

# 'Public theology' from within the church? A reflection on aspects of the theology of W.D. Jonker (1929–2006)

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In this essay, aspects of the work of theologian W.D. (Willie) Jonker are reframed to complement current debates about 'public theology' in South Africa. The introduction points out that Jonker worked during a crucial period in South Africa's history and that his theology is intrinsically linked to the church struggle between 1955 and 1994. The second part reframes Jonker's theology as a public theology from within the church by referring to his understanding of preaching, confessions and public witness. The last part attempts to move beyond Jonker in appropriating some of his ideas for a public theology in South Africa today.

## Introduction

Willem Daniel (Willie) Jonker was born on 01 March 1929 in the Lichtenburg district of the then Western Transvaal, South Africa. He studied theology and languages at the University of Pretoria until 1951, completing a Bachelor of Divinity (BD) on how conceptions of God impact on the doctrine of forgiveness in the work of Schleiermacher, Ritschl and Brunner (Jonker 1951) and an Master's degree (MA) on the Markan translation of Ulfilas (Jonker 1952). In the latter work, he demonstrated his advanced knowledge of both Greek and Latin. He then departed for The Netherlands where he completed his doctoral studies in Dogmatics with distinction at the Free University of Amsterdam under Prof. Gerrit C. Berkouwer in the period 1952–1955.<sup>1</sup>

Willie Jonker and his family returned to South Africa, and he entered the ministry in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), serving various congregations in Johannesburg and Potchefstroom in the period 1955–1967. He quickly rose to prominence in the church and was elected Actuary of the Transvaal Synod in 1961 with Beyers Naude elected as assessor of the same synod. He held a brief appointment as professor at University of South Africa and then accepted a professorship in Practical Theology at Kampen University in The Netherlands where he worked from 1968 to 1971. He accepted a call from the DRC as professor to the Stellenbosch Theological Faculty in 1971 where he taught Dogmatics until his retirement in 1994.

From this cursory biographical overview, it is evident that Willie Jonker was a student and professor of theology in the most turbulent years of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. A number of random links tells the story. He completed his doctoral studies in the year that the Freedom Charter (1955) was drafted. He was active in the DRC and its leadership during the Sharpeville and Cottesloe events (1960) and the Rivonia trial in 1964 when Nelson Mandela and others were sentenced to life imprisonment. He was professor in the DRC faculty at Stellenbosch when this church, in 1974, accepted its document *Ras volk en nasie: Volkeverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif*, an exposition of a conception of pluriformity upon which separate churches for different cultures could be defended.

The Soweto uprisings of 1976 and growing repression by the ruling National Party in the 1980s were mirrored by turbulent developments in the South African church struggle. One thinks of the Lutheran World Federation's declaration of apartheid as theological heresy (1977), the suspension of membership of two Afrikaans white churches at the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa, Canada (chaired by Allan Boesak) in 1982, followed by the adoption of the draft Confession of Belhar by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) (1982), the Kairos document (1985) and The Road to Damascus (1989). Jonker was also part of the DRC's intense internal debates which in the end led to a new stance on race relations by the DRC in 1986, expressed in the document *Church and Society*, revised in 1990. This change in direction was the direct reason for a split in the DRC when the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk, a whites-only church of roughly 40 000 members at the time, was formed. A few years later, the Rustenburg

<sup>1</sup>*Mistieke liggaam en kerk in die nuwe Rooms Katolieke Teologie* is an ecclesiological exposition and critical appraisal of the church as *corpus Christi mysticum* developed after World War I by French Catholic theologians like Congar, Journet and De Lubac. This thesis prepared Jonker well for the many ecclesiological battles in ensuing years in the context of South Africa where, for example, an insistence on the visible unity of the church was portrayed as a Roman Catholic (!) tendency that stands in contrast to the Reformed tradition (see Potgieter 1961).

church conference (1990) was convened to talk about the role of the churches in the transition of South Africa. In the year of Willie Jonker's retirement, we saw the reunification of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and the DRMC to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa as well as – on 27 April 1994 – the first full democratic elections in South Africa.

Over this period, Jonker played a critical role in the context of the DRC and wider church relationships. Instead of merely enumerating these milestones along this journey, this essay attempts to frame Jonker's contribution to complement the 'public theology' debates in South Africa and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> This 'framing' is of course somewhat a-synchronic as the debate about the 'public' nature of theology as such was not overtly raised by Jonker and his contemporaries. As far as could be established, he never referred to himself as a 'public' theologian. This, however, does not mean that some of the issues addressed in 'public theology' discourses were not also in his mind as his elegant exposition of the church in an age of modernity (Jonker 2008) demonstrates. His work is also interpreted as such by Koopman, one of the foremost public theologians in South Africa today (Koopman 2008).<sup>3</sup>

For the sake of this discussion, the contribution of Willie Jonker to a South African public theology in the period 1955–1994 will be surveyed from two perspectives. Firstly, what is theology? And secondly, how can a focus on the public of the church have an effect on the publics beyond the boundaries of the church?<sup>4</sup> A quite simple conception of public theology<sup>5</sup> underlies this discussion: a public theology attempts to address issues of public concern from a theological perspective and communicates this to appropriate publics in church and society.

## What makes a theology 'public'?

The roots of a 'public theology' lie in the conception of what theology actually is. In an article, 'What is theology?' written for a 1976 consultation of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, Jonker (1976a:3–7) distinguishes four models of theology. These are (1) theology as mystical knowledge of God, constituting theology as 'wisdom' (Augustine and the Eastern Orthodox tradition), (2) theology as rational knowledge about articles of faith (Aquinas and Roman Catholic scholasticism), (3) theology as knowledge of God via

2. For an overview of these debates, see *Responsible South African public theology in a global era* (2011), a special issue of the *International Journal of Public Theology*. This journal addresses the need for theology to interact with public issues of contemporary society in dialogue with different disciplines such as politics, economics, cultural and religious studies. For an earlier article on the genre of public theology in South Africa in the same journal, read De Gruchy's (2007) 'Public theology as Christian witness: Exploring the genre'.

3. This essay must be read in conjunction with Koopman's clear exposition of the Trinitarian motives in Jonker's public ecclesiology (Koopman 2008:165–168).

4. See Smit (2008a) for an excellent analysis of the philosophical (Habermas, Luhmann, Arendt) and theological (Marty, Tracy, Bellah, Welker) roots of public theology. He distinguishes between normative and descriptive notions of public theology where the first refers to an ideal for theological reflection (ethical engagement with issues of public concern) and the latter an (empirical) recognition of the public role of the Christian faith in history and in our current societies (Smit 2008a:28–29).

5. For technical discussions on the definition of public theology, see the two influential essays by Breitenberg (2003, 2010). For critique on the very notion of a 'public theology' in South Africa, read Maluleke (2011).

revelation in Scripture (the Protestant tradition inaugurated by Luther and Calvin) and (4) theology as knowledge of God via human experience or religiosity (Schleiermacher, Neo-Protestant- and Pentecostal theologies).

Jonker then makes a conscious choice for the Protestant model because – according to him – the Scriptures are taken as source, object and criterion of theology in a more adequate manner than in the other models or traditions. In the mystical tradition, Scripture is important up to a point after which mystical reflections lead to higher-order knowledge of God beyond the revelation in Scripture. In the Catholic tradition, the doctrines and traditions of the church are seen as equally important sources of revelation compared to Scripture, and Scripture itself is not the actual object of study. He, interestingly, considers the model of experiential theology the least attractive as he views this as an anthropocentric way of speaking about God with only a relative position assigned to Scripture, thereby in fact deserting the very modus of theological language (Jonker 1976a:7).

Jonker goes further and positions himself in the specific Reformed tradition within broader Protestant theology.<sup>6</sup> He draws distinctions between Luther and Calvin and argues that the valid insights from Luther should be maintained but supplemented by the broader theological vision of John Calvin (Heyns & Jonker 1974:248–252).

Jonker obviously works in broad strokes here: in depicting the relationship between God and humans, Luther would emphasise the holiness of God and sinful nature of the human being whereas Calvin works on the basis of a Creator God in relation to a fallen creation, including fallen human beings. Justification for Luther is being saved from sin whereas for Calvin justification encompasses the recreation of all of reality and God's saving act from sin and all destructive powers. Luther interprets the rule of Christ via the 'two kingdoms' view where the law has as primary role the revelation of sin whereas Calvin views Christ's rule as a rule over all of reality in the one kingdom of God with the law as a guide to holiness and the transformation of society (Heyns & Jonker 1974:251–252).

This overt choice for the Reformed view in the tradition of Calvin is echoed in an important article on theology and social ethics (Jonker 1973b).<sup>7</sup> This was written at a time when the social dimensions of ethics were underrepresented and when pious people with a strong individual spirituality in fact 'overlooked' the structural dimensions of the gospel in relation to apartheid society. Jonker differentiates between personal and social ethics: the former deals with the moral action of the individual whereas the latter focuses upon the relationship amongst people within the structures of society (Jonker 1973c:79).

6. See Jonker's contribution in the Heyns and Jonker (1974:232–260) co-publication *Op weg met die teologie*.

7. For a recent instructive discussion of Jonker's ethics, read Van Niekerk's (2011) exposition delivered as the Willie Jonker memorial lecture in 2011.

He then points to the danger of overemphasising the personal dimension of ethical questions. This tendency has its roots in both Pietism and the subject philosophies of the Enlightenment (Jonker 1973c:81). Social ethics has the advantage that it brings the 'institutes' into critical focus (*ibid*:82–83). In line with his views on theology in general, Jonker points to the limitations of Luther's two-kingdoms theory which – probably contrary to Luther's intention – prioritises the individual view and may lead to a mere acceptance and even sanctioning of existing social orders belonging to the 'kingdom of the world'. Jonker also judges the natural-law tradition as too weak to be a solid foundation for social ethics as – theologically speaking – this tradition is simply too optimistic about the natural consensus amongst people of good will and makes too much of general grace compared to God's saving grace in Christ (*ibid*:84).

Like so often in his work, Jonker (1973c:84–85) returns to Calvin whom he admires for developing a truly social ethics on the basis of Scripture as norm for all spheres of life. In this inclusive view, the social institutes are themselves brought under the critique of God's Word – a welcome correction to the Pietism in South African Afrikaans churches in the mid-1970s.

To avoid a possible misunderstanding of the Reformed tradition as a sectarian view, Jonker emphasises that this tradition is 'catholic' in a double sense of the word. It stands in continuity with the early church and the church through the ages, and it strives to understand and proclaim the 'wholeness' of the truth as revealed in Scripture.<sup>8</sup> That is why the Reformed tradition takes the whole canon, specifically including the Old Testament, seriously as it perceives God in the history of creation, law and the covenant (Heyns & Jonker 1974:253–259).

The above interpretation of the nature of theology provides the first answer as to the roots of Jonker's public theology: he placed himself squarely within the Reformed tradition, interpreted via John Calvin<sup>9</sup> and Karl Barth,<sup>10</sup> as a theology that seeks to transform all of reality according to the will of God as revealed in Scripture. The notion that theology would not include all societal spheres or publics would be foreign to Jonker. He would, however, maintain – and this is important – *that the church, understood as local congregation, denomination, and ecumenical church is the gateway to the other publics.*

Let us turn to this part of the discussion.

## The 'public' of the church

The question now is: how can a focus on the public of the church have an effect on the publics beyond the boundaries of the church? Jonker implicitly provides a number of

8. See the article by Smit (1989), *Om saam met al die heiliges Christus te ken*, for an exposition of the catholicity of Jonker's thought.

9. For the reception of Calvin in the work of Jonker, read Naudé (2010).

10. Read Jonker (1988a) for his critical though overtly positive interpretation of Barth. For a broader perspective of Jonker's interpretation of Barth, read Naudé (2013).

pathways in this regard. For the sake of brevity, three aspects that link the church's life and work with broader society and other public spheres are discussed: preaching, confessing and public witnessing.

## Theology and proclamation

There is a deep pastoral and practical intent in all of Jonker's theology:<sup>11</sup> every doctrine should serve the faithful, the church and God's honour in the world. His appointment in Kampen was in Practical Theology, and at that stage already, he published on the 'problem' of preaching in a growing secular environment (Jonker 1970a).

His short monograph, *Die Woord as opdrag* (Jonker 1976b), was an Afrikaans version of his lectures in The Netherlands and has become a classic for guiding and informing preaching in a perceptible and accessible manner.<sup>12</sup> Let us look at just one excerpt from the book, namely the section dealing with the transition from 'text' to 'sermon': *'Van die teks na die preek ...'* (Jonker 1976b:68–78).

In line with the Reformed model of theology, Jonker stands firmly on the fact that preaching is preaching of the Biblical text, obviously in the context of the specific pericope or book, and in line with the whole Biblical message. Jonker opposed both fundamentalism, which takes the text at face value without a historical or grammatical context, and the different 'criticisms', which may render the text mute because the reader is forever caught up in presuppositions and hermeneutical methodologies. The role of proper exegesis is to check first impressions of the text and make sure that the scope and kerugma of the text is determined in the context of the relevant book and the Bible as a whole.

For the text to be preached, Jonker guides toward the importance of personal Bible study, which represents an existential dimension where the preacher herself is being addressed and where God is being met. This opens the preacher to both the pastoral situation of the church and the relevant topics of the day.<sup>13</sup>

Meditation upon the text is the axis point where the history of the text turns to the actual present situation in light of the preacher's knowledge of theology and insights into the 'spirit of the times'. Here 'text' (biblical) and 'text' (context) meet, and the preacher should be both theologically and socially competent to ensure a proper communication of the gospel message in the realities of the world.

The task of the preacher is to formulate one clear message, clarified from different perspectives. Jonker warns against the danger of 'thematic preaching' – even with a Biblical

11. For a discussion of this pastoral intent with specific respect to the doctrine of election, read Naudé (1991) in his comments on Jonker's (1988b) book, *Uit vrye guns alleen*.

12. For more academic reflections on the link between Scripture (exegesis) and dogmatics, read Jonker (1970b, 1973a, 1979), and for actual sermon outlines for the time of passion, read Jonker (1982).

13. For the actuality of preaching addressing contemporary challenges – very much in current 'public theology' language – read Jonker (1976b:109–126).

intent – as the preacher easily slips into no longer being a witness to the Word but an orator about a Christian topic (Jonker 1976b:76–77).

If the preacher then finally delivers the sermon, she trusts God who transforms the church and the world through Word and Spirit. Jonker therefore has the local congregation uppermost in his mind. However, it is clear that, when the Word is proclaimed, God transforms not only congregants but – through them – the world beyond the boundaries of the institutional church. Although preaching seems highly existential and personal, it is in fact a public event with a transformative power both in and outside of the church.

That this was true for Jonker's own preaching is evident from two examples, namely his Mission Week sermons in the Stellenbosch student church, published as *Die liefde van Christus dring ons* (1976c), and his weekly meditations in *Die Burger*, an influential Afrikaans newspaper, published over a period of many years (see collection in Jonker 1987).

There is a deep evangelical thrust to Jonker's conviction concerning the public nature of proclamation. In his recently published, *Die relevansie van die kerk* (2008, original unpublished manuscript, 1983), Jonker deals with the typical question that informs much of the public-theology discourse today. In short: how can the church (and theology) remain 'relevant' in the light of the massive impact of both the First and Second Enlightenments wherein the 'turn to the subject' in Descartes and Kant was followed by a fundamental critique of religion itself in the work of philosophers like Feuerbach and Marx? (Jonker 2008:41).

After a significant discussion of various responses (and a critical choice for Karl Barth), Jonker comes to a sobering conclusion: the gospel is relevant as it is the good news from God. We need not make the gospel relevant. In fact, by attempting to make the gospel relevant, we as the church and theologians might exactly lose our relevance as we take on the assumptions of a secular and antireligious worldview which can only lead to a weakening, if not betrayal, of the gospel (Jonker 2008:147–153).

Preaching is public theology in action as the echoes of the gospel are heard in the church and its effects felt far beyond the church – because it is God's gospel.

## Confessions

The Reformed tradition – exactly because it takes the proclamation of the Word in every age seriously – developed confessions as ever-new witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ as required by the signs of the time.

A confession is 'a faithful and doxological repetition of Scripture'.<sup>14</sup> Confessions derive their authority from Scripture because they are viewed as in consonance with

14.'... 'n gelowige en lofprysende *repetitio Sacrae Scripturae*, 'n naspreke van die spreke van die Skrif' (Heyns & Jonker 1974:200).

Scripture. Simultaneously, they are, despite their gravity, always provisional, standing under the critique of Scripture and a better insight into the truth of the gospel.

Confessions play at least three important roles in the life of the church and beyond (Heyns & Jonker 1974:200–203, see also Jonker 1994:8–15): (1) confessions as public documents in and beyond the church serve as witness to the world about the great deeds of God. Confessions are doxological in nature and praise God amongst the nations, (2) confessions serve the church via catechesis, pastoral care, and they shape the embodiment of faith inside the church and the Christian life in publics beyond the church and (3) confessions act as a rule of faith to discern the truth from heresies and false gospels.

And although this last role seems like an 'inward-looking' function of confessions, it is perhaps its most 'outwardly' public face: the Barmen declaration (1934) does not mention National Socialism, nor does the Belhar confession (1986) mention apartheid by name. What does occur, however, is a fundamental exposure of the false theological bases on which both political ideologies were built. No wonder the authorities responded so quickly – they knew that seemingly intra-ecclesial doctrinal matters were of crucial public-political concern.

The difficult question then arises: do the confessions not curtail the freedom of the theologian who in her scientific endeavours should in principle be open to explore new possibilities and question all inherited truths? Does a confessional theology not in principle make impossible speaking in the public realm of science (understood in an encompassing sense)? (Heyns & Jonker 1974:205).

Jonker suggests that there are normally two opposing positions in this regard: the one position emphasises the scientific freedom of the theologian who should not be restricted in any way to seek for the truth. The other position insists on the binding of the theologian to the confessions and therefore accepts certain *a priori* limitations in scientific research.

Jonker proposes a third way: a confession provides an open presupposition which in any case is inevitable for all scientific enquiry as there is no such thing as value-free interpretation (see Heyns & Jonker 1974:208). Stating this presupposition does not limit the theologian any more than other scientists are limited by their respective presuppositions. However, the confession also provides a basis for the relationship between theologian and church so that the former is free to question (including the very presuppositions!) and the church is duly informed to judge what theology produces whilst both the theologian and church always remain open to new insights from Scripture (Heyns & Jonker 1974:210). *Semper reformanda*.

## Public witness

The most 'public' moment of Jonker's theological and church journey occurred at the Rustenburg church conference in

1990.<sup>15</sup> Jonker was asked by the organisers to speak on the obstacles to a united public witness amongst the churches in South Africa. He cites as the greatest obstacle the sinful division of the church (Jonker 1991b:88) and continues to observe that the social divisions of the country are sadly reflected in these church divisions (*ibid*:89). These vastly opposing social locations made a united witness very difficult (*ibid*:90).

Speaking only months after the DRC General Synod of October 1990 finally rejected the theology of apartheid and recommitted itself to unity amongst churches of the DRC family, Jonker confidently stated that apartheid was now no longer accepted by the DRC. In this light, he (Jonker 1991b) therefore had the courage to confess:

I confess before you and before the Lord, not only my own sin and guilt, and my personal responsibility for the political, social, economical and structural wrongs that have been done to many of you, and the results of which you and our whole country are still suffering from, but vicariously I dare also to do that in the name of the DRC of which I am a member, and for the Afrikaans people as a whole. (p. 92)

Jonker then asked: is the task of the church reconciliation or resistance? (Jonker 1991b:93). He referred to 02 February 1990 (the release of political prisoners and unbanning of all political formations) and asked whether 'theological positions which were geared to match the struggle will be softened and even changed?' (*ibid*:95). He acknowledged that South Africa had come through abnormal times in which the churches played an overt and more direct political role. He, however, warned that there were limits to the political task of the church. This task was limited to the proclamation of 'God's general and abiding demands of justice, fairness and the protection of the weak and the poor' (*ibid*:95), but churches could not play the role of political parties. Christians were called to be radical disciples of Christ whilst knowing that 'political change alone can never make us free from inner bondage' (*ibid*:98).

Jonker later reflected on this public confession of sin (see Jonker 1991a). According to him the space for a confession was created by the DRC which finally moved away from understanding itself as a 'volkskerk', based on natural theology in the negative sense of the word, to a church of Christ, saved by grace alone (Jonker 1991a:99). A Biblical, theological or moral defence of apartheid was no longer possible (Jonker 1991a:97, 98). This non-defence of apartheid was further enabled by the impact of the ecumenical movement (*ibid*:97) as well as the acceptance by the DRMC of the Belhar confession. The voice of the former daughter church turned the DRC in its tracks (*ibid*:98).

Jonker had to confess publicly because of the special guilt of the DRC (Jonker 1991a:101) concerning separate churches and its theological support for the policies of apartheid. Yes, there are various levels of individual guilt and collective guilt. The church as a collective, however, could not wait with a confession of guilt until each member is ready – this will

15. See the publication: *The Road to Rustenburg* (Jonker 1991b).

in all probability never happen. Therefore it was imperative for an individual to do this '*plaasbekledend*' [vicariously] on behalf of the collective (*ibid*:102).

With sharp foresight, Jonker suggested further that, in this confession of guilt, the DRC might assist other churches who then or in the future would stand before the same temptation of aligning the church too closely with political ideals, thereby compromising the gospel of Jesus of Christ.

This public witness (confession) elicited huge media exposure and received both widespread criticism and support from Christians. Jonker himself was vilified by many white (and suspicious black) Christians. It was specifically painful that the church council of Biesiesvlei, the town of his birth, rejected this confession of guilt in a letter to him, calling on him not to be manipulated by politics but to remain true to the Word of God. His letter of explanation was, however, never read to the church council – a fact that saddened him deeply (Jonker 1998a:209–210).

Looking back, this confession was an important precursor to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995–2002)<sup>16</sup> which played a determinant role in the healing of South Africa's past. It, however, played its role in line with Jonker's view of public theology as reconstructed here – *the socio-psychological and political impact of his witness was to be channelled via the public of the church itself, in this case the public of the ecumenical church.*

Jonker always understood his role as primarily *theological* in the realm of the church and hesitated to play a 'direct' political role for fear that the gospel might once again be compromised. This seemingly 'conservative' position was in fact transformative in a quiet but fundamental way. Without his public theology, the struggle for unity, reconciliation and justice would have been longer, and we still draw on his legacy as we face the unfinished task of church reunification in the DRC family, inclusive of the Belhar confession.

## Beyond Jonker: What role for the church in South African public theologies today?

Looking back on the journey of Willie Jonker with the DRC and the churches in South Africa in general, the question may be asked: is the approach he followed still valid for public theology today? This question cannot be answered with a simple affirmation or negation. The following remarks attempt to re-position some of Jonker's impulses in our current context.

### Understanding a different socio-political situation

Willie Jonker and the theologians of his time – both liberation and apartheid theologians – were by default ensured of the

16. The official report, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (1998), detailing the facts, findings and recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been published in five volumes in 1998. See especially volume four, pp. 59–92, which deals with the faith communities.

public significance and impact of their work beyond the boundaries of the church because they worked in South Africa prior to the impact of liberalisation and secularisation which swept over us like a whirlwind after 1994. There was a unity between the institutional church on the one hand and politics and public life on the other because apartheid was in fact a pseudo-religious system predicated upon a pre-modern conception of society.

What the institutional church did and decided, and what church leaders said, really mattered as there was a strong correlation between 'theology' and 'society'. To decide that the unity of the church is not merely an invisible spiritual matter but required outward and visible unification of the segregated Reformed family was a fundamental theological decision proposed by Jonker from the beginning of his theological and church life.<sup>17</sup> However, in the minds of many Christians this was – correctly – interpreted as eroding the very basis of a society built on legally segregated communities. Like in the time of the early church, to say that 'Jesus is Lord' was indeed 'political' in a system where the reconciliatory power of Christ was in theory upheld but in practice denied.

One must further consider that the liberation struggle found fertile tactical space in the church due to the banning of political leaders in the period 1964–1990. This opened the door for a 'direct' political role by leaders such as Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Beyers Naude, Frank Chikane, Johan Heysns and others who could 'step back' after 1994.

As so ably demonstrated by a number of theologians after 1994,<sup>18</sup> it is quite a different matter to do public theology in the context of a liberal democracy with a stronger defined distance between state and Christian church, equality of all faiths, secular human rights guiding the constitution and public ethics and with legitimate political representatives operating in an open society. In short, the kind of developments in Western societies which initially informed the very debate about the public nature of theology have now arisen in this African context as well though with different emphases and trajectories.<sup>19</sup>

Willie Jonker – shaped by European theology and philosophy – understood and saw these developments coming to our shores. He was faithful to the context and dynamics of his time and knew that others after him would have to face a different kind of 'publics' constellation in which theology and the church would have to live out their calling. Whether 'the publics' and 'the institutes' can be reached through

17. See Jonker (1955a, 1962, 1964, 1967, 1986).

18. See the work of Smit (2007a, 2007b, 2008a), De Gruchy (2007), Koopman (2009) and De Villiers (2011).

19. For example, South Africa is not 'secular' in the same sense as European countries like France, Belgium and The Netherlands. Also, our constitution does not require a strict separation of church and state like in the United States of America, nor do we have an official state church or churches like in the United Kingdom and Germany. We are a typical society in transition with its own dynamics of modernisation and secularisation whilst at the same time harbouring fast growth in African Independent and Pentecostal type churches or communities. For reflections on public theologies in South Africa as transitional society, read Koopman (2005) and the doctoral thesis by Kusmierz (2009).

the public of the church in the same way as Jonker and his contemporaries presupposed is however doubtful.

It is the responsibility of our post-liberation generation to chart new pathways on the fundamental assumption<sup>20</sup> that the Christian church as the bride of Christ to whom the ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted remains a crucial pathway for the gospel in the world.

### Affirming the link between worship and the publics

The proclaiming and confessing local churches remain important to shape believers who act as 'light and salt' in their everyday lives in other spheres of society.<sup>21</sup> Under conditions of a liberal democracy, faithful Christians rather than the formal institutional church are for many people – believers and non-believers – a more important and perhaps the only representative face of 'the church'. In this sense, the public nature of the liturgy<sup>22</sup> – as set out by Jonker – must be reinforced and confirmed.

### Strengthening the prophetic channels of democracy

The institutional church must be seen to be a united ecumenical church and retain its prophetic role but not exclusively via after-the-fact reactive media releases or the modus of synodical reports. The 'how' question is important: churches for the most part have to take up the role of 'silent prophets' who influence policy in the democratic process by taking hands with Christians in the spheres of the economy, politics, law and the public service. We are ill-prepared to work 'beyond' theology in cross-disciplinary boundaries, and when we do engage in questions of public concern, we struggle to retain (like Jonker) the profile of our *theological* perspective in dialogue with others. Institutional churches and ecumenical bodies like the South African Council of Churches have proven that we are not well suited to operate in a society where – unlike for Jonker and his contemporaries – institutional and social power have shifted away from the institutional church, and an impact on the publics outside of the church should therefore in part be sought via participation in democratic structures.

### Recognising the social and public influence of 'Pentecostalism'

The public space of the institutional churches that fought for and against apartheid have all been seriously challenged by the phenomenal growth of not only African Independent Spirit Churches but also the attraction of a young generation to non-denominational, multi-racial, 'charismatic' churches. The latter group of churches seemingly speak much better in

20. This assumption can obviously be challenged. It rests upon a specific understanding that God, in his wisdom, has chosen to bless the earth through Israel in the Old Testament (Gn 12) and the church as proclaimed in the New Testament (see the various references in the Pauline letters) whilst also acknowledging that, if the church does not proclaim, the stones will call out.

21. See Smit (2008b) on six different meanings of 'church', including the reference to Christians in everyday life.

22. For a discussion on the link between worship and public theology, read part four of Smit (2007:423–469).

the language of our time and via new-media technologies than the historical churches.

These churches or local, informal faith communities no longer fit easy theological descriptions: some are strong on social justice, some are strong on the teaching office and some take Scripture seriously beyond fundamentalism so that the old criticisms of pietism, superficial experiential theology and a-historical readings of Scripture no longer apply equally to all.

In his last academic publication, Jonker (1998b) once again addressed the DRC. He asked the pertinent question to which of three possibilities the DRC will turn: Will it grasp back to its own past and endeavour to remain a 'volkskerk'? Will it embrace Pentecostalism? Or will the DRC remain true to its Reformed roots? Jonker expressed the hope that the last option will be followed. In light of his fundamental critique of Pietism and 'Cartesian' theologies with an anthropocentric experiential religiosity, the question arises whether our theological evaluations of 'Pentecostal' communities need not show greater nuance in the light of current developments where a one-size-fits-all-view simply does not hold.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Reformed churches should remind themselves that the very same Jonker told us: 'Each sect is the unpaid bill of the church.'<sup>24</sup>

Who knows? Perhaps the face of the public church in 21st-century South Africa might not look 'Reformed' as traditionally understood at all?

### Seeking justice for the weakest in society

There is no greater public task for the churches in this nation and on the African continent than to further their priestly role as disciples of Christ in service of justice. To repeat Jonker at this point: the church has to seek 'God's general and abiding demands of justice, fairness and the protection of the weak and the poor' (Jonker 1991b:95). Churches will have to play a more constructive public role – no longer from a relatively privileged social location but as a humble but indispensable member of civil society, representing faith communities in action. Churches could lend their networks, expertise and infrastructure to address the current government's failures in education, health and caring for the most vulnerable. We could reignite capabilities to soften the blow of non-delivery to the most vulnerable in our society.

Let us remind ourselves that public theology is not about public relations on behalf of the church or seeking cheap public attention for a well-spoken theologian, but it is about

23. See the interesting article by Botha (2007:295–325). He judges the rise of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement since 1906 as of equal fundamental importance to the 16th-century Reformation. He further cites the reasons why this movement has grown to more than 600 million people by referring inter alia to its theological flexibility, its attraction to marginalised people, its high indigenisation capacities coupled with a strong missionary zeal, healing, the use of media in worship as well as empowerment of ordinary believers in the loose leadership structures of these churches.

24. This is the author's recollection. Because Jonker had such an ecumenical orientation, he could – despite fundamental critique – remind us that those who break away in what the church calls 'sectarian groups' always mirror a weakness in the church itself.

serving the most vulnerable whilst the left hand does not know what the right hand does.

The actual purpose of public theology – in whatever form – is well described by Jesus: 'In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven' (Mt 5:16).

## Conclusion

In this article, the life-work of Willie Jonker was situated in the context of the church's struggle against apartheid. Although he himself never depicted his theology as 'public' theology, it is argued that Jonker's contribution can indeed be re-framed to inform current debates about the public nature of theology. His choice to pursue the specific tradition of *Reformed* theology – drawing on John Calvin and Karl Barth – already put him on the path to view all of reality under the rule of God.

It was then demonstrated that Jonker's public theology has an explicit ecclesiological focus. In other words, he firmly believed that the road to other publics in society leads via the public of the church. The specific manner in which the church serves other publics is explained by referring to the preaching, confessing and public witnessing of the church. It was concluded that Jonker made a crucial contribution from within the DRC and the wider ecumenical church to dismantle the theological support for apartheid.

In the last part of the article, it was argued that the situation of a constitutional democracy (inter alia) fundamentally changes the dynamics of public theology. Although one could affirm the valid insights from Jonker's work, the current context makes different demands on theology to play a significant role in shaping the public life in South Africa.

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