in a different way, likewise in translation it is always possible to translate otherwise, without ever hoping to bridge the gap between equivalence and perfect adhesion. Linguistic hospitality, therefore is the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one's own home, one's own dwelling.⁸²

4. Translation as a Paradigm for Inter-religious Hermeneutics: Possibilities and Limits

4.1. Towards a Model of Inter-religious Hospitality

Ricoeur not only explicates translation in its narrow sense, he also proposes translation as a paradigm for hermeneutics. To understand is to translate.⁸³ The analogy between translation and hermeneutics is one of trying to say the same thing differently in order to enfold meaning. To translate in the broad meaning of the word is to explain, to clarify, to illuminate, for example, particular religious practices, rituals, doctrines, ... by connecting them with meanings from a strange idiom. To explain religion is to show something in terms of something else. One has to correlate the strange and the familiar.

Both in the labour of translation as in hermeneutics there is (1) an exposure to strangeness; (2) a question for understanding and meaning transfer; (3) the desire (pulsion) to understand the other in his/her otherness; (4) the trust that this is possible; (5) the recognition of the asymmetry between the 'familiar'

⁸⁰ Berman, *L'épreuve de l'étranger*, 20.

⁸¹ Jane Elisabeth Wilhem, 'Herméneutique et traduction: La question de 'l'appropriation' ou le rapport du 'propre' à l'étranger', *Meta* 49 (2004), 768-776, 772. 'La traduction ou le fait d'apprendre et d'utiliser une langue étrangère (...) nous ouvrent un horizon nouveau et toujours plus vaste.'

⁸² Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 25.

⁸³ Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 11.

and the 'foreign'; (6) the violence of hermeneutics making way for the necessary meaning transfer; (7) the recognition that complete and perfect understanding without residues is not possible; and (8) the recognition that it is not possible to be ever fully at home in the religious language of the other, which makes way for what we could call hermeneutical hospitality or openness. Encountering the other in dialogue means just that, *dia-legein*, welcoming the difference. In summary, and as in translation, the purpose of hermeneutics is to unlock the meaning of what is strange. In the context of inter-religious dialogue, the strangeness to which we are exposed is religious in nature. The religious other wants to be understood, just as we want to unravel the meaning of what commits him/her. By applying the paradigm of translation to inter-religious dialogue, it becomes possible to avoid both the post-liberal claim of untranslatability without likewise falling into the trap of the pluralist hypothesis. Let me further elaborate upon this idea.

Inter-religious hermeneutics begin with a confrontation with religious otherness, other being that which offers opposition to what is known and hence as that which questions the naturalness of our own familiar horizon of meaning.⁸⁴ Precisely because the other withdraws somewhat from our immediate control, s/he catches our attention. The other makes an appeal, which can be experienced both negatively and positively. The other can both disturb and attract, repulse and appeal, disorient and catch our eyes, making it impossible to avert from theirs. The reason for this dialectic is the recalcitrance of otherness, though strangely enough, it is a vulnerable recalcitrance at stake, for it is always possible to ignore the appeal coming from the other or reduce the otherness of the other to the same. It is moreover also always possible that once we have been appealed to by a certain meaning, we become fanatically or one-sidedly engrossed by it or become obsessed by one particular interpretation and lock ourselves in it further, becoming rigid and blind, and hence lose sight of the richness and greatness of this particular meaning.⁸⁵ The fact that this is possible at all, points toward the vulnerability of the recalcitrant otherness and hence at the ethical dimension of hermeneutics. From this perspective the appropriate attitude towards the other who wants to be understood is that of

⁸⁴ Alfred Schütz, 'Der Fremde: Ein sozialpsychologischer Versuch', in: Alfred Schütz (ed.), *Gesammelte Aufsätze II: Studien zur soziologischen Theorie*, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 1972, 53-69, 59.

⁸⁵ Paulus van Bortel, *Het geweld van de laatste woorden: Filosofie in de marge van de gezondheidsethiek*, Filosofische diagnosen, Amsterdam: Sun 2004, 272-273.

a hermeneutical openness or a hermeneutical hospitality. The religious other wants to be understood in his otherness and desires from his dialogue partner at least the willingness to be interrupted by a strangeness, which does not meet the familiar expectations.⁸⁶ In this context I will speak about the hermeneutical openness or hermeneutical hospitality. This hospitable attitude presumes the trust that there is something, which can be understood.⁸⁷ This trust is ground in the more fundamental trust in the readability of reality on the one hand and the trust in the ability of the finite human being to decipher strange meanings. According to hermeneutics, the other is neither too close nor too far, neither too familiar nor too foreign to be understood.⁸⁸ Thus hermeneutics is grounded in an act of faith. Ricoeur expresses this faith as follows 'The hope tells me there is meaning; find the meaning.'⁸⁹ This trust finds its hermeneutical expression in the attitude of benevolence towards the stranger. The benevolence means that the interpreter at least assumes that it is possible to make sense of what the other does or says.⁹⁰ The idea of a religious strangeness being 'untranslatable' hence bears witness to a form of mistrustful 'ethno philosophy'.⁹¹

Hospitality implies the preparedness to renounce the tendency of swallowing up the other or of annexing him/her to what is known. Here, the other is not a projection of one's own.⁹² Hospitality is an ethical category. It implies making room within one's own context to welcome the other in his or her otherness.⁹³ Making room means trying to understand the other in his/her otherness and renouncing the natural tendency toward placing the other within what is known. To recognize the other in his/her otherness means

⁸⁶ Bart van Leeuwen, *Erkenning, identiteit en verschil, Multiculturalisme en leven met culturele diversiteit*, Leuven: Acco 2003, 64.

⁸⁷ David Pellauer, 'Paul Ricoeur and Literary Hermeneutics', in: Andrzej Wiercinski (ed.), *Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricoeur's Unstable Equilibrium*, Hermeneutic Series, Toronto: Hermeneutic Press 2003, 370-378, 372.

⁸⁸ Richard Kearney, 'Between Oneself and Another: Ricoeur's Diacritical Hermeneutics', in: Wiercinski (ed.), *Between Suspicion and Sympathy*, 159-160.

⁸⁹ Ricoeur, *Geschichte und Wahrheit*, München: List 1974, 89-109, 107. 'Die Hoffnung sagt mir: Es gibt einen Sinn, suche einen Sinn.'

⁹⁰ Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique II*, Paris: Seuil 1986, 39-73, 55-56. 'Le choix pour le sens est donc la présupposition la plus générale de toute herméneutique.'

⁹¹ Franz Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie: Eine Einführung* (UTB für Wissenschaft, 2470), Wenen: Wiener Universitätsverlag 2004, 66.

⁹² Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, edited and translated by John B. Thompson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981, 182-196, 191.

⁹³ Norbert Thele, 'Interreligious Dialogue: Theory and Practice', in: Vigo Mortensen (ed.), *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2003, 129-137, 131.

not reducing another person, culture or religion to a variation of what the interpreter knows based on his own 'form of life'. This principle cannot be overemphasized, since in the interest of making other religions accessible, [interpreters] all too often present them as simply variations on the familiar. They might present another's religion entirely in the terms, structures, and categories familiar to Christians.⁹⁴

To not welcome the other hospitably is a form of hermeneutical closure.

While it is true that hermeneutics affirms the possibility of understanding the other in his/her otherness, this does not mean that a complete transparency is either possible or desirable. Just like translation and linguistic hospitality, inter-religious hermeneutics too presumes the recognition of the non-interchangeability of the familiar and the stranger.⁹⁵ The asymmetry between the familiar and the other is irreducible. A hermeneutics, which intends to bridge the distance between the familiar and the other, without being disturbed, challenged or interrupted by the other, is suspicious. For one can assume that such a hermeneutics has forgotten the gap, fissure or asymmetry between what is known and what is other. This also means that a hermeneutics which one-sidedly focuses on the continuity, and hence on the priority of the commonalities between the other and the familiar and likewise ignores the discontinuity existing between them, is problematic. To be challenged, disturbed and interrupted by the recalcitrant other is not an expression of closure, but on the contrary is a sign of the preparedness to take the other seriously in his/her otherness. To be disturbed is to be touched. Hermeneutical closure is not merely to misunderstand the religious other — that is one of the risks of every hermeneutical undertaking; it is much more fundamental and begins with the misrecognition of the asymmetry between the other and the familiar. Hermeneutics is about bearing this asymmetry, without inflating it. Just as the perfect translation is a fantastic ideal, a complete understanding of the religious other is not possible.⁹⁶ A hermeneutics that would start from the ideal of a complete and perfect understanding can only be disappointed and will come to the inevitable conclusion that it is not possible to understand the Other. This, indeed, brings an end to inter-religious hermeneutics as the different religions are thereby deemed 'untranslatable'. Though it is true that a

⁹⁴ Judith Berling, *Process of Interreligious Learning*, in: Didier Pollefeyt (ed.), *Interreligious Learning*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 201, Leuven: Peeters 2007, 23-52 25.

⁹⁵ Ricœur, *On Translation*, 25.

⁹⁶ Henk Vroom, *Een waaier van visies: Godsdienstfilosofie en pluralisme*, Kampen: Kok 2003, 65-66.

complete understanding of the religious other is not possible, this should not signal a short end to efforts, for there are gradations in understanding.⁹⁷ There is more or less understanding, but, in any case, every understanding will always be partial. There will always be some residue resisting the hermeneutical process. It is possible to gain insight into other traditions, but the asymmetry will never be fully removed.

Following Ricœur, we could add here that complete understanding is not only impossible in relations between the familiar and the stranger, but also in the way believers relate to the mystery of their own tradition. Ever linguistic tradition relates to an unsaid, a mystery, something, which cannot be spoken of, something resisting translation, a residue untouched by hermeneutics. If the labour of translation has to move away from the fruitless contradistinction between translatability and untranslatability, then the labour of hermeneutics has to do the same with the equally fruitless antithesis between the possibility and impossibility of comprehending the stranger. In the context of inter-religious translation Ricœur's alternative dilemma between faithfulness and betrayal seems much more valuable, because it correlates with the difficult task of the interpreter. He too has to mediate between two masters. Like the translator, the interpreter hears the appeal of the other to understand him/her in his/her otherness. The interpreter promises faithfulness to both his own religious language and a foreign religious language, even though he inevitably runs the risk of betrayal. The reality of this risk has been illustrated by post-liberalism, which points out that inter-religious translation all too often leads to the excavation of particularities. Trying to avoid this risk by claiming that all religions are untranslatable, however, is not an expression of respect, but rather leads to indifference.

The risk of betrayal is inherent to every form of translation. It cannot be avoided. Once believers enter the hermeneutical space of inter-religious dialogue, they run the risk of being accused of treason. Thus they have to live with the difficult tension: that while promising faithfulness to both 'masters', they also run the risk of betraying them. This risk is inherent to translation and thus also inter-religious dialogue. As a consequence, the gap between the familiar and the strange is a fragile hermeneutic space — fragile because every interpreter finds him/herself in a field containing the tension between

⁹⁷ Ricca Edmondson, 'Interreligiöses verstehen — kultursoziologische Probleme und Paradoxien', in: Michael Bongardt (ed.), *Verstehen an der Grenze: Beiträge zur Hermeneutik interkultureller und interreligiöser Kommunikation*, Jerusalem Theologisches Forum 4, Münster: Aschendorff 2003, 45-80.

faithfulness and betrayal. It is fragile because the interpreter has to find a difficult balance between continuity and discontinuity, between commonalities and differences, between interconnectedness and fissure.... It is fragile too because there are no final criteria to determine the equivalence and adequacy of 'inter-religious translation' once and for all. Only those who are prepared to run the risk of betrayal can enter the fragile hermeneutical space of inter-religious dialogue.

4.2. The Frailty of Inter-religious Theology

The preceding discussion has sketched connections between Ricœur's model of linguistic hospitality and inter-religious dialogue and can, perhaps misleadingly, give the impression that what is at stake in inter-religious dialogue is not unique. It is a matter of balancing identity and openness, a challenge with which everyone who is confronted with strangeness wrestles. Still, it would be inaccurate to conclude that that's all there is to inter-religious dialogue and the dialogical tension between identity and openness. Though hermeneutical hospitality is the basic ethical condition for inter-religious dialogue, the challenge of inter-religious dialogue cannot be reduced to a hermeneutics. The reason for this is straightforward: inter-religious dialogue starts from and ends with a particular faith commitment. For Christians, 'the accurate understanding of another religion is never the end of the process; the believer must also consider the impact of such knowledge on Christian thinking and living.'⁹⁸ For Christians, the question is how the newly discovered meanings concern their relation to God. Only then will inter-religious dialogue become a real *locus theologicus* a place where Christians look for traces of God and, indeed, even look with an open hospitable attitude.

Because Christians are committed to God, theological judgements are part of inter-religious dialogue. A Christian engaging in inter-religious dialogue is not simply a hermeneut or a translator, but also someone who is bound to God in a personal, faithful relationship. This commitment forces him/her to make judgements, though judging the religious other is not a form of closure or an expression of the incapacity to transcend one's own faith perspective, as the pluralists would have it. The fact that one judges shows that one takes seriously the challenge of the other as well as one's own religious commitment. An attitude of non-indifference is implied by one's religious engagement. Thus judgement, whether it be positive or negative (or both) is inextricably part of

⁹⁸ Berling, 'Process of Interreligious Learning', 30.

inter-religious dialogue. The very thought that 'judging the religious other on the basis of one's own faith would be inappropriate', shows a desire for a universalist perspective or a helicopter perspective, which unfortunately (?) does not belong to the human possibilities. To judge the religious other — whether that be in a positive or in a negative way — is not an expression of ethnocentrism. It would be ethnocentric to do so without taking on the attitude of hermeneutical hospitality.⁹⁹ It does not necessarily attest to openness to include certain convictions or practices of another religion in one's own religious identity, just as it does not necessarily shows closure to reject certain elements of strange religion. In both cases there can be question of superficiality.¹⁰⁰ This can only be avoided by rejecting a priori judgements.

Assisted by the sources of tradition and experience, Christians look where God comes to mind. This is however a very precarious undertaking. On the one hand, Christians should guard themselves against enforcing a priori limits to God's activity in the world. On the other hand, they should be equally vigilant in not seeing (projecting) God where he is absent. Christians should always bear in mind that God has the tendency to show himself in the margins, where they least expect it. Tradition shows that God's messengers are not seldom strangers (Gen 18; Luke 24,31; Heb 13,2). This implies that hermeneutical hospitality can create a place of revelation. However, not every stranger is a messenger of God, just no more than each Christian. Christians may not but too open, nor may they become too closed. They should both be open and closed. But what is the appropriate balance? What is the right openness? Analogous to the process of translation, there are no definite criteria for making theological judgements. There is no final prescription. And thus Christians do not always know what the 'right' balance between openness and closure is.

In this perspective seems that the tension between faithfulness and betrayal, brought to our attention by Ricœur, gets an extra depth-dimension in the context of inter-religious dialogue. For the believer not only vows to be faithful to religious other and his/her own tradition, but first and foremost to a living and personal God, who cannot be fixed in what is known and familiar. He has not only revealed himself in the past, but continues to do so in the present. Standing in a faithful relation with God is not without hazards, for the believer always runs the risk of violating one's faith commitment in

⁹⁹ Van Leeuwen, *Erkenning, identiteit en verschil*, 93.

¹⁰⁰ Catherine Cornille, 'The Dynamics of Multiple Belonging', Catherine Cornille (ed.), *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, Faith Meets Faith, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 2002, 1-7, 2.

inter-religious dialogue. Maybe the believer sees traces of God where there are none or he comes to think that the religious other is not a messenger speaking for God, where God is actually trying to say something. Christians venturing to engage themselves in inter-religious dialogue are inevitably caught in this tension between faithfulness and betrayal.¹⁰¹

Theology should not try to transcend or solve this tension. This tension actually refers to the fact that both one's faith commitments as well as the otherness of the other are taken serious. The tension between loyalty to God and allowing one's faith commitment to be challenged by the religious other, is the place where inter-religious theology can be born.¹⁰² Inter-religious dialogue can only be theologically fruitful if Christians bear this tension and wrestle with it. This means, if he renounces the 'solving' this tension 'theologically' in either a universalist (pluralist) position or a relativist (particularist) position. The moment when Christian no longer wrestle with the religious other, is the moment when they have either reduced the other to the same or have made him/her into a totaliter aliter. The moment Christians no longer wrestle with God, is the moment they have either fixed God in what is known and familiar or have made God into a mysterious, ineffable Reality. To be involved in inter-religious dialogue as Christians, means to wrestle: to wrestle with God, with the strange other, and with one's own faith commitment, whilst realising that this wrestling brings along both injuries and blessings. (Gen 32,22-32).

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¹⁰¹ Ricœur, *On Translation*, 16.

¹⁰² Francis Clooney, 'Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989-1995)', *Theological Studies* 56 (1995), 521-550.

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