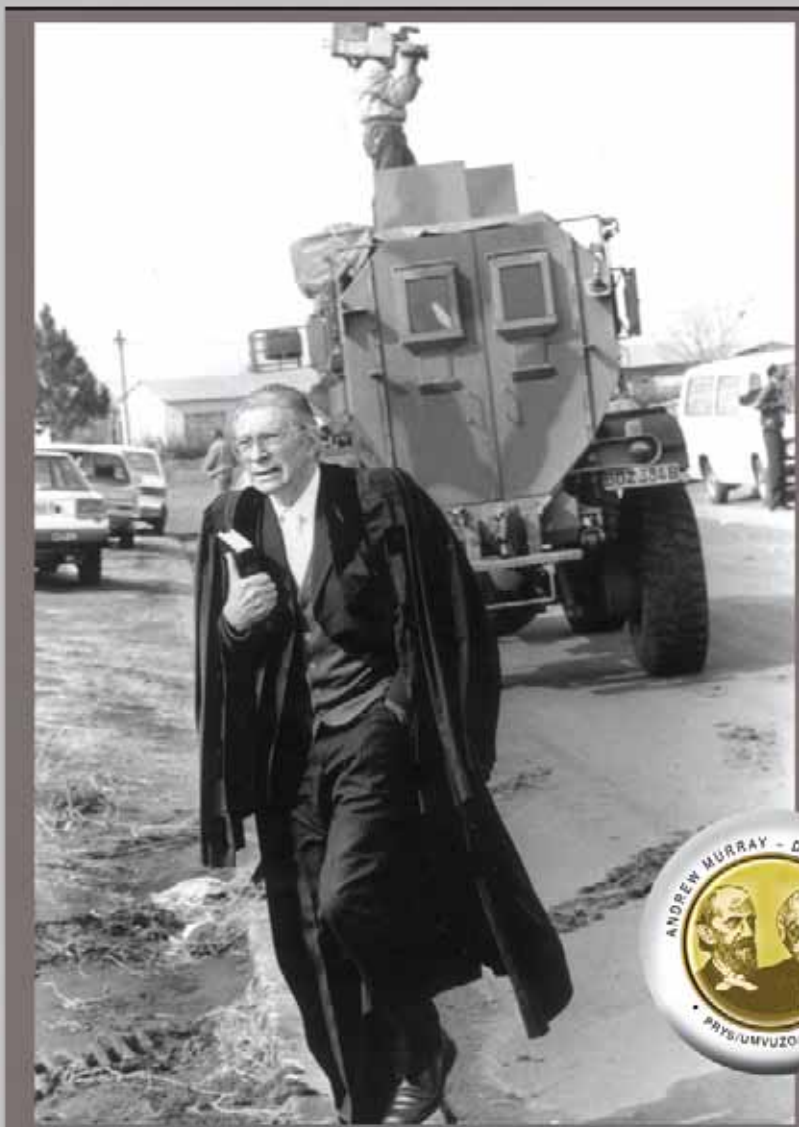


Christian in Public

AIMS, METHODOLOGIES AND
ISSUES IN PUBLIC THEOLOGY



LEN HANSEN
(Editor)



BEYERS NAUDÉ CENTRE SERIES ON PUBLIC THEOLOGY

Beyers Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology Volume 3

CHRISTIAN IN PUBLIC
Aims, methodologies and issues
in public theology



Christian in Public
Beyers Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology

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No one should doubt that Beyers Naudé, from whose life and example we at the Beyers Naudé Centre draw much of our inspiration, believed that the adjective “Christian”, when applied to the Christian minister, should never be limited merely to the private, personal spheres of one’s existence. This is clear, for example, from an interview with Naudé by renowned South African author and fellow apartheid critic Alan Paton. Asked when he thinks the role of a minister of God begins to take on a justifiable political connotation, Naudé answered:

At that point where the minister is confronted with the question whether the issue concerned is purely a party political one or whether, in fact, it touches a very deep moral truth. Where a basic Christian truth is threatened by any political action or any political policy a priest must stand up and speak out – not to criticise and condemn a specific party, but to state clearly what Christian truth, justice and love demand of everyone. And that includes the Christian members of that party. He [*sic*] must state clearly what needs to be done. If he doesn’t do so, he does a great disservice, not only to the church but also to government (*The Star*, 13 December 1984).

Of course, Beyers Naudé did not limit the responsibility to be specifically Christian in the public arena to ordained ministers. Quoted many years ago with reference to the trial of Bram Fisher, he made it clear that this was the responsibility of not only the Church as institution and its functionaries, but of all Christians:

The Church of Jesus Christ ... to be sure, is not of this world, but is church in the world and for the world, called to confront every person and every system with the gospel of Jesus Christ ... The Christian who shrinks from this, in this regard fails in his [*sic*] calling (*Die Transvaler*, 11 August 1966) [transl. ed.].

The above convictions are also shared by those who started and have been involved, in the past and currently, in the work of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology. In its bylaws the general objective of the Centre is described as “[t]he promotion of knowledge to the public arena in respect of the field of, role, task and responsibility of public theology, by means of research and the rendering of service”. Within this general framework, one of the specific objectives of the Centre, according to its bylaws, is “[t]o publicize the results of research, as well as the presentation of congresses, symposia and workshops, by means of national and international publications”. This is of course true of all volumes in the Beyers

Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology, but perhaps especially of this one. Compiling it gave us the opportunity to reflect once more on what the nature is of what we do at and hope to achieve with the Centre, and what the challenges, the opportunities and the obstacles are in achieving these aims. This publication is therefore aimed at a whole series of related questions which can be summarised by the following quotation from the contribution, focusing on being Christian in the economic public sphere, by Nico Koopman and Dirkie Smit, respectively the director and the chairperson of the board of the Beyers Naudé Centre:

The difficult questions facing the public witness of church and theology in the economic sphere – not only in South Africa, but indeed everywhere – are the same questions that have always faced the public witness of the church concerning political life as well. What knowledge does the church possess, on the basis of which it can witness? How should it speak, to whom should it speak, when should it speak, about what should it speak, what should it say? With which authority can it speak? Indeed, the church with its theology is here dramatically faced with the challenge that ecumenical theologian Keith Clements has so clearly described and helpfully analysed, namely the task of “learning to speak”.

Addressing these questions also gave us an opportunity to look back on the activities of the Centre over the past five years, the many friends who have visited the Centre and the contributions they have made to the work of the Centre, be it by way of public lectures, by attending and participating in conferences, or in many other ways. Some of the articles contained in this volume have their origin in these encounters. It was also an opportunity to renew friendships with the many friends we have made who share our commitment to public theology and whom we are still looking forward to receiving in future as our guests at the Centre. As an acknowledgement of their areas of expertise, we have invited them to contribute to this publication either by writing a completely new article or by allowing us to republish an existing one on a topic without which this publication would have been incomplete. Some of these authors are well-known locally or internationally in the field of theology in general or specifically in that of public theology. It is, however, also important for us to invite and encourage new and younger voices to join the discourses on public theology. For this reason we wanted to include some of these voices in this volume. The list of contributors therefore reflects a whole spectrum of scholars, from those currently busy with their doctoral studies to those who have only recently completed their doctoral studies, to the names of established scholars and teachers of theology. As always, deciding which contributions to include or whom to approach was an exceedingly difficult task. In our choice we were, however, guided by what we set out to achieve with this

publication, as can be seen in its subtitle, namely to reflect on the aims, methodologies and some of the burning issues in public theology. But it is important to realise – a fact that will be clear from most contributions to this publication – that it is often almost impossible to reflect on an issue in public theology, such as economic justice, globalisation, gender issues, the environmental crisis, etc., without it having a direct influence on what is understood by the term public theology, its aims and the methodology that is most fitting in addressing the issue theologically. The opposite will prove equally true: To reflect on public theology's aims or methodologies, besides them being at issue in public theological circles, implies that it would have a significant influence on what are considered to be issues public theology needs to address. *On the whole, however, an attempt has been made to arrange the articles in this publication starting from those more explicitly concerned with the nature, aims and possible methodologies in public theology to those focusing more directly on specific issues in public theology, albeit with significant methodological and conceptual implications.*

In the first article Dirkie Smit addresses a foundational question in public theology. Foundational since – as Smit shows – before we can even begin to ask what we mean by public theology, the first part of this phrase is already open to a myriad of different possible meanings. By drawing especially on the thought of authoritative German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas's account of the development of and developments in the social sphere, and support or criticism of this view, Smit shows that the term “public” can be understood as having a variety of possible meanings. Then, considering the combination of “public” and “theology”, Smit narrows down the understanding of “public” to a “narrower, more specific meaning ... [as] a normative concept, designating an ideal that developed together with the typically Western democratic culture”, on the one hand and on the other as a “vaguer, more general meaning [of] public in public theology [as] ... merely a descriptive term” and he discusses the consequences of both meanings for our understanding of what public theology is.

In the next contribution Werner Wolbert asks why, for some thinkers, there is “something uncertain and debatable about the legitimate place and role of religion in the public sphere”. He suggests that the answer has to do with the universal reasonableness or not, and the universal communicability or not, of religious arguments. With this in mind, Wolbert discusses the reasons why particularly John Rawls and Robert Audi demand that religious arguments have to be kept out of public discussions. After addressing the idea of public reason and the differences between the ideal and the reality of public reason and consensus, Wolbert explores what exactly might be regarded as “religious reasons” and their relationship to “secular reasons”. He concludes by giving a series of considerations as to why religion in fact does or ought to have a role to play in the public sphere.

Clive Pearson's article, "Speaking of God ... Ballyhooing in public", deals with some of the issues addressed by Dirkie Smit and Werner Wolbert, and gives many concrete examples, especially with reference to statements made in the popular press. These include, for example, "[the] belief that matters of religion belonged to the private domain and should not be 'ballyhooed around in public'" and "[t]he prevailing secular belief ... that religion is the 'handmaid of inflexibility, arrogance, and intolerance'". Pearson therefore also explicitly asks, "Dare we speak of God in public?" And, while he compares it with the situation in and examples from the United Kingdom and the USA, he specifically asks this within his own context, that of modern-day Australia. In his article, "designed on the basis that a public theology does not just happen", he shows that in "a complex post-Christian society which prizes freedom and tolerance [such as Australian society] ... the Christian faith is one voice among many and is itself subject to considerable variation". However, he also maintains that "[t]here is a need to win the right to be heard" and makes suggestions as to why this right has to be won and, if it happens, how this right should be exercised.

Moving more explicitly into the arena of inner-theological debate, Max Stackhouse reflects not only on the "differences between three often-confused terms: 'civil religion', 'political theology,' and 'public theology,'" but also on the differences and similarities between public theology and systematic theology. He also argues that public theology

... is not simply the religious sentiments or experiences of a particular community, projected into the artifact of a cultural self-celebration, that is the source of normative thought and life, but ... it is a revelatory source that stands as the norm.

Stackhouse continues, however, that public theology

... sees this "top-down" reality as not having implications for the political order in the first instance, but first of all for inner personal convictions, the communities of faith, and the associations that they generate in an open society ... [and that] [t]he principles and purposes they advocate ... do not stay in the religious community or in private associations. They work their way through the convictions of the people and the policies of the multiple institutions of civil society where the people live and work and play, that make up the primary public realm.

It is exactly with reference to the relationship between inner convictions and experiences on the one hand and socio-political action on the other that the current author then asks for a re-appreciation, especially by Protestant theologians in

general and Reformed theologians in particular, of the value of the long mystical tradition in Christianity. With reference to a variety of so-called mystical-prophetic theologians of the 20th century, he investigates the relationship between the mystical and the political, and the latter's renewed interest in and appreciation of the former. This view of mysticism is also compared to developments in the understanding of mysticism amongst some of its leading scholars in order to ultimately test the truth of the controversial dictum of Charles Péguy that "[p]olitics begins in mysticism, and mysticism always ends in politics".

While the previous author focused on one aspect of the work off a number of theologians – the relationship between the mystical and political elements – the next three authors each focuses on one or more aspects of importance for public theology in the works of extremely influential theologians of the 20th century. With special reference to the theological influences on Karl Barth, Rothney Tshaka not only shows how Barth's theology "remains belligerently and unapologetically public", but also acknowledges the role it played in South Africa "during the church's struggle against the theological sanctioning of apartheid" and that Barth's theology remains useful also for democratic South Africa.

Frits de Lange focuses on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's contribution to public theology, especially in the light of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, which represented "the kind of theology that most of today's practitioners of public theology should like to develop". It does so by being both authentic theology ("not abstracted from the concrete personal life of the one who was doing it, but ... rooted in a powerful Christian engagement") and dialogical theology ("not an isolated product of the interior monologue of an academic theologian in a study, but the experimental and fragmentary result of an open process of questioning and response"), but also and above all, "a theology that spoke of God in the midst of life, not at its borders ... a theology that asked believers to live a worldly life without reservations and without the escape into what Bonhoeffer called: 'religion'."

Compared with the reception and influence of the thought of Barth and Bonhoeffer in South Africa, Clint Le Bruyns comments that the impact of Paul Tillich has been limited. He intends, however, "to draw renewed attention to the potential resourcefulness of Tillich's theological insights for understanding and engaging public challenges in contemporary society". Le Bruyns does this especially with reference to Tillich's notion of "theonomous culture" as a means to "facilitate an appreciation and recognition of how he [Tillich] attempts to correlate religious faith and secular life in a meaningful and propitious manner that might possibly assist the churches in their public agency today". Finally Le Bruyns also make some suggestions as to the possible implications of Tillich's public theology for South Africa as well as further afield.

James Cochrane takes us back in history to reflect on the aims and actions of the Christian Institute of Southern Africa (the CI), with which the name of Beyers Naudé, as one of its founders and its first and most famous director, is synonymous. Cochrane paints a picture of the CI as a “body in crisis – inserted into crisis; reacting to crisis; in the end, facing its own crisis”. It was a body “damned by some ... for doing what it did; and it would have been damned by others, those for whom its witness brought encouragement and hope, had it not done what it did”. For Cochrane, what the CI did do was to exemplify what public theology should be and by recalling this, it teaches contemporary public theologians important lessons on how to respond in the public arena to the manifold challenges facing our societies today.

Moving more explicitly in the direction of specific issues in public theology, the next contribution addresses one of the most important issues in public theology – that of the relationship between church and state. In fact, this issue to a greater or lesser extent stands in the background of all of the issues in public theology discussed in this volume. It also is an issue that is especially important for a nascent democracy with a Bill of Rights such as South Africa’s – that is one that guarantees freedom of religion for all its citizens. The question of the relationship between church and state in such a society is what Pieter Coertzen discusses, particularly with regard to the guidelines that churches in the Reformed tradition can and have used to clarify their position. Coertzen not only discusses in detail the most important guideline, namely the conviction that both church and state form part of the Kingdom of God on earth and are therefore both subject to the sovereignty of Christ; he also tests the ways in which three dominant views in history of the relationship between church and state acknowledges this conviction to a greater or lesser extent.

In his contribution Coertzen repeatedly states that it is important not only how churches view the state, but also that they should take cognisance of the way the state views their nature and their role in society. It is this consideration that comes to the fore especially clearly in David Pfrimmer’s article, which is embedded in his own context, Canada. Besides giving his personal reasons why it is important that churches take note of how the state views them, Pfrimmer also describes some of the popular perceptions of what the role of churches is in the public sphere. After giving a historical overview of how the role of churches in Canada has changed over three successive eras in Canadian political history (from 1535 to the 1970s), he shares the insights gained from research on the political expectations of four major Canadian political parties of the role of churches today. Finally, Pfrimmer makes suggestions as to the implications of these expectations for the relationship between church and state in Canada and suggests “a possible pastoral method for public ministry and strategies” which may clarify the role churches can play today in Canadian society, which is again undergoing profound changes.

The next two contributions both concern the issue of gender equality and the need for public theology to address it. Christina Landman explores the role of and need for women public theologians in South Africa. According to Landman, our society not only presents women in this capacity with a variety of bridge-building challenges, but also requires them to do so specifically by “embodying public theology”. This “method of embodiment” asks of women theologians

...on the one hand, to “give body” to issues ... putting these issues to flesh in liturgies, practices of care, legislation and so forth ... [but] [o]n the other hand, embodying also means to give body to issues starting from our bodily experiences. For instance, to embody HIV infection in a liturgy or a newspaper article, one needs to sing, dance or write from the bodily experiences of those infected.

This challenge to women public theologians is furthermore especially urgent, “[s]ince a majority of the suffering bodies in South Africa are female”. Therefore, Landman “... argues for the radical involvement of women theologians in embodying public theology”.

Miranda Pillay also addresses the issue of gender inequality, but focuses specifically on a challenge of the utmost urgency, especially in Africa and South Africa, namely that of the HIV/Aids pandemic. She endeavours to show that

[w]hile the HIV/Aids pandemic challenges Christian churches (and other faith communities) to respond to the needs of those persons infected and affected, it is also an (urgent) opportunity for Christians to reflect anew on how they see themselves in relation to God and to others.

As a New Testament scholar herself, Pillay then reflects on our relationship with God and others by searching for “a theology of gender equality and the plausibility of New Testament texts as a basis for gender equality” by referring especially to Vernon Robbins, a proponent of socio-rhetorical interpretation.

In his contribution Ernst Conradie states his conviction that “[t]here can be little doubt that environmental concerns will remain a crucial issue for public theology in the (South) African context in the foreseeable future”. However, he is also of the opinion that “this recognition cannot be taken for granted”. In explaining the latter conviction Conradie identifies certain important factors which influence the inclusion of environmental concerns on the social agenda of the church, including the church’s own culpability in environmental degradation and the relationship between the ecological crisis and other items on the agenda of public theology, such as political and economic injustice and inequalities. As a guideline for a public theological response to the ecological crisis, Conradie then analyses “four

dominant approaches within public theology in (South) Africa in response to environmental challenges”.

The final issue addressed in this volume concerns the role of public theology in the current debates on economic justice and economic globalisation. In the first contribution Ulrich Duchrow shares the insights developed over the past couple of years of a study group of which he is part, and which includes not only theologians but also psychologists and economists, on the controversial and detrimental consequences of globalised neo-liberal capitalism. Duchrow also argues that theology definitely has a place in addressing this issue. He then explains how theology can do so, especially by contributing to the promotion of society-wide resistance to the negative effects of neo-liberal capitalism by creating societies that are more fully human and therefore acting more in solidarity with one another.

Nico Koopman and Dirkie Smit discuss this issue by addressing questions such as whether the church and theology indeed have the responsibility to participate in the debates on economic justice and economic globalisation; what the unique contributions are that a theological perspective can bring to these debates; what guiding principles can be identified, especially how respect for human rights and human dignity can inform a public theological response to economic matters. The article also refers to the life of Beyers Naudé and finally makes some cursory remarks on how the Beyers Naudé Centre, together with other role players, wants to contribute towards addressing this issue.

The final words in this publication belong to Nico Koopman, who also is the current director of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology and the chairperson of the newly created Global Network for Public Theology. What has just been said about the aims and activities of the Beyers Naudé Centre with regard to the issues of economic justice and globalisation, Koopman discusses there on a much wider scale. He first draws on the insights of Dirkie Smit, as informed by Jürgen Habermas, on what constitutes the public sphere and identifies the different “publics” that the Beyers Naudé Centre addresses and also he explains the so-called Trinitarian approach followed at the Centre. According to this approach

[w]e reflect on the meaning, significance and implications of Trinitarian faith for public life ... [This] approach enables us to focus in a comprehensive albeit not exhaustive way on the story of God’s involvement with Israel, with Jesus Christ and the church through the ages; in fact, with the whole of creation. Whilst guarding against ethicising theology, and against inferring blueprints for public life from Trinitarian faith, we do explore the vision of public life that Trinitarian faith does offer.

Finally Koopman, in a very practical way, gives an overview of the Centre's activities, partnerships and programmes since 2002, and shows how the BNC

by following the path of Trinitarian faith, ecumenical and interfaith work ... dedicated and disciplined interdisciplinary and intra-disciplinary reflection, an ethos of dialogue, partnership, tolerance and embrace of the other, [endeavoured to] contribute to spreading the conviction that religion indeed can be and is good news for society.

Most books, even those by only one author, are seldom the result of one individual's efforts and this is especially true of a collection of essays such as this one. From the side of the Beyers Naudé Centre we therefore wish to thank AFRICA SUN MeDIA, and especially publisher Wikus van Zyl, for their ongoing support and the professional way in which they make the Beyers Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology possible. We also again want to express our most sincere appreciation for the financial assistance of *Kerkinactie*/Global Ministries of the United Protestant Church in the Netherlands, who were instrumental in making this publication a reality, as was the case with the first two volumes in this series.

Finally and most importantly: to all contributors to this volume, a word of heartfelt gratitude for taking the time to share your thoughts and expertise with our readers and with us. Thank you for your efforts to teach us in this book how we should speak, to whom we should speak, when we should speak, about what we should speak, what we should say and with what kind of authority we can speak in our own efforts to be Christian in public.

LEN HANSEN

Stellenbosch, May 2007

WHAT DOES “PUBLIC” MEAN? QUESTIONS WITH A VIEW TO PUBLIC THEOLOGY

Dirkie Smit¹

WHAT DOES “PUBLIC” MEAN?

Over the past two decades the term “public theology” has become increasingly popular. However, it has not always been very clear what is meant by it. Both those practising public theology as well as those criticising the notion of public theology often seem not to be altogether sure what they are referring to.

This lack of clarity is related to a *variety of possible issues*. One issue, for example, is whether public theology wants to be a specific form of theology distinct from others, which would then apparently *not* be public. For this reason, for instance, the focus often is on the possible similarities and differences between public theology, political theology, social ethics, civil religion or other related approaches and methods. Furthermore, if public theology does indeed want to be a form of theology, in what way can it or does it want to be public? For this reason questions are often raised as to the public impact of theology and theologians, their social role and function and exactly whom they address.

One may also ask for example, what exactly is the relationship between public theology and the so-called public church. During the last two decades the latter term has become equally well-known and popular. This is why the public place and role of the different social forms of the church – worship services, congregations, denominations, the church in its ecumenical form, the faithful – are often reflected upon and along with this the possible role that theology plays in and through these social manifestations of the church.

The above approaches can indeed be useful when greater clarity is sought on what public theology is and wants to achieve. However, another possible way to achieve clarification would simply be to reflect on what is meant by the term “public”. Perhaps much of the confusion regarding the concept becomes even more apparent with the ambiguity this seemingly simple term evinces when used in combination

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with the word “theology”. Perhaps when using “public” in this way, people are talking at cross-purposes because they hear different nuances. They might even have different presuppositions regarding “public” or attach completely different meanings to the term. So, what do we mean by “public” in the expression “public theology”?

HABERMAS AND “THE STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE”

In reflecting on the meaning of the term “public”, the thought of the authoritative German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas may provide a useful point of departure. Already in the 1960s Habermas published an influential study entitled *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962). It was translated into English some thirty years later as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1989), long after it already had far-reaching effects in scholarly circles. It might help to relate the story as told by Habermas here in very simple terms – not to do justice to his argument in any way but merely to draw attention, in an extremely simplified manner, to a number of enduring and fundamental questions regarding the so-called “public sphere”.

Since their first appearance both Habermas’s historical reconstruction as well as his systematic intentions have been subjects of intense debate worldwide. These reflections furthermore proved to be only the first steps in Habermas’s intellectual programme. Over time the latter would develop profoundly, increasingly employing categories other than “the public sphere” to address the same issues as those in this earlier work.

Still, a greatly simplified version of some of the main points in Habermas’s early study remains useful to open one’s eyes to issues and choices regarding the term “public” – a term often used without thinking twice or without appreciating its complexity.

The subtitle of Habermas’s study – *An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* – already makes it clear that his investigation is into so-called civil society. It concerns the kind of society that typically developed in Western countries during the *modern age*. This is already an important insight. Used in a narrower, more technical sense “public” therefore refers to something that concerns developments characteristic of the Western world and in a specific era. The structural changes that Habermas describes – according to the title – therefore led to the development of something in Western societies that could be described with the term “public”. It was something that did not exist in a similar way earlier. In time it became increasingly threatened and finally in all respects it disappeared, or at least it no longer exists or functions in the way that it used to at a certain stage according to

his version of the story. Yet again quite a number of presuppositions and assumptions are hidden within this point of view, all of which raise profound questions regarding our use of the term "public".

The very specific use of the term "public" mentioned above calls forth many *questions*. If "public" in this technical sense of the word developed only relatively late in Western societies, what had been the case in earlier times? What is the case in other communities and societies in other parts of the world and in other cultures? Has there never elsewhere existed a "public sphere" and does it not exist currently, at least in *this* technical sense of the word? Furthermore, if "public" in this technical sense becomes a normative term, a term laden with value judgements and ideals for social and political life, does it follow that the Christian gospel, church and theology are called to help serve and promote these ideals and values if it represents such a recent and particular development? Can one in any legitimate way speak of public theology if it implies normative ideals for civil and social life, and expect the church and theology to support them? Would this imply that the gospel, church and theology should be at the service of the historical project of Western developments? Above all, if "public" in this technical sense is increasingly threatened and replaced with something else, does it follow that church and theology should be at the service of defending these norms and values? In short, should church and theology be at the service of the cause and future of this kind of public? Would public theology then normatively imply that the calling of the church and of theology is inextricably interwoven with the unfinished task and, according to some, threatened future of modernity? To find some answers to these questions, let us listen more closely to the story Habermas tells.

HABERMAS'S ACCOUNT OF THE RISE AND FALL OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

According to his story, before the rise of modern societies, there existed no public sphere in the sense that we know it today. Terms employed in languages such as English, French, German, Dutch and Afrikaans that all have to do with the root "public" or "publicity" only developed their current meanings and usages since the 17th and 18th centuries. This happened much faster or slower in different countries, depending on the social and political shifts that occurred and necessitated the development and uses of these kinds of terms. Broadly speaking, the following are the outlines of the story. Life in the world – what today we would call public life – was mainly characterised by power relations. Powerful people and institutions – especially political, but also religious – determined the contours and practices of life. However, since the 13th century an early form of commercial capitalism developed. With it the seeds were sown that, over centuries, gradually undermined existing power relations. This deprived them of their hold and almost natural quality, and hence profoundly transformed the way of life in these

societies. Over time two factors would play an especially decisive role in this transformation, namely the flow of commerce and communication – both will remain important motifs to keep in mind later in this discussion.

Since the 16th century economic realities in particular changed increasingly. Commercial companies were formed that required political support to protect and promote their business ventures. In return they paid taxes and gradually what we today regard as nations and nation states came into existence. The latter were therefore at their core originally tax states so that the modern form of state and so-called early capitalism developed simultaneously and concurrently. In other words, as both political as well as economic life started to change dramatically, so did the lives of people living together. It is again very important to see how these two aspects are bound together in forming the kind of life that people lead together, namely what we know and describe today as *politics* and the *economy*.

However, gradually and inevitably what we today know and call *civil society* also began to develop. The new form of state and economy needed a different kind of citizen. For the first time newspapers appeared, at first weekly and since the beginning of the 17th century even daily. The so-called public targeted as readers by these first newspapers did not really include all people or citizens, but rather only the more sophisticated and educated classes. The initial double purpose of these newspapers was, on the one hand, to relate commercial news to merchants and potential buyers (thus serving economic power) and, on the other hand, to make the will of the political powers more widely known (thus serving political power). In short, there really was no question of a citizenry being empowered by the new emergent press to develop its own social voice. Rather, the first citizens were mainly the early classes of capitalists and government functionaries.

The situation began to change only in the last third of the 17th century. This happened with the emergence of a critical group of citizens who held their own opinions. These opinions were sometimes referred to as the private sphere and sometimes called public opinion or the public sphere – this ambiguity, namely that the same reality can be referred to as both “private” and “public”, depending on the perspective involved, continues in the common usage of these terms up to this day. The role of the press then changed towards being a more pedagogical or educational one. Magazines were published for the first time. This novel kind of publication promoted a new kind of public by supplying information, helping to form critical opinions, carrying reviews, in short, by critically challenging the legitimacy of political and economic powers. For the first time terms such as *public*, *publicity* and *public opinion* began to appear. From now on one could speak of a true interplay of three instead of merely two forces: the state (regardless of the way it was organised), the economy (regardless of the form it took) and a critical public opinion (regardless of the fact that it was still in its infancy, regardless of its

unrepresentative nature, and regardless of the fact that it could be described as both the public sphere or the private sphere).

What initially had been somewhat undeveloped gradually grew to become a greater and more significant reality – this was always connected to specific social locations, social spaces, institutions, practices, where this new informed and critical public opinion was formed, nurtured and gradually became more and more strongly established. In England and France, for example, the so-called coffee houses and salons played a significant role in this regard. In these social institutions all were regarded as equals, regardless of their status, descent or positions of economic or political power. Here all could exchange opinions freely, inform others and be informed by them. Here they could develop their own critical insights as well as a common public opinion by way of intense conversations. The development of this new conversation community not based on existing power, influence and status will again prove important for systematic considerations later on.

During that period learning was increasingly celebrated, especially in the form of literacy. Works of art were published, reviewed and critically discussed as part of that emerging and growing public (or private) exchange of opinions. A high premium was placed on debate and rationality, and the power of information and argument. Until the beginning of the 19th century journalism developed more and more as an autonomous sphere. With it emerged a new so-called middle class. Gradually the right to vote and that participation in public life was extended to growing groups of people, albeit at a different pace in different Western countries. During that time publicity for the sake of influencing public opinion developed as a counterforce against the secrecy of state and politics. The middle class was purposefully informed in order to assist public opinion in questioning and criticising public actions. What we know as democracy in fact underwent a structural transformation during that period.

Of course, the fundamental views – some might say of philosophers and cultural critics – on how that history had to be interpreted and those developments had to be judged, whether it had to be opposed or promoted, strongly differed during those centuries. The writings and debates by well-known social thinkers – for example, Locke and Mill, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx as well as, for instance, De Tocqueville – are all related to these developments. Hegel, for example, refers to the internal tensions that grew between different classes in societies in which this kind of democracy is found. According to him, civil democracy is in fact a democracy for the minority because of the strong social hierarchy. Marx is highly critical of precisely this feature. He argues that the state continues to serve only the interests of the holders of private property and not of the whole of society. For him,

therefore, the state remains an instrument of domination over the entire population despite, and even because of, partial fragmented public opinion.

According to Habermas's account, this situation changed with the rise of liberalism. With the immense extension of voting rights since the 19th century, the principle of true publicity – here his view of a normative notion of rational, informed and critical public opinion, formed by intense conversation and the exchange of arguments, becomes particularly clear – was exchanged or even renounced for the sake of wider but less meaningful representation. One could say that, while publicness gained in quantity, it lost in quality. What was called public opinion from then on seems to have succumbed increasingly to pressures toward conformity – “most people think this way and therefore everybody has to think this way”. Public opinion was no longer a rational and critical force based on the information people possessed and their profound exchanges of opinion without fear of coercion by economic or political powers. In short, from this point of view, with the increased extension of the right to vote to more, and later to all, adult persons the ideal of truly critical and rational discussion was increasingly lost.

At the end of the 19th century even that liberal age came to an end in some societies with the rise of so-called late capitalism. Born of the fear of and reaction to economic distress in the wake of the great depressions, public opinion and personal liberties were sacrificed for the sake of greater protectionism by politics, by increased concentration on the immutable laws and demands of the economy, and state intervention in the interest of the economy. The implications of that for the so-called public sphere were significant. Habermas's story also is exceedingly critical of those developments, especially because his normative view of the public sphere is fundamentally threatened by them. The so-called public was increasingly turned into consumers of culture, rather than being the voice critical of culture that they, the real public, are supposed to be. This shift is of pivotal importance in Habermas's critical analysis of contemporary democracies, which he typifies as false democracies or pseudo-democracies.

The so-called public news reported in the public media as well as the nature of the public media themselves also change radically. Both became subservient to the ideology of the economic and the administrative systems, and thus in turn to the economic and political forces in society. They are used to delude people into thinking what they are supposed to think. No longer do they empower people with relevant information in order to discuss it critically and eventually to come to a conviction and opinion *themselves* and *together*. In this way the public sphere in fact becomes a sphere of publicity, of advertising, of influencing and persuasion, of dictating and deluding. The role of the press, as the actual driving force that enables public debate and in this way serves democracy, has thus changed drastically. Public dialogue has disappeared and with it real substantive

democracy is exchanged for what Habermas calls a merely formal democracy. People have the right to vote, but nothing more. Public opinion no longer plays a criticising role; in fact it is no longer formed at all. In truth, political parties tell people what they should believe and think, and the real decisions are no longer taken in public in order to be discussed and, if need be, criticised.

In summary, the real discussions take place in the backrooms of the politically and economically powerful, and the public media are used as a conduit for information to ordinary people to keep them satisfied with these decisions. Transparency and rationality are lost, and with them true democracy and an effective public sphere.

HABERMAS'S LATER ANALYSES

To understand Habermas's own thoughts on this issue one cannot end here, but one also has to consider his *later works*, over decades, on the subject. With new terminology and other themes and approaches, he continued to advocate the same ideals.

First of all, Habermas wrote much on the promotion of a society built on *rationality* and not on false democracy and manipulation. One example of this is his collection of essays *Toward a Rational Society* (in German, 1962). Because rationality plays such a pivotal role in the modern project, as he understands it, Habermas analyses and criticises perceptions of what constitutes scientific character, perceptions of knowledge and perceptions of rationality. He does so especially with those perceptions that became popular in societies driven and formed by so-called technical rationality and not by rationality understood as inter-human conversation and debate, the kind of rationality that is intended to promote ideals of freedom and liberation, humaneness and dignity. This he does, for example, in *Knowledge and Human Interest* (in German, 1968). Habermas also wrote essays, such as those in *Legitimation Crisis* (in German, 1973), on the legitimacy crises faced by political power in late-capitalistic societies, because they were not really founded on the consent of informed citizens who had had the opportunity to engage freely in debate on the foundations of their communal life. *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (1979, selected essays in German from various works) is a collection of his essays on the necessity for, and simultaneous lack of, criticism or of a critical public opinion, and on the changing role of culture and cultural organisations, when the public is reduced to being mere consumers of culture and is ideologically manipulated.

Besides the abovementioned works, Habermas also gradually developed his main work, the comprehensive two volumes bearing the title *The Theory of Communicative Action* (in German, 1981). From the title it can already be surmised that he here uses theory of language, or more specifically speech theory, according

to which speech is perceived as a form of human action, to pursue these same normative ideals. According to him speech is an absolutely fundamental form of human action; it is what actually distinguishes human beings as human. There are, however, different ways of speaking with others. Amongst these, one way occupies a very basic and special place, namely true *communication*, i.e. a form of speech that will attempt to address others, that respects the others as subjects and tries to persuade others by way of arguments. At its core human speech is aimed at this true communication. Living together with other people is based upon it and Habermas is therefore convinced that our societies should likewise be based on it.

Fundamental to his theory is his conviction that in all our speech acts that aim at communicating with others we implicitly make *four basic claims*, all of which can be verified in different ways. We claim that what we say is *understandable*. We claim that the other can *hear* what we say and *knows* what we say, because the words we use and the way in which we use them convey the same content as others understand them to do. Surely no true communication transpires if we say one thing but others hear something different?

When we communicate, we also make a claim as to the *correctness* or accuracy of what we say. This can be verified by others through their establishing whether it is in accordance with the true facts, the state of affairs, whether what we say reflects objective reality, that things truly are the way we say they are. If we allege one thing, but the facts differ from this in reality, it was surely also not true communication that transpired between us, but rather efforts at concealment or deception.

Furthermore, when we communicate we make a claim to *truth*, i.e. that what we say makes good sense, that it fits in with what we all know, that it complies with everybody's convictions and best interests. We claim that *at this moment* what we say is indeed the sensible opinion to hold with regard to *this* issue. In other words, what we say is the truth in terms of mutual and social relations. Even in biblical traditions the truth, such as that of true prophecy, always has to do with the truth for that particular moment. Is it not the case that even false prophecy can apparently make true pronouncements – peace! peace! – without it being the true message for that specific moment?

Finally, when we communicate we eventually also make a claim of *genuineness*. We claim to be true, honest and sincere in what we say. With it we claim that we can be trusted, that we have good intentions and that what we say is also in the best interests of the other. If not, our speech is surely not true communication. Will it not then amount to a form of fraud, an attempt at deception, abuse and manipulation? Will it not be driven by secret self-interest, then, and therefore be ideological, insincere and in that sense false?

According to Habermas, if societies want to be true democracies, they have to be founded on rational communication. This will include public conversation regarding the communal weal and woe, regarding the so-called common good, and it will comply with the abovementioned four criteria of true communication. Do we understand another, and do we have the same information at our disposal? Are we all clear on what is at stake or are we speaking at cross-purposes? Does what we say correspond with the true state of affairs? Does what we say accord with the facts? Do we all realise what the consequences of our decisions and actions will be, or are we being misled by incomplete or false information? Is what we say or suggest and would like to do indeed the true, appropriate and sensible opinion? Is it the suitable and best way to proceed, and do we indeed agree on it, or do some of us have the influence and power to force and manipulate others to do our bidding and to promote the particular interests of our own group? Are our motives honest and sincere? Are we not resorting to abuse and unfair influence by way of ideological language and thereby presenting things as they are not, in order to serve our own interests and ourselves?

It is not very difficult to understand how Habermas can develop and apply his comprehensive theory of communicative action to advocate the same normative ideal of a rational and democratic public sphere that he had earlier, in *Structural Transformation*, distilled from historical developments. Indeed he does this very explicitly, applying it to the public sphere in various other works, such as *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (in German, 1983) and *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction* (in German, 1984).

Habermas would, however, gradually go even further by developing his so-called *discourse ethic*, for example in *Justification and Application* (in German, 1992) and *Between Facts and Norms* (in German, 1992), especially by applying it to the administration of justice in the latter work. He purposefully follows the tradition of Immanuel Kant and his view of the Enlightenment, according to which ethical questions cannot be answered substantively or according to their content, but merely formally or procedurally. Put differently, Kant and Habermas – given their point of departure of trust placed in the universal nature of human reason – by definition do not want to state on behalf of others what is right or wrong, good or bad, but rather leave such decisions to the rationality of people themselves. Kant still had faith in every individual's reason and every individual's ability to perceive and know what is right and what is wrong, thanks to the categorical imperative operative in every person's conscience. In the case of Habermas, one could rather say that trust is placed in humanity's common rationality and ability to discover *together* what is good and bad by way of true conversation. Kant's individual (with his or her knowledge of what is right) makes way for Habermas's discourse, dialogue and true conversation (which leads to a collective discovery of what is right).

Of course, the key to Habermas's view is to be found in what should be understood by "true conversation". With this we return to his views on the public sphere, on true democracy, or what he would call in his later work "discourse", i.e. the coercion-free discourse or the ideal speech situation. In the latter the four requirements of true communication – comprehensibility, correctness, truth, genuineness – are met and consequently people can debate and discern *together* what will be in the best interest of all.

In even later works Habermas applied these insights *time and again to other issues*, but he always held the same basic convictions that had already appeared in *Structural Transformation*. As can be seen in, for example, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (in German, 1985) and *The Unfinished Project of Modernity* (in German, 1990), for him this is simply the necessary continuation of the modern, since the modern at its core is based on the promotion of public rationality, which is the only possible way towards true democracy. For example, in *The Inclusion of the Other* (in German, 1996) Habermas explicitly argues for the inclusion of the so-called "other" in this conversation and considers quite concretely the nature of such inclusion and the real problems that prevail today with regard to this matter. He also applies this in a very practical manner, to questions concerning international law, the so-called universality of human rights and practical problems regarding democracy during the unification of Europe, as well as to the effect of economic globalisation on nation states and their political role and power. This is the case in, for instance, *The Postnational Constellation* (in German, 1998) and *The Divided West* (in German, 2004). Finally, Habermas also applies these insights to the issue of secularisation and morality, for example in his sensational debate with Cardinal Ratzinger (as the present Pope was still known at that stage) in *The Dialectics of Secularization* (in German, 2005).

CRITICISM OF HABERMAS'S ACCOUNT AND ANALYSES

The objective of this introduction, however, is not simply to elucidate Habermas. It is to come, by way of his influential thought, to an understanding in simple terms and in broad outlines of what happens when the terms "public" and "public sphere" are used in a fairly technical sense. What happens is that all kinds of assumptions and presuppositions come into play that are all related to the development of modern Western societies and to Western democracy. Before some of these questions can be introduced, it might be helpful to keep in mind that Habermas's project was also subjected to criticism from all sides and for a variety of reasons. This *criticism* can indeed help clarify the (complex and controversial) meaning of the term "public" even further.

Put in very simple terms, one might summarise the criticism against Habermas as disagreement with him regarding the *past*, the *present* as well as the *future*.

With regard to the *past* some are of the opinion that Habermas constructs an idealised picture of a so-called public of informed citizens and of rational debate that never really existed in that way. They say that he idealises the heyday of civil life, simultaneously being unnecessarily negative about the transformations that occurred – seen by him as decay, disintegration and renouncement of the rational and democratic project of the modern.

Regarding the *present* some deem Habermas – still because of his normative ideal – as not having sufficient insight into what is actually happening in the public sphere. First of all it is said that Habermas completely misreads the flourishing of the public media and especially the *mass media* and that he views their role much too negatively. Many communication experts choose, rather, to point out the positive role that the electronic mass media, for example, play in spreading information and in promoting the common good. These debates on the exact role and function of the mass media in the contemporary world and their potential moral responsibilities are, of course, highly controversial. Without at all trying to relate the details of these debates here, it is of great importance to realise that in many places around the world today it has become impossible to reflect on the public, publicity, the public sphere and public opinion without also thoroughly taking into account the function of the mass media.

Critical questions are often raised as to whether the mass media do indeed spread the necessary information that helps to form critical public opinion or whether entertainment and consumption do not actually determine their function and content. In other words, the question is raised whether the public media aren't often at the service of economic and direct financial interests. After all, one of Habermas's central criticisms is that the social world in which people live is being colonised by the economy, i.e. that it is being occupied as if by a foreign power, compelled to speak the language of the economy and to live according to its values and serve its interests. In practice this raises questions about whether people are not guided by the logic and values of the economic sphere also in other social spheres of life, for example, in the educational sphere (school and university), the religious sphere (congregation and denomination), or the sphere of sport and recreation (professionalism and profit), rather than by considerations proper to these specific spheres. Thus the same kind of critical questions are being asked with regard to the potential role the mass media could play or actually do play.

Furthermore, critical questions are often raised as to whether the mass media indeed help in the formation of independent opinions. Aren't they often and in many places – either consciously or not – at the service of the ruling political and ideological powers? If this is the case, it would mean that the mass media are then engaged in propaganda, using ideological language. Then they suggest what discourses are necessary, permissible and sensible, instead of helping to create the

spaces and possibilities where informed and critical public discourse can occur. Many analyses, including those by prominent media experts – one only has to be reminded of Neil Postman’s sensational *Amusing ourselves to death!* – are exceedingly critical of the abilities and the will of the mass media to help serve really independent thought today.

Above all, it is said that Habermas could not, in his analyses during the early 1960s, foresee the rise of current technology, the internet, direct and immediate world-wide communication, the cell phone with its still unimaginable possibilities, the *interactivity of the web* and everything connected with it. These critics say that Habermas’s analyses of what constitutes the “public” therefore is simply no longer valid, because reality has already changed again radically. His analyses were already out of place and outdated in an era of analogical communication; in an era of digital communication they simply no longer make sense. It is claimed that it does not make sense to hanker after the coffee houses and salons at a time when internet cafes have become the new metaphor for inter-human encounters and communication. The future no longer lies in direct and personal face-to-face communication. The question has now become how we communicate with those who are absent, the invisible ones, the anonymous ones, the virtual ones.

Of course, opinions again differ on how this new reality should be analysed and evaluated. Others think that the development of these technologies merely presents yet another illustration of the correctness of Habermas’s views on the transformation of the public sphere. He was completely right in his negative judgment, they say – and current developments show yet again, superlatively, the extent to which he was right, because the decline of rationality and of the real formation of public opinion is becoming *more and more* apparent. Others, again, are of the opinion that current interactive world-wide communication creates new possibilities for empowerment, conversation and forming of opinions which in fact improves rather than weakens the quality of public opinion. Here too it is not necessary to go into the merits of the various arguments themselves. One merely has to look at the profound structural transformations of the public sphere that are taking place because of, for example, the internet and cell phones, and the almost unimaginable possibilities they present. Whoever is interested in the way that public opinion is formed will have to take these transformations into account.

There are also many differences of opinion about the *future* or, to put it differently, about what should be done with a view to the future. For many of Habermas’s critics his analyses are not sufficient and his proposals are too idealistic, impractical and simply *not feasible*. The kind of public sphere he idealises – the coercion-free discourse conducted in an ideal speech situation between equal participants with equal information and influence and without regard to their own interests – never existed and does not exist. Even more than this, it *cannot exist*. It

simply cannot be put into practice and become a part of real everyday life. Such public spaces, places and opportunities do not exist, his critics claim, and it would be futile to hope that they might be created. It remains a difficult question how to interpret Habermas on this point. Many people say in his defence that he is, of course, fully aware that such ideals, such rational and democratic discourses do not in fact exist or cannot exist. They say that his actual point is rather that this is the implicit ideal present in every speech act, in every conversation and in every piece of public debate and decision making. Simply put, they say that what Habermas means is that, even if we cannot fully realise it, it ought to be the critical ideal we strive for, in all our conversations and debate and in our public life. *This* kind of coercion-free dialogue ought to be present in our consciousness and in our aspirations. We ought always to regard others in this way and we should therefore include them in our conversations and discourses. We ought to aspire to rational persuasion and not to coercion or manipulation, etc. Put differently, Habermas did not mean that places such as these actually had been created and that conversations such as these indeed take place, but that in *all* spaces and in *all* conversations these ideals should inspire us.

Still others are critical of Habermas's aspirations and of the suggestions he makes with a view to the future, not because they believe them to be unrealistic or unattainable, but because they simply disagree with him. Many critics simply *do not* share his normative vision. They do not agree with the values he pursues. Some critics, for example, find him far too *rationalistic*. They find the emphasis on reason one-sided and excessive, and are of the opinion that Habermas reduces humankind to much less than what it in fact is. They say that in the process he does not take into account many factors that are of equal importance for human co-existence and for human society. Many of the key terms that have become popular nowadays in social theory and cultural analysis are almost completely absent in his account and analysis – corporeality, practices, desire, representation, images and brands, iconicity, entertainment, enjoyment, consumption – in short, everything symbolic, irrational, emotional, everything to do with passion and instinct, with body and feeling. According to these critics, the story as told by Habermas simply does not reflect the social realities of life today. People are not solely rational beings, nor is our life together like that.

Yet other critics find Habermas's emphasis on language, communication, discourse, conversation, argumentation and debate one-sided and excessive. They accuse him of implicit *logocentrism*, of having too much respect for the word and for communication. They are of the opinion that human intercourse and co-existence, and accordingly also human society itself, is much richer than when it is perceived as merely discursively constituted, by what we argue about, discuss and agree on. A particular aspect of this critique is, for example, that Habermas underestimates existing gulfs of injustice and inequality. According to these critics,

his ethics of mutual respect for and of listening to one another does not leave enough room for systemic and structural interventions and changes. Only through such actions can power relations be transformed, before coercion-free dialogue can even begin to take place at all. Feminists, amongst others, stress this point in their criticism of Habermas's "totalising ethics of inclusivity".

Still other critics find Habermas's point of departure – i.e. that consensus has to be reached, that common interests have to be promoted, that persuasion and agreement have to occur – all too naïve and idealistic. They believe that the power of differences of opinion and *conflict is underestimated* by Habermas. They feel that he over-simplifies the complexity of current reality through his emphasis on rational discourse and intellectual agreement. They are also convinced that he thinks much too globally and too little locally, not acknowledging sufficiently that local contradictions, inequalities and tensions are part of life. They cannot be resolved or do not need to be resolved. Instead, they function creatively as conflict. These critics therefore wish to keep on speaking of "publics" in the plural rather than always of "the public" in the singular, as if something like such a phenomenon exists or ought to exist. For them continued conflict and contestation better accounts for the true nature of the public agenda.

It is clear that all such critics – who wish to place less value on rationality, discursivity, persuasion and fair procedures for conflict resolution – will view the *medial world* we are increasingly living in more positively than Habermas. They can appreciate the fact that our life together can be mediated by means other than rational debate and persuasion, without perceiving today's developments as an impoverishing deviation from a more ideal style of communication from a bygone modern era.

Habermas naturally also has eminent supporters who plead for renewed efforts to promote forms of "reflective democracy" in today's world. In other words, they plead for the strengthening of a public sphere in which public opinion can grow by way of information and debate, critical reflection and discourse – and this at a time when globalisation, economic colonisation of our social world, and a medial culture threaten to radically overwhelm rationality and democracy. Of course, for these supporters of Habermas the questions raised by this state of affairs are first of all *practical questions* that concern the way in which this can be done: where can one still find and create such public spaces for reflective democracy today?

Together with this, many of them also raise the *ethical question* of why people would join such coercion-free debates at all. Why would they forsake their own interests for the sake of the greater well-being and the so-called common good? This, of course, is a question with which Habermas has occupied himself intensely over the years with the distinctions he has made between law, ethics and morality, and also in his conversation with Cardinal Ratzinger. It is almost as if he has faith

in the goodness of people and their willingness to become part of such rational conversations, built on procedural justice as a remnant of the emancipatory ideals he initially held so dear as an adherent of so-called critical theory. However, even some social thinkers who agree with Habermas and share his vision are conscious of the profound problems this presents, namely that people have to be motivated to pursue this kind of public justice rather than only pursue their own interests. No wonder that Habermas in recent years increasingly reflects on human nature, that he speaks of the limitations of secularisation theories. No wonder that he also points toward the necessary contribution that religion can make towards public discourse – because religion, for example, has at its disposal a language with which to speak of sin, something which is otherwise impossible but seems essential for public life today, according to him.

QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS STORY

It is now finally possible to formulate *some* questions with regard to public theology *if* the adjective "public" is *understood* in such a *technical sense* of the word. It is after all often the case that public theology is indeed being used in this narrow and very specific meaning, in the sense of Habermas's "category of civil society". This is indeed how many people, supporters as well as critics, understand public theology. For these people, therefore, public theology has more or less the same meaning as Benjamin Franklin already in 1749 assigned to "public religion". Public theology is then inextricably connected to these ideals of a public sphere in which informed citizens form a public opinion by way of rational debate, which is potentially critically disposed towards institutions of political and economic power, and in this way tries to promote the common good or wellbeing. In short, it is then used as a normative concept, closely related to the ideals of Western democracy. It aims at the promotion of democratic values and is based on, among other things, the responsible role the public press and media have to play in the process. It is clear that such public religion and public theology have a definite *agenda*: they are at the service of the promotion of the common good in a specific society.

It is also no wonder that such views of public theology are often extremely closely intertwined with identity-constituting and identity-strengthening processes. This is often referred to as nation building. In the case of Habermas himself, he gradually began to speak of constitutional patriotism. By this he meant that the public that is served and the identity that is sought is the nation that is connected by a common loyalty to the constitution, which for Habermas expresses the fundamental values of human dignity and respect, and forms the centrepiece of this modern project. Also, in young democracies such as South Africa there are numerous people who are enthusiastic about nation building. They view loyalty to the constitution and

the value of human dignity entrenched in it and its bill of human rights as the highest good. For them the task of religion in the country is to assist in the promotion and strengthening of these loyalties, and they would therefore understand the task of theology – if they are interested in it at all – to be public theology in this sense of the word, i.e. as the promotion of the nation and the common values contained in the constitution. In this way public theology acquires a clear agenda or programme which is inextricably bound to the realisation of the ideals of modern, Western democratic values in that specific society. In terms also employed by Habermas, for example, but which in South Africa are also generally used: it is the task, then, of such public theology to promote tolerance, to help serve a democratic political culture, to plead for a politics of recognition of the other, in short, to stand for *human dignity* and *justice*.

A similar ideal was formulated classically in Robert Bellah's famous version of *civil religion*. It was the cause of much reflection in sociological circles about two decades ago, especially in the USA. The term was soon used in a variety of different ways, from analytical to prescriptive, from negative and critical to positive and descriptive. Such was the extent of the radical plurality of uses of the term that it led to its losing its poignancy and falling into misuse. Its original meaning was a positive description of the religiosity which bound the American people together as a nation. As Bellah showed in his original contribution, this kind of religion was used particularly by American presidents in key speeches as a description of the transcendental values, sense of calling, historical self-consciousness and vision of the future that justified the American nation in almost religious terms. The conviction that this *civil religion* does not belong to any specific church tradition, but is something in common, something national, something above the particularity of specific denominations and groups – in fact, perhaps *no* religion at all in the normal sense of the word – was a fundamental part of this description.

In 1981 Martin Marty wrote his influential study *The Public Church*, in particular because he wanted to break away from this distinction between *civil religion* and the churches. Marty chose to use the term *public church* to describe more or less the same phenomenon as Bellah did, but with greater acknowledgement of the role and calling of churches. Following Marty, public theology then also became a popular designation used in the same spirit. For Marty *public church* and *public theology* refer to the churches in America, especially the three dominant groupings, namely mainstream Protestantism, evangelical Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, to the extent that they allow their religious convictions regarding the values of justice and the common good to critically inform their social practices and cultural views and conceptions. Put differently, *public church* and *public theology*, according to this view, refer to church and theology participating in the public discourse on the nature and calling of the nation in the light of transmitted

democratic values and aspirations. Yet again it is clear that this *public church* and this public theology have their own agenda, namely promotion of the democratic way of life, the common good and so-called civic virtues.

It is interesting that Habermas *himself* – at least for the greatest part of his career – did not share this view of religion, church and theology. For many years he did not really concern himself with religion and did not view it as important in his analyses of society. Later he was obliged to acknowledge that the best reception of his work occurred amongst theologians. However, he himself was not convinced that theology could serve the ideals and values of civil democracy. Habermas's reason for this is quite remarkable. He thought that, by doing so, theology would threaten its own integrity. He believed that this would inevitably happen since, in order to really serve that public conversation, one had to suspend one's personal moral views. One had to concentrate on purely procedural justice, not on the contents of justice and morality. Since this would inevitably require such radical translation of religious content into language, values and concepts accessible and acceptable to all people, according to Habermas, theology could not do that yet still remain theology. It would amount to the betrayal of its own origins and nature. One might therefore say that, in Habermas's opinion, public theology – in this technical sense of the word, i.e. theology in the service of the public project of modern Western democracy – would remain a contradiction in terms and a practical impossibility without sacrificing its specific nature.

Many theologians differed from him on this point. At a famous symposium organised by the well-known practical theologian Don Browning a number of prominent thinkers, including David Tracy and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, made it clear that they were convinced that public theology was in fact possible in this technical sense of the word. This was because they believed that the democratic values that Habermas referred to were not foreign to the Christian tradition and faith. They also claimed that public dialogue seldom involved matters of procedure only. Participants could indeed bring their own traditions, convictions and values into the conversation as part of their rational arguments and negotiations, even if those had been translated to such an extent that what remained of them was "a thin layer of content" only.

Perhaps these conversations with public theologians did have some effect on Habermas, because he definitely changed his tune radically over time. This was evident, for example, from his speech when he was awarded the German Book Trade Peace Prize in Frankfurt in 2001. In it and also since then he makes it abundantly clear that he now thinks differently about secularisation and about the place and task of religion and theology in public life. His public conversation with the then) Cardinal Ratzinger similarly speaks of his new understanding of the

necessary and unique contribution that religion and theology can make to public life and the common good, to human dignity and to peace.

It is equally interesting that probably the most important alternative position to that of Habermas's social thought in German sociological circles, the system of the influential Niklas *Luhmann*, also cannot really find room for public theology in this technical sense of the word. Luhmann is equally well-known for his famous analyses of modern societies. However, unlike Habermas's so-called critical-emancipatory thought, i.e. thought that purposefully thinks within the framework of values, Luhmann stands in the tradition of a radical separation between thought and values. He has no normative vision of society that he wants to promote; he merely wants to analyse and describe how societies function. For this reason his thought is more static and lacks any deliberate orientation towards the future.

According to Luhmann, modern societies exist and should be understood in terms of independent subsystems of communication. One subsystem cannot intervene or try to influence another and society as a whole functions more effectively to the degree that every subsystem operates according to its own function. Religion also forms a separate subsystem with its own self-referential meaning and sense. Religion is communication on religion (for Luhmann: on transcendence and immanence). This religion has to do as effectively as possible; therefore, religion should therefore not try to interfere in other subsystems, such as the economy, education, science, jurisprudence, or politics. Public theology in its technical meaning is therefore an effort by churches and theology to do just that. By doing so it is bound to fail in achieving its own purpose and is in fact detrimental to society.

Without any knowledge of Luhmann or his theories, many people today indeed think of religion, church and theology in this way. For a variety of reasons and on account of a variety of experiences, many people are convinced that religion is only a matter of personal, often highly private, intimate and confidential conviction and experience. Therefore, it must try at all costs not to intervene in public life, or in economic and political matters. For many people religion indeed concerns only communication about personal experiences of transcendence and immanence. In many Christian circles – in South Africa as well, where one finds a growing influence of modern life and of Western values and lifestyles – such convictions are increasingly evident. Faith is a solely a private matter. Currently, especially in Protestant circles, many manifestations of Christianity are to a large extent products – and in turn inadvertently agents – of Western modernism. Their religious needs and experiences, their church language, their values and notions of the fulfilled and successful human life are complete representations of modern Western value systems and ideals. Often personal success, fulfilment and self-actualisation and other typically modern values are explicitly and unhesitatingly propagated and celebrated as the gospel. Behind this one finds the conviction that

the gospel and faith have nothing to do with public life and that public theology consequently does not make any sense. One might say that these sometimes intensely religious and committed people have become followers of a specific kind of secularisation, sometimes described as self-secularisation. Secularisation does not necessarily imply a farewell to religiosity, but it does mean a farewell to the kind of religiosity that critically intervenes in public political and economic life.

CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM THIS STORY

Firstly, Habermas's story clearly shows that the term "public" is neither as old nor is its meaning as obvious as many people might think. In its almost technical sense it is of quite recent origin, closely connected to typically Western developments. In practice, however, it can be used *in a variety of contexts*. It can also have a *variety of meanings*, sometimes apparently even opposite meanings. This makes it impossible to deduce from the term itself what is intended. At their core all these divergent uses are related to the development of a *separate sphere* in societies somewhere between state, economy and civil life.

Sometimes public and private are viewed as opposites and people readily distinguish between the public *sphere* and the private sphere. Some areas of a person's life are private and do not concern others. However, at times these private individuals form public relationships in order to achieve specific common objectives, the so-called public *interest*. In its *most* common and general sense the latter is sometimes called the *common good*, i.e. that which is *really* meant to serve the interests of all, or at least of the majority of the "public". This "public" then refers to almost everybody or to the majority of people with regard to *specific* aspects of their lives which are not private but are shared with others.

Many scholars, often including feminists, strongly reject the above distinction between public and private. The renowned Hannah Arendt already did so in an influential way. These scholars are convinced that what in fact happens in public – the opinions held there, the values cherished there and the kinds of actions tolerated there – have a profound influence on people's so-called private lives, and that women are often the victims of this. Matters not allowed to be discussed "in public" because they are deemed not to concern anybody else are in truth matters crying out for public attention, discussion and criticism. This is why in these circles one often finds the slogan: the public is the private and the private the public – as an indication that the distinction between public and private is artificial and problematic, and does not really exist in practice.

Sometimes the above distinction is presented the other way around, public being the *opposite of the state* (and the economy). According to this usage, public can have both a wider spatial as well as a more collective meaning. It is in this double sense

that Habermas uses the designation “public *sphere*”. On the one hand, in a more spatial sense, this refers to specific places (coffee houses, salons), institutions (parties, organisations, associations, *imbizos*) or practices (debates, civil initiatives, marches, mass-meetings, pamphlets). It is here where citizens meet to truly discuss their common, public interests, whether they be local, regional or national. On the other hand, in a more collective sense the term refers to all these people together in their public interest, “the public”, or even to the public (or common) *interest*. When these processes function, one can (ideally) speak of public *opinion*, as a type of collective consensus which prevails amongst the majority of persons, be it on specific matters of common (or public) interest or on common values and trends in public life. This is why public, in this (double) sense of the word, is often portrayed as the opposite of and opposing state and politics, economic and financial interests of owners, firms, employers and industrial powers, even *large* ones but still “private”.

Sometimes, however, the term public is used from precisely the opposite angle. It then refers to that which the state (and sometimes also the economy) is supposed to do to enable public *life*. The state (and economy) is responsible for the basic structure of the public *sector*. The state has to provide public *services*, ensure public *health* and see to public *care* (sometimes even called public *welfare*); it has to build public *roads*, regulate public *traffic* and it (or the economy, or both) runs public *transport* (including trains and airplanes). The state also has to finance and administer public *education* in public *schools*, and for all of this it has a department of public *works*, which in fact sees to the provision of the basic infrastructure that makes life possible for all citizens and ensures a certain quality of life.

Here the ambiguity and even the tensions become clearly visible. The public *media*, for example, are often (openly or secretly) in the service of either the state and its ideological propaganda, *or* of large firms. The latter are nowadays increasingly international media consortia that naturally do not have the public interest of any specific public somewhere at heart. Often, as is the case in the USA, talk of *public* radio or of a *public* broadcasting service in fact indicates that the specific radio station or television channel is *not* merely part of the usual public media, but is indeed *independent* of both the state and economy. This means that it is to a greater extent financed by the voluntary contributions of the “public”, so that public interest can *truly* be served, without any undue influence from politics or advertising.

The same ambiguity is apparent with regard to terms such as “public opinion polls”, the so-called “public relations” of today or sometimes of “public policy”. The kinds of opinion polls referred to here often are more stimulus than poll, more a way to influence the public, particularly consumers. They are seldom a true reflection of the informed and deliberated opinion of the majority of citizens based

on intense public discourse. Public relations are often merely a cynical way in which politicians, parties and large firms try to polish their image and in fact try to hide behind appealing facades from the critical eyes of the public. Public policy often has more to do with how to deal with the public than with a true search for converting public opinion into policy.

In short, in a technical sense "public" concerns a specific, novel type of social space and accompanying institutions and practices that have developed in democratic societies since the onset of modernity. It does not refer to the so-called private sphere, the sphere of the state, the economy or the various activities and organisations of civil society. It has to do with the *general welfare*, with the *general will* and the *general consensus* on values and interests in society. Because of the complex power relations and even conflicts in such societies, the adjective "public" is used in a variety of ways, even in conflicting ways. As an adjective "public" often does not clarify but rather obscures. It hides the fact that many particular opinions and many specific interests remain hidden behind so-called public opinion or public interest.

It is also useful to realise that reflection on the public concerns the way in which *structures* and *systems* operate. *One always has to try to understand the structural shapes the public assumes at a specific moment.* Societies differ and because of this, so does what counts as the public sphere in every specific society. If, for instance, one wants to reflect on what constitutes the public in South Africa – perhaps even to ask how theology can participate in public discourse – one has to try to understand specifically how the country's institutions and systems function *today*. Where and how is information spread? Who reads the newspapers? Who listens to the radio? Who sees what on television? Who uses the internet – and what effect do the public media have on these people? What values do they communicate? Whom do they serve? Where are the real decisions being made that affect people's lives? Where is something like a public opinion really formed, something like a common good communicated, and by whom? Who participates in this, who has access to it, who really determines the contents and the agreements of public opinion?

For public theology this even raises the question whether it is in fact necessary or possible in specific societies to consciously create new spaces where such public discourse can truly take place – academies, centres, institutes, conferences, perhaps large and popular gatherings such as SACLA I and II, or the well-known German *Kirchentag*? Where – to be concrete – must public conversations take place that will truly make a difference in South Africa today? For example, in what social locations do public conversations have to take place that will result in concrete action against family violence, violent crime, gang-related violence and drug abuse among the urban youth?

In societies where even political parties struggle to enlist members and to organise representative meetings with citizens, where public opinion is in practice merely the vague opinion of the masses, where rumours, personal loyalties and local fears are often decisive factors, where the ideals of Habermas of being informed and knowledgeable are strange to many people – how can these challenges to democracy be addressed structurally? And where do the church and theology fit in, especially in societies where the church and all its local congregations are the social institutions with the widest membership and have the best representation at grassroots level? The decisive point is that these public structures differ from society to society. This is why one cannot simply speak of “public” in general, as if it is something universal. Social spaces and practices that play a decisive role in one society might not even exist in another, and vice versa.

It also is important to realise and take into account that these institutions and structures in the course of history are themselves often subjected to profound social *transformations* with regard to their composition and functions. In South Africa such transformations are of the utmost importance. Everybody knows that radical changes occurred in the political, economic and civil life of the country since the dismantling of apartheid. But what exactly happened with regard to the public sphere and public opinion? How did these forces perhaps change in the meantime – perhaps even unnoticed? Where are the real centres of power in this society, today? Are they subject to public transparency, to critical testing and democratic control? Did the spaces where real public debate takes place change, shift, or even go into decline or disappeared? What, for example, happened to the mass mobilisation of the 1980s, the so-called conscientisation of the youth? What happened to the spontaneous channels of communication at street level and in township neighbourhoods? What happened to the controversial alternative press? In other words, where in South Africa is public opinion formed today – if one can in fact still speak in earnest and with integrity of the formation of public opinion in South Africa?

For public theology this raises the question whether church and theology have kept abreast of the social transformations. It also raises the question whether the church and theology are truly making serious contributions where people are struggling amongst themselves to create personal and communal values, convictions and opinions?

From the perspective of widespread criticisms against Habermas, it is furthermore important to realise that the formation of public opinion is *not only rational and discursive* in nature. Art plays a role, as does sport, and surely worship. Entertainment and pastimes, recreation and amusement all help to form people; they change values, influence people’s attitudes, expectations, views of other people and of life. Heroes and role models leave their mark on public opinion.

They allow people to think in new ways and to feel and act differently. Emotions and personal experiences too change people's opinions, sometimes much more than objective facts and rational arguments do. One only has to think of the ways in which the prevalence of violent crime, perceptions of possible danger or prejudice, lack of personal security, limited opportunities and expectations for the future all help to create perceptions of the quality of life in a particular society and shape public opinion. For public theology, all these critical objections addressed at Habermas's story pose questions regarding the style in which it is practised. Are intellectual debate and critical reflection indeed the most appropriate means by which the gospel can inform public opinion? It is often asked today whether a ministry of presence by church and theology sometimes is not more important than rational persuasion and conversation. Is a theology of caring and of concern not a better contribution to make than a theology of justice, as feminist voices might ask of Habermas? Is a theology of activism, of true action, a theology of deed (including deeds of producing, building and supplying) not perhaps making a more important contribution to changing public opinion – *as well as* to the promotion of human dignity and quality of life – than a theology of mere communicative action?

It is clear from Habermas's most recent analyses that increased globalisation has profoundly influenced the discourse on the formation of public opinion as a counterforce to state and the economy. Many social commentators have been emphasising this for decades. Life in all societies is being transformed by globalisation and no study of "the structural transformation of the public sphere" today would be complete without a penetrating analysis of the phenomenon of globalisation – in its political, economic as well as cultural manifestations. A theology that wants to be public by shaping a public life and opinion embodying the so-called emancipatory values and aspirations of the modern project and strengthening these values against colonisation and domination by political and powers, simply has to give attention to the nature and influence of the complex processes of globalisation. Societies today simply do not exist as mere nation states or as isolated units. The world is being transformed by globalisation and this means that so are the daily lives of people, for better or for worse. How do the public church and theology respond to this? How does public theology assist in giving globalisation a more human face than the one it currently has in so many places and for so many people?

In the end it means that the term public *theology* can also be used in this kind of technical and even normative sense. For some this is unacceptable, albeit for a variety of radically diverging reasons: for some because they think religion, church and theology have nothing to contribute to public discourse and they therefore withdraw from it, for others because in this way religion, church and theology are reduced of the modern project. For others, however, this is exactly what public

theology should do. They are convinced that the task of religion, church and theology is to contribute to the unfinished modern project promoting progress and modernisation, democratisation and development. They believe this can happen especially by building and strengthening a public domain and public opinion based on these values and ideals of modernity.

A BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF “PUBLIC”

Even though the technical term “public” is relatively new, it is crucial to realise that the larger *issue* has always been of prime importance for church and theology right from the start. It is on this point that many misunderstandings with regard to public theology arise. Some see nothing but the narrower – modern, democratic, normative – use of the term. They reject it as foreign to church and theology, because in the New Testament, during the formative years of the early church before Constantine, as well as in the time of the Reformation, before the advent of the modern era, church and theology were not “public” in this sense. In fact, a public in this almost technical sense did not exist at all, the mere suggestion is anachronistic. Therefore theology also ought not be viewed and practised as public theology today, according to them.

Of course it becomes a whole different matter if one understands “public” rather in *its wider, more general descriptive sense, designating life in general, everyday life in reality with all and everybody*. Public life after all also has this general, even vague, meaning. It can function as an umbrella term for the totality of life with others in the world, in a variety of forms of social institutions and relations. The church, even in New Testament times, has inevitably always taken an interest in public life in this more general sense of the word. This is not the place to elaborate on this point, for it would require a much more detailed discussion. Suffice it to say that the gospel is in all respects a message *about* the whole of the world *for* the whole of the world. It is impossible to truly understand the gospel without realising this. It was, after all, this that made the gospel so extraordinary and sensational even at the time it was first proclaimed. The God of the gospel is the Creator of heaven and earth, of everything visible and invisible, and he has been its Faithful Provider in the course of history. In Jesus Christ God reconciled the world with Godself, thereby putting everything in heaven and on earth in its rightful place. The Holy Spirit calls out on behalf of creation groaning in travail for the day of deliverance, for a new heaven and a new earth. The Christian faith confesses one holy and catholic Christian church. For the first time ever in human history the whole of the cosmos and the whole of history are perceived as *one*. The Christian faith sees and thinks the *oikoumenē* together as one inhabited world. It is directed at the ends of the earth, awaiting the end of times. There simply is no way in which the gospel can be reduced to the small private sphere of the intimate religious

feelings of a typical modern subject. In all its assumptions and in all its claims this gospel concerns the God of the whole of reality. No wonder the famous mission expert, church leader and theologian Lesslie Newbigin would speak of the confession of the Triune God as "public truth".

If one, for instance, reads the well-known and authoritative New Testament scholar N.T. Wright on church and state in the New Testament, this is strikingly clear. Of course relations were completely different at the time and it is utterly anachronistic to read our questions on church-state, church-politics, church-economy, church-public back into biblical documents. Of course it is not all written there in the way that we understand these issues today. However, it is equally impossible, says Wright, not to read the Bible and come deeply under the impression of the profound implications that this gospel message of the Triune God has for the whole of reality and for life in its entirety. It even is impossible to pray the Lord's Prayer, he says, without doing so from the perspective of *this* encompassing vision that pleads for and longs for nothing less than the coming of the kingdom of God. This is equally clear, and strikingly so, when one reads, for example, the description of the well-known and authoritative church historian Christoph Marksches of the development and the growing influence of the early church in his *Das antike Christentum. Frömmigkeit, Lebensformen, Institutionen* (2006; the earlier version entitled *Zwischen den Welten wandern. Strukturen des antiken Christentums*, 1997, has been translated as *Between two worlds. Structures of early Christianity*, 1999.) Of course, the small early congregations were in no way interested or involved in the political, social and public life in the way we know it today. Still their message did lead to a new kind of piety and way of life. It did transform existing modes of life such as marriage and family life, and the early Christians did build alternative forms of community with the eventual consequence that public life in its entirety – in all its manifestations, up to the power structures of the empire itself – was not left untouched.

One can also, for example, read about the life and thought of someone like Calvin. Of course, he lived in Geneva in the 16th century. Of course, the social conditions of that time differed completely from today's and it is impossible to hold up as models and as normative for later times the relations of state-politics, church-economy, church-public life as they existed then. Still, it is equally impossible not to see in Calvin the same deep pathos that the gospel has implications for the fullness of the lives of people together and in God's creation. It is impossible not to see the pathos that the church and theology are time and again called upon to discern what their calling entails under new and changing circumstances. After all, the fact that our neighbour was created in the image of God stays the same, as does our calling to seek and promote our neighbour's welfare. This includes educating, protecting, feeding, nursing, where possible curing, and in many other ways treating our neighbour with dignity and therefore respectfully and justly. This

calling remains the same, even if under new, changing circumstances it manifests itself in new forms of responsibility and in new social practices and institutions.

We no longer live in New Testament times, in pre-Constantinian or in so-called post-Constantinian times. We no longer live in the 16th century, or in the 17th or 18th centuries with the emergence of public spheres and critical debates. We also no longer live under 20th-century apartheid, but in a democratising South Africa, on a groaning continent, in a time of radical globalisation. And precisely because of this, the calling of church and theology still remains to enquire after the implications of the gospel and the Christian life for our specific conditions today.

In short, the conviction indeed exists in many traditional Christian churches that the gospel concerns the whole of life and that church and theology are called to *public witness*, as it is often called. Different confessional traditions often have their own and sometimes widely divergent theological motivations for this, and the pathos and zeal for *this* public witness differ accordingly. As such, it has traditionally always been more obvious for those from a Reformed persuasion than, for example, for Lutherans, while Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities similarly have their own approaches.

The important point here is that, for traditions such as the Reformed tradition, which are convinced of their calling to public witness, it is of great importance how they analyse the societies of which they form part. Put differently, whether they are of the opinion that they have to become involved in public life for the greater glory of God, or for the sake of the salvation of their neighbour, the decisive question always remains how they think the glory of God can be served or how they think the wellbeing of their neighbour can be promoted best. If they have to witness to justice, the question remains as to what this means in concrete terms. Whether they have to fight for freedom, be peacemakers or be instruments of reconciliation, the question remains how this should be done and what is expected of them in practice. In short, any instance of the public witness of the church always supposes an explicit or implicit situation analysis. It will always be based on a certain reading and interpretation of the moment, of the environment, the society.

The implication of this is also clear: it means that the public witness of the church in practice inevitably meant something different in the 8th century than it did in the 16th or the 20th century. It will also mean something different in every society and culture. It always will depend on life *there* and *then*, and on how the salvation of the neighbour can be promoted at best there and then. It is exactly for this reason that the analyses of modern societies by Habermas (and Luhmann), for instance, are important. If church and theology want to give public witness in typical modern societies, if they want to make a difference for the better, if they want to serve justice, peace, freedom and reconciliation, then their actions will always depend on how they understand the specific society. This is why churches and

believers often ask what the challenges are that face the church today or what the calling of the church is in our situation today.

Therefore, even a cursory use of Habermas's analysis of modern societies can help us make useful and clarifying *distinctions* when addressing these questions on the calling of the church and the challenges facing it. Broadly speaking, one has to distinguish between at least *four basic areas* of importance in order to understand how modern societies function, and what the calling of church and theology might be. These are the areas of state and politics, the area of the economy, the area of civil society (which includes for example the judiciary, education, the world of labour, culture, science and sport, but also organisations and associations) and finally, the area of public opinion, including the public media in all their complex current forms. It is no wonder that over the centuries the church concentrated to such a degree on the relationship between church and *state* or church and politics. For centuries, in so-called times of throne and altar in the Middle Ages or church and *volk* in the time of the nation states, these two were the major institutions of power in most societies. This was the context, too, in which questions about the calling of the church were raised for decades in South Africa during the 20th century.

However, from Habermas's account it becomes apparent that in fact centuries ago the *economy* became an extremely important influence on the lives of people. It not only had to provide them with their daily bread, but often also produced the values according to which people thought and acted, the dreams they cherished and the perceptions of the good life that they aspired to for themselves and for their children. It goes without saying that church and theology increasingly would become aware of this powerful influence exerted in the lives of all people and, in the words of the ecumenical movement, would begin to realise that the economy is a matter of faith. It realised that religious convictions ought to have practical implications for the economic life of people. This placed completely new questions concerning the public task of theology on the church's agenda.

Habermas's story, however, also shows that modern societies are characterised precisely by the development of a *civil sphere*. In these areas of social life together, politics and economy do not dominate. This is because these areas have their own inherent values and meanings, which can indeed at times call forth critical interaction with the influences of politics and economy. Again, it is no wonder that church and theology under modern circumstances have become increasingly aware of the importance of this civil society and indeed of the strengthening and expansion of these civil societies. In fact, the quality of people's lives is often greatly determined by the quality of these institutions that protect the individual against the overly powerful state and economy. At the same time these institutions call up individuals from their self-centred small worlds of private happiness to

take responsibility jointly for the quality of life in the neighbourhood and environment.

However, in the end Habermas's also calls attention to the importance of the formation of a well-informed and critical *public opinion*, built on values such as human dignity, respect, openness, tolerance, justice, reconciliation, peace, personal freedom and real care of others. Especially in the light of the current role of the electronic media and the possibilities of interactive global communication, questions on how this kind of public opinion can be formed so that these values will be pursued and these kinds of practices will become a reality – in the interest of our neighbour – are becoming more and more complex and urgent.

It is no wonder then that public theology is interested in these kinds of questions. Any theology that wants to serve the welfare of the neighbour in modern societies cannot but pay attention to such questions. Therefore, when John de Gruchy therefore describes the recent developments in South Africa under the title "From Political to Public Theologies: The Role of Theology in Public Life in South Africa", it is this kind of development in analysis and insight that he has in view. It is not theology that has changed, but the situation and with it the *situation analysis*. The situation under apartheid was not a democracy. There was political domination and social injustice. The imperative at the time was that that situation first had to change so that the possibility could be created for all people to experience justice. Only then could people begin exercising personal freedoms and begin living with dignity. For South Africa political transformation did not signal the end, but the beginning. What would take centuries in other societies, including the structural transformations that would make a more democratic formation of public opinion both necessary and possible, happened overnight in South Africa, so that these complex challenges now also face us. The new situation requires new ways of public witness, greater social and economic justice, more real reconciliation, forgiveness and healing of historical wounds. It requires more living unity, tolerance, mutual acceptance and co-existence. It also requires new forms of freedom and liberation for all who are still trapped in servitude and fear, from systemic to psychological. It requires, in short, new forms of public theology.

Those who *criticise public theology even in this more general sense* of the word often do so from theological positions and positions based on other ways of understanding the gospel. Some, for example, are convinced that the gospel and together with it the church and theology are private matters, without implications for the public sphere, politics, economy and civil life. This might be because these people hold a kind of ascetic view of the Christian faith, idealising the mystical traditions of pre-Constantinian times. It could, however, also be because they have adopted, perhaps without even being aware of the fact, the implicit assumptions of modernity and secularisation. Therefore, they believe that religion only concerns

inner experiences, religious devotion and commitment, and that it does not concern itself with the ways in which it can manifest itself in public life. It could also be that such people have adopted what they often describe as communitarian views. This would mean that they believe the best way to practise faith is within a closed circle of like-minded people – e.g. in a religious order, a monastery, or as part of a congregation of isolated devotees – who live *in* the world but are not *of* the world. For this reason they are not particularly interested in anything of a transient or everyday nature, such as politics and public life.

But can such a distinction ever be possible in practice? Are the lives of believers in a modern society – such as South Africa – not inextricably interwoven with its social life and social institutions? They might marry, have children, provide their children with some sort of education, pay taxes, drive on public roads, walk on public streets, make use of public infrastructure, secure themselves against crime or rely on the police force for protection. They might even vote in the country's elections, or not, and in that way also make a difference. They might work somewhere and earn money, or might not work and depend on others or the state for survival. They might spend money, save or invest, give to others, perhaps buy property, have certain convictions and cherish certain values. At times they might talk to neighbours and friends about life, have certain perceptions of their neighbours, do something for the poor and suffering in society, or perhaps do nothing for them. Perhaps they belong to congregations and denominations of which the majority of the population are members and where they meet weekly to pray and listen to sermons – perhaps about the world and for the world. Does not the gospel concern any of these aspects of their lives? Does the gospel have no implications for this interwovenness of believers with society? Does the Christian life have nothing to do with this fullness of our everyday existence?

SO, WHAT DOES "PUBLIC" IN "PUBLIC THEOLOGY" MEAN?

The term "public" in "public theology" can have a *variety of different meanings*. But it is useful to differentiate between a narrower and a more general use of the term. In its *narrower, more specific meaning* it is a normative concept, designating an ideal that developed together with typically Western democratic culture. It refers to a specific sphere of human life together distinct from politics, the economy and civil life, namely the deliberate formation of public opinion which has the common good at heart and promotes human dignity and justice. This public opinion is formed when informed citizens have the opportunity to try and find consensus with a view to the common interests and welfare of society. This happens according to practices based on inclusion, mutual respect and procedural justice, by way of rational debate and persuasion, in spaces devoid of coercion.

In this narrow sense a whole *spectrum* of variations can be distinguished. At one extreme, public theology is viewed as a synonym for a civil religion nurtured independently from specific religious or church traditions. At the other extreme, public theology is viewed as the calling of the church and theology to actively – sometimes even by active advocacy – cooperate in the promotion of democracy and development, of a culture built on human dignity and human rights. This is what *some* people hear when they hear the expression “public theology” and for that very reason they reject it – some because they are of the opinion that church and theology have no right to take part in *this* conversation, others because they think church and theology in this way renounce their own integrity when they willingly allow themselves to become instruments that serve the unfinished project of modern democratisation. *Others* hear the same meaning in the term and for that reason support it, because they in fact believe in this project and are convinced that theology indeed has been called to give shape to the gospel in this way.

In its *vaguer, more general meaning* “public” in “public theology” is merely a *descriptive term*. It acknowledges that from the start and through the centuries the gospel has been calling believers to give an account, by way of public witness, of the hope in the Triune God that lives within them. Depending on the social circumstances, the nature of *this* witness will differ profoundly over the centuries, but in any relatively modern society it will at least imply that there is theological reflection on the implications of the gospel and the Christian life for public life, for economic realities, for human organisation in the numerous spheres of civil life, and for forming a public opinion on common values and the general welfare, especially the care of the weak and the victims in society.

Once more a *spectrum* of variations can be discerned within this more general use of the term. More or less at the one extreme of the spectrum lies the famous description by David Tracy in his *The Analogical Imagination* of the three publics in which theology is practised, namely the church, the academy and society. In Tracy’s use of the term this means nothing more than the acknowledgment of the fact that any form of theology always addresses a specific audience; it is aimed at a specific public. Theology, according to Tracy, always happens in the form of public discourse. The only question is which public is the addressee of specific theological activities.

Theologians always think within certain social contexts, with an eye on certain hearers, readers or conversation partners. Therefore, they speak in ways that fit these audiences. They employ arguments that will make sense to the audience and they search for a word of truth that is at home in that specific public environment. Church theologians therefore use certain kinds of language and arguments for the public of the church; academic theologians also use certain kinds of language, arguments, genre and rhetoric with their specific public in mind, as do theologians

who wish to engage with society. In practice, one and the same theologian may on one occasion address one kind of public, for example, the members of the church, and on another occasion he or she may speak to another kind of public, for example, scholarly colleagues in an inter-disciplinary academic public.

On the opposite side of this spectrum are those who also use the term "public" merely descriptively, but who want to limit it to the *third public* of which Tracy speaks, namely theology that takes an interest in the public issues of society. In *this* sense the influential South African theologian Bernard Lategan has argued over the years that theology should take this "third public", namely society itself, more seriously. In his work on the involvement of churches in development issues, the Stellenbosch scholar Naas Swart follows this same usage of the term. In a similar sense the German systematic theologian Michael Welker is of the opinion that Tracy's useful distinctions should be refined further to describe more accurately the variety of publics in complex modern and pluralistic societies. His own work over the years on structured pluralism in contemporary societies is precisely such an attempt to enter into conversation with the manifold and complex subsystems in modern life – very critically, too, where necessary, for example, with regard to the mass media. At this end of the spectrum the usage is therefore still descriptive and not normative, but intentionally limited to society as a *specific public*.

People also differ in their opinions regarding this general view of public theology. On the strength of their theological convictions *some* people feel that the church should not become involved in any way in this public life – in politics, economy, civil life, public opinion – because this will inevitably lead to adaptations and loss of spiritual integrity. On the basis of *other* theological convictions *others* are of the opinion that church and theology, precisely because of their nature and integrity, have no choice but to witness in these public spheres to the faith, hope and love in their hearts.

It is therefore clear that those who feel that church and theology have no other choice but to practise public theology can still have *divergent conceptions* about public theology itself. They can have diverse motivations for their views and can pursue different ends on the basis of their conception of public theology. This is well illustrated by the ways in which so-called centres for public theology view and describe their own task. The Global Network for Public Theology, founded in Princeton in 2007 and involved in the publication of the *International Journal of Public Theology*, for instance, includes institutions that have very diverse views of their own role and task.

Based on the foregoing, is in fact possible to compile a whole catalogue of different ways in which public theology is understood and practised – as a religious contribution to the foundations of pluralistic, democratic societies; as a contribution to the formation of common values; as a contribution to the moral

foundations of a secular state; indeed, as a social place and as practices in which the formation of public opinion can be assisted through coercion-free dialogue; as an indispensable element in the foundation of the liberal state adhering to the Rule of Law (*Rechtsstaat*); as constructive involvement in the moral renewal of society; as a service to the general welfare, common interest, common good; as the intentional practice of civil religion; as service to a *volkskerk*, or the state church and state religion; as religious substructure of the nation state and part of the process of nation building; as legitimisation of constitutional patriotism; as theological justification of greater loyalty and fidelity to the constitution and its values; as involved in value and policy studies and partner in the formulation of public policy; as theological presence in parliament and in political legislation; as ecumenical and even inter-faith partner in the government's delivery of social services and care; as activist organisation for the promotion of specific moral and political ideals (for example, freedom, truth, reconciliation and justice, amongst other things) or even more specific civil and political aims; as public voice on behalf of specific values and aspirations, amongst other things, non-racialism or greater ecological sensitivity and responsibility; as advocacy group for the rights of, for example, homosexuals, women, street children, Aids sufferers, the poor, or victims of crime; as advocacy group *against* certain institutions, practices and developments in public life, for example, church and theological groups active in the anti-globalisation movement; especially in situations of conflict as a kind of round-table facilitator that initiates and sustains difficult discussions between divergent interest groups, even hostile groups, in this way trying to promote understanding and reconciliation; as facilitator of negotiations in which marginalised groups and parties can have a say and can be heard; as a think-tank or organisation in the service of public aspirations, such as the social activities of the ecumenical movement in recent decades, both globally and nationally, both regionally as well as locally; as conversation groups in the church that wish to inform its members on current issues and to promote conversation amongst its members on these issues; as purposeful inter-disciplinary conversation groups between theology and other scientific disciplines in the academy promoting conversation on current issues; and many more.

It is possible to give concrete examples of public theologians and of centres for public theology that understand their nature and tasks according to each of the above descriptions, and many of them are to be found in South Africa, today. All centres and public theologians discern for themselves exactly what they are called to do. The reason for this is clear from the above discussion. What "public theology" is, is not determined solely by the meaning of the word "public", because there is no uniform usage of the word. It is used today with this whole spectrum of possible meanings, from the very specifically modern to the very general and vague. What people therefore envisage when they practise public

theology is co-determined to a large extent by their *ecclesiological* and therefore by *theological* reasons and choices – be it consciously or unconsciously. It is on the strength of what people think the church is or should be, which in turn is based on how they think about God and God's purposes for church and world, that they form their opinions on what the proper public role of theology should be. Naturally their views on public life – once again consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly – then play a significant role in how they are going to give form to these ecclesiological and theological convictions, but because the variety of possible contents of these views of public can be so great, public theology itself can in the end also take so many different shapes.

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INTRODUCTION

“Religious voices in public spaces” was the title of a conference in 2003 in Leeds (England) in which I participated. The title indicates that there is something uncertain and debatable about the legitimate place and role of religion in the public sphere, at least in Europe and North America. The least controversial role of religion may be the prophetic one: denouncing social evils, standing up for the poor, the weak, the disadvantaged, or for global justice and the protection of the environment. In Germany another task of religion is associated with the famous dictum of E.W. Böckenförde (1991:112): “The liberal, secularized state lives on prerequisites which it itself cannot guarantee” (1991:112). Another question would be about the contribution of religious schools to general education and consciousness formation.

The meaning of the religious voice might be particularly disputed in public debates on controversial political questions (with ethical implications), when this voice expresses positions of which the universal communicability is doubted. Issues of bioethics and biopolitics, marriage and family come to mind. The position of the church on these issues might appear to be a merely particular one, but nevertheless lays a universalistic claim which may collide with the ideological neutrality of the state, especially if the law forbids and sanctions a certain kind of behaviour. Authors like John Rawls and Robert Audi have demanded that religious arguments be kept out of these public discussions. Rawls demands that

... in discussing constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice we are not to appeal to comprehensive religious and philosophical doctrines – to what we as individuals or members of associations see as the whole truth (1996:xviii).

But is his demand not in opposition to the basic right of the free exercise of religion?

¹ Public lecture delivered at the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at the University of Stellenbosch on 22 April 2004.

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THE IDEA OF PUBLIC REASON

For Rawls, the plurality of conflicting, rational, comprehensive doctrines, be they religious, philosophical or moral, is characteristic of a democracy. It is impossible to reach an agreement on these doctrines. Public reason in Rawls's conception neither criticises nor attacks those doctrines, except when they are incompatible with the essence of public reason and with a democratic state. Public reason is shared by free and equal citizens. Its concern is fundamental political justice. It is public by its very nature; its forum is the discourse of judges, political representatives and candidates for public offices; its background is the culture of a civil society which in a democratic society is not determined by any central idea or principle, neither political nor religious.

Rawls distinguishes between the idea of public reason and the respective ideal. The latter is realised if all members follow the idea of public reason and are ready to explain the reasons for their support of fundamental political positions. Citizens act according to this ideal when they recognise one other as free and equal within a system of social cooperation, if they cooperate even at the cost of their own interests. Political legitimacy has to do with reciprocity. Political power is exercised honestly only if we are convinced that the reasons we offer are sufficient and that our fellow-citizens can accept them reasonable. This idea Rawls also calls "deliberative democracy". It works only with sufficient education of the citizens and public information on pressing problems.

Public reason is not synonymous with secular (antireligious) reason. The latter presupposes a framework of a comprehensive non-religious doctrine. Liberal political principles are not of this kind; they refer only to constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice; they can be presented independently from all comprehensive doctrines. They have to be worked out as implications of the political culture of a certain constitutional system. Rational comprehensive doctrines, be they religious or not, are not totally excluded from the public debate; they may be introduced only if convincing political reasons which sufficiently support the political proposal are also offered. There might, however, also be positive reasons for introducing comprehensive doctrines; reciprocal knowledge of religious and non-religious doctrines may be useful for public culture.

But why does Rawls want to exclude certain convictions from the public debate? Because he regards them as dangerous. Religion tends to divide society, it arouses passions and endangers the stability of the state. If you want to preserve peace in a family, you sometimes have to avoid debate on certain matters. The same wisdom is recommended by Rawls in the case of a democratic society. On a critical note, however, it might be asked if Rawls's diagnosis is not more applicable to Europe of the 17th century than the Europe of today. We have after all, at least, some experience of religious tolerance.

More important might be the question of what is to be counted as “comprehensive doctrines” and if doctrines like these are the only or main divisive factor in societies. Regarding the first question, R. Audi speaks of an “absence of a clear notion of a comprehensive view”.³ Rawls (1996:xviii) mentions religious, philosophical and moral doctrines, amongst which he also includes his own “Theory of Justice”. It is noteworthy in this context that religious and antireligious convictions are most easily classified as belonging to this category. They can very easily be identified by their appeals to some authority (the Bible, the Koran, the Pope, etc.). One should, however, not forget that partially comprehensive convictions may be equally divisive, as was skilfully illustrated in a paper by Charles Murray at the Societas Ethica meeting of 2003 in Sigtuna (Sweden) on the theme of free market critique of the welfare state. Murray remarked on the ideal of equality that:

Here, I think that liberals and social democrats inhabit separate planets. I ... completely fail to understand why equality is a good thing. To feel inferior and degraded because one is utterly destitute – that I can understand. But to feel inferior because I make a decent salary that is smaller than someone else’s? To feel I am unjustly treated because others have ended up with more interesting lives than the one I lead? ... I am delighted to live in a world where people are vastly richer, more beautiful, more talented, and more charming than me ... For me, equality is boring (2003:74).

For Murray, this point of his reflects the difference between a US-American ethos and a European one, on which he remarked: “I do not so much disagree with your position as I am mystified by it” (*ibid.*:75). The reasons for this difference lie, for Murray, mainly in a different view of the human person. For social democrats, the human individual is something dangerous if not under the control and regulation of the state; for liberals, human beings are by nature benevolent and cooperative, whereas the state and its actions are regarded as something always dangerous. These differences make agreements on basic matters of distributive justice difficult.

It is instructive how Rawls classifies the problem of abortion. Comprehensive doctrines should not be introduced in that debate as it was the case in the debates on the abolition of slavery. But there is an important restriction: “The only comprehensive doctrines that run afoul of public reason are those that cannot support a reasonable balance of political values” (1996:243).

³ Audi in: Audi/Wolterstorff p. 125.

But what is the criterion for a doctrine to be reasonable,⁴ for instance in the debate on abortion? Rawls comments in a footnote:⁵

Suppose ... we consider the question in terms of these three important political values: the due respect for human life, the ordered reproduction of political society over time, including the family in some form, and finally the equality of women as equal citizens. (There are, of course, other important political values beside these.) Now I believe any reasonable balance of these values will give a woman a duly qualified right to decide whether or not to end her pregnancy during the first trimester. The reason for this is that at this early stage of pregnancy the political value of the equality of women is overriding, and this right is required to give it substance and force. Other political values, if tallied in, would not, I think, affect this conclusion ... any comprehensive doctrine that leads to a balance of political values excluding that duly qualified right in the first trimester is to that extent unreasonable; and depending on details of its formulation, it may also be cruel and oppressive; for example, if it denied the right altogether except in the case of rape and incest. Thus assuming that this question is either a constitutional essential or a matter of basic justice, we would go against the ideal of public reason if we voted from a comprehensive doctrine that denied this right".

This is a very restrictive judgment, to put it mildly. It is not a doctrine that introduces other values or denies the importance of the values on which Rawls relies, that would be unreasonable, but it already is a doctrine that weighs the values relevant for Rawls differently. Rawls, however, concedes that even an intrinsically reasonable doctrine may, in a special case, have unreasonable consequences. And yes, I would add, the opposite might happen as well. In addition, Rawls concedes: "Even where we agree fully about the kinds of considerations that are relevant, we may disagree about their weight, and so arrive at different judgments" (1996:56). This shows that religion or another comprehensive doctrine cannot be the only or the most decisive factor causing division and disagreement.

⁴ Wolterstorff in Audi/Wolterstorff, p. 98: "It would take a good deal of exegetic industry to figure out what Rawls means by 'reasonable,' and even more to figure out what he means by 'rational.'"

⁵ *Ibid.* note 32. Cf. V. Gerhardt's assessment of his own thesis, that birth is the act of anthropogenesis (p. 41): "Für diese schlichte und trotz aller Technik – immer noch intuitiv gewisse Überzeugung sollte man eigentlich gar nicht argumentieren müssen".

Rawls makes another disputable presupposition, namely that the legal regulation of abortion is a “matter of basic justice”. On the other hand, matters like environmental issues, our relation to non-human creatures do not belong to this category. Regarding these matters citizens are allowed to introduce “non-political values” (the idea of stewardship, for instance),⁶ if they regard other ideas as insufficient. In addition, an agreement on the question of what is to be categorised as “essential” or “basic” might not always be easy and might depend on the concerned “comprehensive doctrine”.

IDEAL AND REALITY

Rawls’s footnote on abortion might be regarded as a singular illiberal slip-up. It does, however, reveal a more basic problem. Rawls does not explain what has to be counted as “reasonable” and according to what criteria.⁷ Whoever accepts his contract model of justice might be regarded as reasonable by Rawls. According to Jean Hampton (1994:211), who agrees with Rawls’s view on abortion, Mill or a Millian would have said to another disputant: ‘Your conclusion is not unreasonable, but wrong for the following reasons.’ Rawls, however, would have accused him of not having judged according to reasonable standards, at least in the case being debated. But this judgement is based on private intuitions. And the idea of an “overlapping consensus” becomes questionable if that consensus is reached by way of the exclusion of convictions regarded as unreasonable according to a purely subjective intuition. Hampton entitled her essay “The common faith of liberalism”, thereby insinuating that Rawls’s political liberalism at least is a partially comprehensive doctrine whose central idea is “... that reason has the capacity to effect harmony in a society of conflicting lifestyles and points of view” (*ibid.*:214).

Even if reason might in principle have this capacity, it does not always work. Therefore, we often cannot find a consensus, but have to vote on the disputed matter, which means that there are winners and losers. For the latter, there is at least some hope of coming through with their opinion the next time. Reason does not grant a consensus, but at least a procedure for a fair handling of differences. And, as Hampton remarks, there might be a consensus on the values underlying such a procedure:

⁶ Cf. 1996:246.

⁷ Cf. Rawls, *ibid.*:132: “The basic requirement is that a reasonable doctrine accepts a constitutional democratic regime and its companion idea of legitimate law”. Is that a criterion for reasonableness or a standard every reasonable view has to match? For Rawls (1996:136f) citizens are reasonable if they reciprocally offer others “the most reasonable terms of fair cooperation”, the acceptance of which is at least a reasonable choice for their fellow citizens.

But we cannot hope for a liberal state that does not offend anyone; and if we are offended, we can only continue the debate, defending our view until we win, or until better views force us to stand aside and yield to them (*ibid.*:214).

N. Wolterstorff characterises the problem in a similar way in his critique of Audi, whose concern is mainly to avoid any coercion.⁸ Wolterstorff points to the difference between a *parliamentary session* and a *Quaker meeting*. The first operates by majority vote, the latter operates by consensus, which means *agreement*, not *acquiescence* – at least in theory. In fact, consensus is often reached by acquiescence. Audi seems to conceive of liberal democracy as analogous to a Quaker meeting, when he formulates the point as follows:

A liberal democracy by its very nature resists using coercion, and prefers persuasion, as means to achieve cooperation ... Thus, when there must be coercion, liberal democracies try to justify it in terms of considerations – such as public safety – that any fully rational adult citizen will find persuasive and can identify with ... (quoted by Wolterstorff in Audi/Wolterstorff, 1997:151f).

For liberals, the Quaker model is an ideal with which reality does not always correspond. Wolterstorff points out that in the recent years no law and no policy in the USA has had the consent of all rational citizens. If decisions that have not been consented to by all citizens lack an adequate basis, according to Audi, people would have to ask themselves if it makes sense to work on, and for, an important issue. Wolterstorff concludes:

The pervasiveness of disagreement and controversy in our society constitutes overwhelming evidence for the conclusion that, on such issues, there simply are not any considerations that all adult citizens who are fully rational and adequately informed on the matter at hand will find persuasive and can identify with (*ibid.*:154).

In addition, Wolterstorff reminds us, religious factors are not necessarily particular and incommunicable; a lot of modern movements had religious roots (abolitionists, dissidents in totalitarian states, opposition to apartheid). This is often regarded as being purely accidental, as Wolterstorff remarks ironically:

The people in Leipzig assembled in a meeting space that just happened to be a church to listen to inspiring speeches that just happened to resemble sermons; they were led out into the streets in protest marches by leaders who just happened to be pastors. Black

⁸ Cf. Audi/Wolterstorff, 1997:152.

people in Capetown [sic] were led on protest marches from the black shanty-towns into the center of the city by men named Tutu and Boesak – who just happened to be bishop and pastor, respectively, and who just happened to use religious talk in their fiery speeches (*ibid.*:80).

For the US, one could point to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. The first regarded the civil war as a divine punishment for the sin of slavery. Did he violate the idea of public reason? No, says Rawls, what he said “has no implications bearing on constitutional essentials or matters of basic justice” (1996:254). This is indeed a strange assessment of the evil of slavery.

WHAT ARE RELIGIOUS REASONS?

Wolterstorff’s examples show that religious language must not be inaccessible to outsiders. However, there are rarely any considerations to be found on the questions as to what counts as religious reasons and about their relations to secular reasons. Audi (Audi/Wolterstorff, 1997:18) gives us an important hint, though:

If we assume a broadly Western theism, we can take God to be omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. Might we not, then (at least given this set of divine attributes), expect God to structure us free rational beings and the world of our experience so that there is a (humanly accessible) secular path to the discovery of moral truths, at least to those far-reaching ones needed for the kind of civilized life we can assume God would wish us to live?

Helm (2001:1473) puts it more cautiously:

There must be some point of contact or overlap between natural and revealed morality; otherwise how would the revealed morality engage with everyday moral concerns of humanity?

There was a debate during the 1970s and 1980s among German-speaking Catholic moral theologians on the *proprium* of a Christian ethic. The position of a so-called “faith ethic”, according to which certain ethical norms can be understood only from Christian (or theistic) premises, did not prevail. Had it been correct, certain arguments did indeed have to be excluded from public debates. So far as I can see, there was no similar debate in the Anglo-Saxon world, even though there is a similar question to be discussed in the current debate on universalism and communitarianism – this fact might (partly) explain the lack of considerations regarding the characteristics of religious arguments. Audi pleads for a “theo-ethical equilibrium”:

Thus, a seemingly sound moral conclusion that goes against one's scriptures or one's well-established religious tradition should be scrutinized for error; a religious demand that appears to abridge moral rights should be studied for such mistakes as misinterpretation of what it requires, errors in translation of some supporting text, and distortion of a religious experience apparently revealing the demand (Audi/Wolterstorff, 1997:19).

Some examples may illustrate this kind of equilibrium:

1. Some countries or provinces (Switzerland, Salzburg) have added to their constitutions an amendment on animal protection in which animals are called "fellow-creatures". At a conference, I heard a twofold critique of this kind of religious language: firstly, that this language is not based on public consensus and, secondly, that the language is not precise, because plants or stones too are fellow-creatures. The latter argument is correct, in principle. But there is no risk of misunderstanding in the particular context. On the other hand, speaking of fellow-creatures already makes some presuppositions: that only animals, especially sentient animals, are meant; that suffering should be prevented or reduced; that not all creatures have the same standing. Speaking of fellow-creatures signals that the way we deal with animals is not a mere matter of our sovereign decision, it probably excludes positions of a radical ethic of animal liberation (Bentham, Singer) for which the ability to suffer is the decisive criterion. Those positions, by the way, would have to be regarded as no less "comprehensive" than religious ones. And even the answer to the question of whether animal protection is a "matter of basic justice" depends on the concerned comprehensive doctrine.
2. Another example is the traditional prohibition of killing, according to which killing is forbidden because God alone is the Lord of Life. This language is still used in (Roman Catholic) church documents, even though moral theology has pointed out its tautological character. God is Lord not only over the human life, as Ps 24:1 may illustrate:

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who dwell therein.

There is nothing on earth which is not the Lord's. Nevertheless, we may use what is on earth according to his will. The traditional argument only says that human life has a special value, but it does not say why this is so. Helmut Weber (1990:91) objects to the accusation of tautology because it stands against spontaneous feeling: the argument may convince not logically, but emotionally.

That might be true, but it does not suffice. Our ethical intuitions can be true or false, plausibilities can be deceptive, as especially H. Sidgwick has shown.

However, Weber thinks that the argument is plausible only for those believing in God.

This assumption might appear too hastily made, if we read Anne Hendershott's remarks on suicide: "Anti-suicide laws do much more than simply affirm the sanctity of life; they also establish and support social boundaries" (2002:144). This corresponds to Durkheim's observation that suicide is rare in societies with strong social cohesion. On the other hand, the propagation of suicide or assisted suicide is done not only for reasons of autonomy and prevention of suffering, as Hendershott illustrates using the example of Oregon: "assisted suicide in Oregon has become primarily a replacement for caregiving" (*ibid.*:148). Regarding "Dr. Death" Jack Kevorkian, Hendershott quotes another author as saying: "In the Kevorkian worldview, the patient is a solitary figure, related to nothing or no one beyond himself [*sic*], with neither a past to honor nor a future to influence" (*ibid.*:151).

The emotional appeal of the traditional argument against suicide could be explained not only in the sense of rejection of human sovereignty or arbitrariness but also in the sense of a plea for social cohesion. In 1997 a group of American philosophers led by Ronald Dworkin demanded a constitutional right to die in a declaration sent to the Supreme Court in which we find the following remarkable statement:

Denying that opportunity to terminally ill patients who are in agonizing pain or otherwise doomed to an existence they regard as intolerable could only be justified on the basis of a religious or ethical conviction about the value or meaning of life itself. Our Constitution forbids government to impose such convictions on its citizens (in Jones *et al.*, 2002:232).

This opinion on what the constitution grants or forbids is, at least, debatable. Gerald Dworkin points to a gap in liberal arguments on this question:

There is a gap between a premise which requires the state to show equal concern and respect for all its citizens and a conclusion which rules out as legitimate grounds for coercion the fact that a majority believes that conduct is immoral, wicked, or wrong. That gap has yet to be closed (*ibid.*:236).

R. Dworkin's remark on the ethical conviction about the value of life is true. But, according to G. Dworkin, that would not be a reason for excluding it from public debate. And, on the other hand, does the plea for assisted suicide not imply an opposite conviction about the ideal of autonomy, the disvalue of a dependent life, loss of self-control, etc.? The people of Oregon are proud of the history of their

pioneers who went west and left their moral, social and religious traditions behind them. Religious groups sharing this attitude were in favour of assisted suicide as well. On the other hand, there were also non-religious groups opposed to assisted suicide – amongst the disabled, for instance, there were those who claimed to be “not yet dead” against the slogan “better off dead than disabled”. R. Dworkin and other liberals seem to have some sensitivity to personal bias in certain positions, but little sensitivity to the cultural bias of their own position. The result is, in Jones’s words,

that the privileged who wield power can, in the name of tolerance, paternalistically dismiss these “alien” gestures as mistaken, paranoid, unmannered, irrational or, as is popular among liberals, as ultimately grounded in some personal bias (such as strong religious or moral belief) that the protestors lack the discipline to bridle (*ibid.*:236).

The paper by Jones was presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics in Vancouver (Canada) where a central theme was the condition of the “First Nations”. One speaker quoted an indigenous chief belonging to a traditional religion who nevertheless regarded an indigenised form of Christianity as desirable for the survival and revival of his own culture. With this in mind, T. Anderson stated:

Secularism, then, not Christianity as conventional wisdom claims, is the chief vehicle of assimilation. According to this view (shared by many traditional elders of different First Nations but not often heard in public), if a restructured relationship is not to be simply a new version of assimilation through secularization, religious matters must be central in all aspects of the restructuring (2002:20).

3. A statement by theologians of different denominations on the status of human embryos submitted to the House of Lords refers to Ps 139:13-15:

Thou it was who didst fashion my inward parts; thou didst knit me together in my mother’s womb.

Even though these words do not tell *when* human life begins, they do “establish God’s involvement and care from the beginning, a concern that is not diminished by our lack of awareness of him” (Jones, n.d.:196).

The authors of this submission to the House of Lords in this way avoided fixing the debate on the question of the status of the embryo and on the categorisation of its use as the killing of a human being. Perhaps it is not yet sure what the real objections are. Our reservations could be against the materialisation and virtualisation of the embryo in stem-cell research and PGD, against the rededication for another purpose.

There is in this debate, of course, the argument of the genetic determination of the embryo, which Audi categorises as “tacitly religious” (Audi/Wolterstorff, 1997:29). The content is not religious, but Audi doubts that people are really motivated by that argument. He therefore demands,

that one has a (*prima facie*) obligation to abstain from advocacy or support of a law or public policy that restricts human conduct, unless one is sufficiently *motivated* by (normatively) adequate secular reasons, where sufficiency of motivation here implies that some set of secular reasons is motivationally sufficient, roughly in the sense that (a) this set of reasons explains one’s action and (b) one would act on it even if, other things remaining equal, one’s other reasons were eliminated (*ibid.*:28f.).

Audi refuses to regard the latter condition as being satisfied. For him, the secular argument is not convincing without assuming animation from the beginning.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the different viewpoints as explained above, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the place of religious arguments in public sphere:

1. Where there is freedom of speech, anybody is free to present the reasons he/she regards as important and convincing. If he/she looks for followers, he/she will express his/her arguments in a way that is as accessible as possible. And then, as Wolterstorff says:

I see no reason to suppose that the ethic of the citizen in a liberal democracy includes a restraint on the use of religious reasons in deciding and discussing political issues. Let citizens use whatever reasons they find appropriate – including, then, religious reasons. (in Audi/ Wolterstorff, 1997:111f).

2. As Michael Perry points out, Rawls may overlook a fundamental difference when he demands to present only reasons, ideals and principles which no reasonable person can reasonably reject, since:

[m]any convictions, including (especially?) fundamental convictions about human existence – for example, the conviction that life is ultimately meaningless – are not shared. That a conviction is not shared does not mean that reliance on it in political argument is necessarily inconsistent with the accessibility standard” (Perry, 1991:119).

Stout (2004:70) makes the same point from a different perspective when he says that:

Rawls has overestimated what can be resolved in terms of the imagined common basis of justifiable premises ... He has underestimated what a person can reasonably reject, I suspect, because he has underestimated the role of a person's collateral commitments".

3. Mutual respect requires that one present one's position as clearly as possible and it also implies respect for the particularity of the other.

4. Liberal democracy has worked as an ideal. However:

[t]hat ideal has to compete with other considerations; often it has lost, and often it continues to lose, the competition. But it is and has been a member of the competition, and sometimes it wins. Sometimes we have acted as we have so as to bring the ideal closer to the earth. (Wolterstorff in Audi/Wolterstorff, 1997:71)

5. Though Rawls and Audi exclude even secular comprehensive doctrines, they sometimes demand "secular" reasons for the debate. One should rather distinguish as follows: secular reasons – publicly accessible reasons (*ibid.*:74) – acceptable reasons.

6. Every responsible participant in public debate has to be regarded as reasonable (Stout, 2004: 82).

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Clive Pearson²

LET US PREY

The Christian faith now occupies a rather ambiguous position in Australian society. It can still attract high-profile public attention while, at the same time, one crisis after another leaves the credibility of its institutional face in tatters. This state of play is captured well in a Cathy Wilcox cartoon that adorned the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* shortly before Easter 2002. It takes the form of a caricature designed to expose the gap that exists between the highly intentional language of the Christian faith and harsh, less forgiving, down to earth realities. It disturbs a number of Christians, biblical scholars and theologians. But there are no letters to the editor; there is no response in the daily "Heckler" column of the paper and Chris McGillion, the religious correspondent for the *Herald*, lets it pass unnoticed. Even the perceptive, good-for-a-read Peter FitzSimons, a former self-confessed "rugby journeyman" not averse to putting into print critiques of the more fundamentalist forms of Christian faith, looks the other way. There is no public comment. There is no need.

All that is required are a few lines. For those accustomed to matters of faith the style is not too unlike those line drawings that litter the pages of the *Good News Bible*. There the similarity ends. This cartoon's message, its *kerygma*, is about as far removed from heroic and joyful scenes so often depicted in a relatively user-friendly version of the Bible as could be imagined. The outline of a figure looms behind a lectern ready to intone. The audience is "us", the reading public, for there are no other characters on this enclosed space on the front page of one of Australia's leading newspapers. The caption beneath the "person" says it all in three brief monosyllabic words that hit home and strike a most vulnerable point: "Let us prey."

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The wording is, of course, a parody. For those of us who are at home in the Christian life, the invitation should read "Let us pray." That is what we expect. We make ready to shuffle into position, maybe eyes down, perhaps closed, slumped to the floor on our knees in some traditions, standing ready to look upwards, heavenwards, hands waving in others. They are cue words that perform a symbolic function. They belong inside the domain of liturgy and how its public expression intersects with the life of personal devotion and discipleship. The lectern's presence in the cartoon strongly implies the act of worship, a public office in keeping with the etymology of *leitourgia*, rather than a much smaller household fellowship, where meaning and intention are more private.

The cartoon takes its meaning from a public scandal. The Governor General, Peter Hollingworth, had been exposed for the insensitive handling of cases of clerical sexual abuse a decade or so ago while he was the Archbishop of Brisbane. For Hollingworth the timing could not have been worse. The media in the United States, the United Kingdom and now Australia are full of disturbing stories of ecclesiastical practices that have not travelled well in time and which create the impression that various churches were more concerned with protecting their own office-bearers rather than attending to the needs of those designated victims. *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*, in particular, generate a global flow of concern. Hollingworth's days are numbered. In little more than a year he will be forced into the ignominious position of having to stand down from the nation's highest constitutional office.

For the sake of a public theology the Hollingworth crisis is an important episode. The prospect of an ecclesiastical Governor General puts a more visible religious face upon the constitutional structure of a secular, democratic state. The standard practice is to make appointments from the judiciary, the world of politics and the military. This particular selection creates a more immediate Christian presence than is to be found in the inclusion of God in the constitution itself and the customary rites observed in the saying of the Lord's Prayer and the swearing in of members to office. The ceremonial nature of the position and Hollingworth's high clerical status, his ordination, sets him apart from those members of parliament whose personal faith shapes their moral and political concerns. Even at the best of times there is something potentially awkward about the role Hollingworth is being invited to perform. How well he would be regarded was always a question well worth putting in a society whose religious character Marion Maddox has deemed to be one of "innocence" in matters political and cultural. Far too often the skills, experience and a familiarity with religious language are absent and the field is left open "for half-remembered or unfamiliar categories" and "gut-level" reactions.³

³ Maddox, M. 2001. *For God and Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics*. Canberra: Department of the Parliamentary Library, pp. 285-288.

The difficulty in this instance is that Hollingworth does not demonstrate a good understanding of the presenting issues of clerical sexual abuse, let alone the ensuing constitutional crisis. He becomes the “prisoner of Yarralumla” and, “bunkered down”, believes himself to be on the receiving end of a witch-hunt. In the words of the Adelaide columnist, Chris Pearson, he has been “an accident waiting to happen”. The legacy of this protracted sorry affair is the visible failure of a public Christian leadership in high office. The whole business also runs the risk of confirming a basic lack of trust in a self-confessed moral community. Nowhere is this state of play put more succinctly than the Wilcox cartoon.

BALLYHOOING AROUND IN PUBLIC AND “LETTING FLY”

The Hollingworth affair was not on its own in attracting media attention. Its timing was such that it sometimes ran alongside a raft of other contentious appointments and public pronouncements. The momentum was such that FitzSimons was led to proclaim in the *Sydney Morning Herald* “GOD! He’s baaaaack.” On that occasion FitzSimons was, in fact, lamenting the return of God into public debate following the call Peter Jensen, then Archbishop-elect of Sydney, made for the Prime Minister, John Howard, to examine his conscience over whether he should say sorry to the stolen generation.⁴ On this occasion the issue at stake had been the politics of Aboriginal reconciliation. Pressed by reporters on whether or not Howard might be “out of step with God”, Jensen went on to say that if the Prime Minister were present, he would advise him to “keep reading your Bible, keep saying your prayers, keep listening to God”.⁵ In reply Howard had questioned whether there was only a single view on reconciliation and the next day implied that Jensen was running the risk of taking too narrow a view. Howard wondered whether it was a “bit presumptuous” for anyone, including an archbishop, to lay claim to knowing “with such conviction and without any fear of contradiction” the will of the Creator on any given matter.⁶

For FitzSimons this exchange was the thin end of the wedge. It followed hard upon the appointment of Hollingworth, the arrival of the new Catholic Archbishop, George Pell, from Melbourne to “whip us heathen Sydneysiders into shape” and the visit of John Spong, whose claim that Christian belief needed to be reconfigured for the twenty-first century had been aired in the *Herald* the preceding weekend. FitzSimons observed that rarely had “the whole notion of a Christian God been so often discussed in Australia in recent times”.

⁴ “Go tell it on the mountain, with the volume down”. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 2001.

⁵ “God knows you should say sorry, new archbishop tells PM”. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 June 2001.

⁶ “Jensen taking narrow view: PM”. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 June 2001.

For this former sports icon turned successful writer, after dinner speaker/personality (and just maybe celebrity), the problem resided in his belief that matters of religion belonged to the private domain and should not be “ballyhooed around in public”. This was deemed to be the Australian Way and in keeping with the civil character espoused by a democratic system.⁷ It was assumed that this distinction between the public and the private was normative. The underlying assumption was that in a democratic system this was the proper *habitus* for faith. In keeping with the civil virtue of tolerance, FitzSimons had no desire to undermine the best of Christian values which he identified as sharing, caring, honesty and generosity. These were its public virtues and “the world no doubt will be the better” for them. These values were matters of integrity and inter-personal relationships. The line was drawn at the political and the structural. The public spokesmen for the Christian faith were advised not to “insist [that] the rest of us, or our political leaders should go on the same trip as you” because “we are quite happy where we are”. The present public focus on God in the life of the nation was an aberration and business should return to normal as soon as possible.

That passing reference to a “Christian God” was also a signifier of an altered religious landscape. Once upon a time the qualifying term “Christian” would not have been necessary, but now it was clear that Australia was a multi-faith, multicultural society. In the light of a further controversy involving Jensen a couple of months later – this time on how appropriate it was for any religious body to proselytise in a society that had committed itself to tolerance – Stepan Kerkyasharian, chairman of the Community Relations Commission for Multicultural NSW, warned:

We should all remember that whether we like it or not, we are a multicultural and a multi-faith society. We are a democracy and although we all have the right to worship and to preach as we see fit, our government does not assign greater value to any particular religion, nor should any particular religion dominate Australian life.⁸

The extent to which Jensen was at odds with the media over a matter like this was made clear again a couple of months later. On this occasion Jensen informed a packed sports stadium of co-religionists in Wollongong that Anglicans should “spread the Word of the Lord” in a multicultural community and turn their daily lives into opportunities for evangelising. He was subsequently cited by religious affairs correspondent Kelly Burke as saying that “particularly those with a

⁷ “Go tell it on the mountain, with the volume down”. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 2001.

⁸ “Wrong place for conversion kick, Buddhists tell Jensen”. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August 2001.

Buddhist background, were brought to this country by God to enable them to 'share in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.'⁹ Jensen accepted that Australia was now a multicultural nation in which there was a religious pluralism. This public reality was interpreted in the light of evangelism. There might be many cultures living in Australia, but Jensen was adamant that there was only one God.

Two years later Jensen installed his brother, Phillip, as the 11th Dean of Sydney. On this occasion the new incumbent "delivered a broadside attack on secularism, religious tolerance, political correctness and the media in a 40-minute sermon, which Burke claimed "ended in spontaneous applause from some quarters of the cathedral". Such was the nature of his understanding of truth and revelation, Jensen insisted that while there were "many lovely wonderful Hindus and Muslims and Jews and atheists" in Sydney, "their different religions cannot be all right". Some, or all of them must be wrong, and, "if wrong [they] are the monstrous lies and deceits of Satan – devised to destroy the life of believers". The photograph in this instance was of the new Dean standing behind a lectern, asking the congregation to pray for him – to give him boldness – under the caption this time of "letting fly".¹⁰

THE HAIRY LEFTY POINT OF VIEW

These Australian media stories testify to how awkward the public role of the Christian faith has become in this country. It now finds itself as one faith among many faiths in a society the public domain for which is organised along highly secular lines. It is now highly compromised through the Hollingworth affair and is faced with the difficult job of securing the right to be heard in the media on matters of the public good. Is what is on offer here sophisticated and subtle enough for the actual situation in which faith finds itself? The present may bear witness to an upsurge of interest in a public theology, a civil society and a civil religion but, in view of these recent episodes, advocates for such have their work cut out if they wish to concern themselves with revealing alternatives to the contemporary cultural and political imaginary. In the circumstances it is likely that the most practical Christian ethical and theological point of view is going to be hidden away in the well-presented submissions various church and ecumenical agencies make on selected matters of governmental policy.¹¹

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ "No sacred cows in dean's tirade". *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 March 2003.

¹¹ For one description of such, see: Wansbrough, A. 1999. *Speaking Together: A Methodology for the National Council of Churches*. Contribution to Public Policy Debate in Australia. Unpublished thesis. Sydney.

The comparison can be made with the prospect that attended the naming of Rowan Williams as Archbishop of Canterbury. In the lead-up to his installation Williams was invited to be the first primate to be marooned on the popular Radio 4 programme “Desert Island Discs”; he was lauded by a national press not used to having an Archbishop with something “worth saying” for the past forty years – at least, so *The Guardian* reckoned;¹² his being honoured by the Welsh order of Druids, the vision of a fifty-plus Archbishop dancing at a Christian festival for young people, the publication of a volume of poetry, a meditative account of the implications of September 11, and a perceptive account of childhood under threat, *Lost Icons*, attracted widespread interest. The promise of hope his appointment released led to frequent discussions on the future of the Church of England in the media.¹³

This self-confessed “hairy lefty” was clearly a mix of a substantial Christian intellectual presence and a populist at several removes from what was featuring in the media in Sydney. How would the likes of a FitzSimons have responded to an archbishop-designate in the forefront of those calling into question the policies of Prime Minister Tony Blair and the seeming drift to war in Iraq and being feted for such? At this point in proceedings the possibility of a schism over the homosexual clergy was little more than a small dark cloud beginning to form. The only other awkwardness resided in the publication of a report, *Called to Account*, by an evangelical think-tank calling upon all the bishops to resign for the part they have played in falling attendances and the decline in moral standards.¹⁴ In this autumnal season making way for a seeming winter of content, Williams was invited to

¹² See: Brown, A. “The gospel according to the ‘hairy lefty.’” *The Guardian*, 20 December 2002. “... at least – and at last – we’ve got an archbishop who is worth disagreeing with”. *The Times* welcomed the prospect of an Anglican intellectual leadership by means of a simple comparison with his predecessor. Following his appointment George Carey had outlined the Church of England to “an elderly lady, who mutters away to herself in a corner, ignored most of the time”. It was recognised that Williams “promises to be a refreshing, if controversial influence”. See: “Church and State: The new Archbishop demonstrates a passion for big ideas”. *The Times*, 19 December 2002.

¹³ E.g. Simon Jenkins, “The Church may be lost, but save our churches”. *Times* 26 February 2003. “His plight is desperate ... A great British institution is imploding ... There is no time for reform like day one ... The church has fewer than a million Sunday worshippers, one third the size of the National Trust. The Church of England is a parastatal. It claims constitutional privileges. It has its own ‘rotten borough’ of 26 seats in Parliament. More important, it keeps a huge estate of properties empty, dark and at best underused on key sites in the middle of every town and village. Like an absentee landlord. If Dr Williams cannot revive the Church of England he can at least revive the churches of England”.

¹⁴ Stephen Bates, “Bishops must go, say traditionalists”. *The Guardian*. 24 February 2003. The report was designed to coincide with the enthronement of the new Archbishop of Canterbury.

deliver the prestigious BBC Dibleby Lecture. The Australian equivalent would have been for Hollingworth or Jensen to have been asked to give the Boyer Lectures.

The focus for the 2002 Dibleby Lecture was essentially on “why should we do what the government tells us?” The issue at stake was one of legitimacy and all the more pressing because Williams discerned that we live in one of those periods “when the overall worthwhileness of a system begins to look a lot less persuasive”. That positioning question for the lecture was explored in the light of the relative demise of the nation state at the expense of the market state. The nature of this change was such that Williams argued that we need, once again, to think about what it means to be a citizen and “what kind of vacuum [has been] left in our social imagination” through this restructure that has crept up upon us. The subtext read: how do we to make the best decisions for ourselves and how might we think about the role of religious faith in this “volatile and uncharted context”?

For the sake of his reading of the present situation Williams acknowledged his debt to the critical analysis of the American historian and strategist Philip Bobbitt.¹⁵ In this new climate government is taking leave of the functions it has exercised in a nation state. These were seen as the promise of effective defence against outside attack (rendered a “nonsense” in an era of intercontinental missile technology) and a high degree of internal stability. The latter was “based on a firm directive hand in the economy and a safety net of public welfare provision”. Now the function of government in the market state was to “clear a space for individuals or groups to do their own negotiating”. The public space is one of deregulation and the “franchising” of various sorts of provisions – “from private prisons to private pensions”. In this frame of reference Bobbitt reckons that politics becomes, in effect, consumerist and “a matter of insurance”. It is organised along the lines of wooing voters for what they believe will “guarantee the maximum possible freedom to buy their way out of insecurity”.

In making this review of the public order Williams is not interested in making a “lament for lost community or a denunciation of neo-liberal economics”. The issue at stake is the legitimacy of the market state’s claim upon us and how do we decide what is for the best, especially “if we are to avoid the reduction of politics to instantaneous button-pressing responses to surface needs”.¹⁶ Williams’ horizon is

¹⁵ Subsequently Bobbitt commended Williams for the accuracy of the Archbishop’s reading of his argument. Bobbitt was conscious of how some critics of the Dibleby Lecture had not read his book, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*. The issue at stake did not concern whether the state was declining or the nation dying. Bobbitt’s thesis was focused upon the relationship between the two.

¹⁶ Williams’ critics were inclined to argue that he had misread the nature of the market economy and the role of the state.

the more distant future rather than the immediate; his concern is for the “overall pattern of the human world” and not whether “it’s the most profitable course of action here and now for you as an individual”. The dilemma he senses is what has happened to a sense of cumulative experience, growth or learning in a marketised environment. Is society now sufficiently self-aware of its history? Do we know where we have come from? Can we situate ourselves inside a “story” that is part of us but which also stretches behind us and beyond us? Are we able to “inhabit a tradition with confidence, fully aware that it isn’t the only possible perspective on persons and things, but equally aware that they are part of a network of relations and conventions far wider than what is instantly visible or even instantly profitable?”

This is the point at which in his argument Williams becomes more self-consciously a public theologian. That reference to tradition allows him to focus on the role of religions and more specifically “the sheer presence of the church”. Without wishing to downplay institutional religion’s history of violence, Williams argues that religious traditions necessarily relate us to the eternal. They are not confined to “my needs” and “each item in our environment”. They play a part then in making space for a bigger picture concerning the purpose of humankind. On a level of practice it is also in the nature of the market economy to look for possibilities of partnership. The tendency for a liberal, modern society to think of public life in secular categories and assume that religious beliefs are a purely private matter has given way to this new model of public action. The invitation is there for religious communities to bring “their beliefs into practical contact with public questions”, to become “brokers” for those who are disadvantaged, and play a part in community regeneration.¹⁷

This lecture elicited substantial comment. There was a proper intellectual debate. For the sake of a public theology one of the most perceptive was a column by Stephen Plant in *The Times*. Its theme was concerned with how hard it is for today’s “religious leaders to speak about public issues”. Plant looked beyond the surface responses of card-carrying Christians who criticised Williams “for not using his television platform to preach the gospel” and those outside the church who saw no place for God in politics. As a matter of fact, the most striking reaction to the lecture Plant identified was how “seriously” it was taken and how it had indeed elicited a respectful, thought-through response from the Home Secretary, David Blunkett. The comparison was favourably made with the more typical response “representatives of religious communities” experienced of being ignored or lampooned. On the receiving end of such treatment Plant observed that religious

¹⁷ Williams, R. “The Richard Dimpleby Lecture”. 19 December 2002. Andrew Brown observed that the kind of programme Williams is talking about is “too ambitious for conventional politics”. *The Guardian*, 20 December 2002.

leaders “can sound like a distant relative who takes offence at being missed of the wedding invitation”. The core problem he discerned, though, was much more deep-seated and concerns the very nature of how a public theology is practised. It boils down to a question of authority and of how a particular language or discourse has lost its persuasive presence.

The entry point into this debate was *via* a consideration of the prophetic model religious leaders are inclined to assume when they exercise a social and political role.¹⁸ Plant puts his finger firmly upon the hermeneutical pressure point. The contemporary religious leader does not speak into a society that possesses a common moral code and, more importantly, is not accustomed to acknowledging individuals who lay claim to a divinised authority. The tendency to think in categories of a prophetic ministry seldom labours this “crucial difference” between the Hebrew there and then and our here and now. Even the most unpopular of biblical prophets addressed their message to a “moral and social framework shared by rulers, people and prophets and underwritten by God”. For all the vigour of its critique of market-style consumer values, the Dimpleby Lecture could not presuppose such an audience. The difficulty facing Williams was further compounded because of the way in which the pronouncing of the Christian *kerygma* can now be received in the public domain. In a “simple bit” of etymological research Plant identified how words like ‘sermonise’, ‘preachy’, ‘dogma’ and ‘pontificate’ had first come to be equated with browbeating, arrogantly asserting opinions, and opinionated pomposity. For the future well-being of a public theology – so well exemplified by Williams – the omens are not particularly promising. Once upon a time a neutral term for the study of God, Plant conceded that “theology is increasingly used to denote all forms of unreasoning”. It now attracts negative associations and can lend itself to the view that religious words are of “judgmental, moralising nature” and reflect a practice of “speaking at people rather than with them”. With no common moral framework there is no underlying authority that would command a hearing when faith lives out a public prophetic vocation. Plant concluded that it is becoming “very hard to distinguish prophetic ministry from sermonising dogma” and that it is “going to get harder still for bishops, arch or otherwise, to make themselves heard”.¹⁹

¹⁸ On several occasions Williams has been “seen more like a prophet than anything else”. In this role he has attracted a comparison with Archbishop William Temple. For example, see Andreas Whittam Smith, “It is rare to have a prophet as an archbishop”. *The Independent*, 24 February 2003.

¹⁹ Plant, R.S. “It’s hard now to distinguish ministry from sermonizing dogma”. *The Times*, 18 January 2003, p.43.

ON THE POLITICS OF BEING PREPARED TO MEET "MY MAKER"

Of these forays into the public domain Williams' entrance was of a different class. There was considerable respect for his capacity for argument; his hairy lefty visage seemed to bestow upon him a prophetic *gravitas*. And yet the point is well made by Plant. In a secular Western democracy it is very difficult for a public theological voice to make itself heard in a way that secures some standing in the community. The problem does not always reside, then, in the calibre of the Christian spokesman/woman or the merits of the case they mount. The dilemma is that not all public marketplaces welcome the religious discourse. To put Williams' Lecture into perspective on this score, the comparison can be made with reaction to Tony Blair's willingness to "meet his Maker" in the wake of the recent Iraqi War.

The occasion was an interview Blair gave as Prime Minister to Peter Stothard for *The Times Magazine*.²⁰ Following the death of seven Iraqi women and children at a checkpoint, Blair had let it be known that he was prepared to answer before God for "those who have died or have been horribly maimed as a result of my decisions". It quickly became clear that Blair's turn to God was not the done thing in British politics. Presidents in the United States might be able to invoke God and Generals and see the conflict with terrorism as a battle with Satan, but not so in Westminster. Michael Grove invited his readers to consider:

Be honest how did you feel? Scornful of this Christian Soldier enlisting God to the colours for his Holy War? Or embarrassed that a grown man of 50 entrusted with the fate of the country was rattling his rosaries in the nation's face?²¹

Former Tory politician and now columnist Matthew Paris wondered if Blair had become "somewhat unhinged". In an interview on Radio 5 it was clear that Parris was not merely scoring a cheap political point. This being prepared to meet one's Maker for the political decisions made in public office implies a purity of intention, the conviction that good intentions can only lead to good results and that, in the long run, the Prime Minister believes he will win people over – almost by divine right.²²

For some time previously there had been a certain nervousness with respect to Blair's faith in those close to the Prime Minister. It was widely known that he read the Bible while on holiday. To Roman Catholic objection he took Mass with his family. He had been criticised for allowing himself to be pictured at a school

²⁰ *The Times Magazine*, 3 May 2003.

²¹ Michael Grove. "Thank God for politicians who take their cue from above". *The Times*, 6 May 2003.

²² Kamal Ahmed. "Unease as Blair lays soul bare". *The Observer*, 4 May 2003.

standing before a stained glass window with a hymn book in hand. The occasion had been the launch of Labour's 1998 election campaign. Writing in *The Guardian* Alexander Chancellor reckoned that Blair had looked more like an American television evangelist than a Prime Minister seeking re-election. The extent to which his key advisers believed that "religion plays badly" with the political public was starkly revealed in the pressure brought to bear on him prior to the broadcast to the nation at the start of the war. Blair had to be persuaded to drop the phrase "God Bless You". He was reminded that "you are talking to lots of people who don't want chaplains pushing stuff down their throats". Blair said "thank you" for the advice but declared them to be "an ungodly lot".²³ On another occasion his principal adviser, Alistair Campbell, butted into an interview before Blair had much of a chance to catch his breathe and said, "We don't do God."

This public, political space is constructed in a way that God-talk is excluded. The widespread assumption is that nothing opens a politician to more ridicule than religion. Grove observed that when George W. Bush declared that "his favourite philosopher was Jesus Christ, the scorn on this side of the Atlantic could not have been greater if he'd said Homer Simpson". By way of an aside, Blair's fascination is with Pontius Pilate – "the quintessential politician who listened too much to his advisers, bowed before public opinion, and acquiesced through inaction in the perpetration of evil". The prevailing secular belief is that religion is the "handmaid of inflexibility, arrogance, and intolerance". In this particular situation Blair's confidence in an apparent Christian virtue of prosecuting a controversial war was seen as likely to inflame further disaffected Muslim opinion. The case Grove made in favour of a politician owning his faith was isolated. No one else seemed to buy into the possibility that faith could incline a man to humility rather than arrogance, sharpen his conscience, or extend his sympathies.

TRADING PLACES

There is a considerable hermeneutical and geographical distance between these public encounters of faith at opposite ends of the world. The difference is not simply one of personalities and expertise. Nor is it even simply a case of having to attend to a raft of discrete issues particular to a given society. That which requires close examination is how a public faith is constructed in a specific culture. It is a complex business with histories attached. There is a close intersection between the public and contextual natures of theology that needs to be teased out rather than it being assumed that a public faith in one location is essentially the same in another. The ease with which we can talk about the importance of a public faith in both societies should not create the illusion that what we have here is an emerging

²³ Webster, P. *The Times*, 3 May 2003.

discipline that is universal in its intention and form. Why a public theology is necessary in the first place, its method, its audience, the issues that must be engaged and which biblical and theological themes are likely to be invoked and with what effect are peculiar. Hollingworth, Howard and Jensen belong to an Australian story. It is not possible for them to trade places with Williams and Blair as if one context is exactly the same as the other.

The most obvious difference between the two locations is made plain in the response of Helen Irving to Peter Costello's recent call for a return to the values of the Ten Commandments. The Treasurer's argument that this biblical tradition exemplified a range of universal values that had laid the foundations of modern Australia was welcomed in pentecostal and evangelical circles concerned about contemporary "moral decay". In terms of Plant's *schema* Costello had opted for the preachy model. The symptoms of this cultural condition he diagnosed were the level of gangland violence in Melbourne and the words of the popular rap artist Eminem. These references fulfilled the equivalent function of sermon illustrations. Costello duly paid eloquent tribute to those gathered to hear him "who have not, in their hearts, acquiesced to the kind of decay that is around us". These were the godly about to be publicly thanked, for

[t]hey earnestly pray for the expansion of faith and yearn for higher standards. They will get up tomorrow and go to their places of worship in suburbs and towns across the country, affirm the historic Christian faith, and go to work on Monday as law-abiding citizens who want their marriages to stay together, their children to grow up to be healthy and useful members of society, and their homes to be happy. They care deeply about our society and where it is going. These people will not get their names in the media. They will not be elected to anything. They will not be noisy lobbyists. But they are the steadying influence, the ballast of our society when it shakes with moral turbulence".²⁴

Costello subsequently declared that he received more letters of a positive nature on this particular address delivered at a Hillsong gathering in Sydney and the National Thanksgiving Day of Prayer in Melbourne than any other he has delivered. There was another side to the coin. This well-publicised address also elicited clever, sometimes witty, counter claims as to why the Decalogue has "little meaning for this era" and why we should, therefore, "disregard the gospel

²⁴ Costello, P. "Address to National Day of Thanksgiving Commemoration". Scots Church, Melbourne, 29 May 2004.
Online: <http://www.treasurer.gov.au/tsr/content/speeches/2004/007.asp>

according to St. Peter".²⁵ The style of media response was similar, at this point, in tone to how Blair's invocation of his Maker was treated in the London newspapers. The difference in settings was left for Irving.

The critical issue was the impression that Costello had seemingly given that Christianity was the "official religion" of Australia. In actual fact he had not made this claim at all: Costello had referred to the Judeo-Christian-Western tradition as being the "single most decisive feature" in the nation's heritage; it had "determined the way" this society had developed. This reading of history had then been coupled with the lament over moral decay and the need for a recovery of these commandments which Costello reckoned to be "the foundation of that tradition". Following a now well-trod path in media coverage of matters political and religious, Irving found this conjunction of themes offensive "to the many decent and honourable Australians who are either non-religious or follow another faith". This concern, though, was incidental to the risk Costello's address ran of "distorting our history" and "secular heritage". The point Irving wished to labour was constitutional. The Preamble to the Commonwealth Constitution makes reference to "Humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God"; Section 116 expressly prohibits the Commonwealth from establishing a religion, requiring or prohibiting religious practice, or imposing any religious test for public office. For Irving the foundations of Australia were "definitely and deliberately not Christian". The comparison was drawn with English precedent and the lack of an established church. It was also noted how the Australian constitutional option differed from the First Amendment in the United States Constitution.²⁶

For the sake of developing a public theology in this country these differences must be taken into account. The public forum in Australia has never been organised along the lines of what Rex Ahdar, across the Tasman, has identified as the "Constantinian impulse".²⁷ On occasion mainline denominations may have fulfilled the function of being a *de facto* or quasi-establishment, but seldom have they exercised the right to be represented that attends the mere fact of being a national church. Time and time again leaders in the church have been advised not to meddle in public affairs; their proper public role is to wait upon the spiritual needs of their members and demonstrate pastoral care and social service. In the

²⁵ Bone, P. "Disregard the gospel according to St. Peter". *The Age*, 13 July 2004.

²⁶ Irving, H. "Australia's foundations were definitely and deliberately not Christian". *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 June 2004.

²⁷ Ahdar, R. 2000. "New Zealand and the Idea of a Christian State". In R. Ahdar & J. Stenhouse (eds.) 2000. *God and Government: The New Zealand Experience*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, pp. 59-76. On the role of the Christian presence and mainline denominations in Australia, see Breward, I. 1993. *A History of the Australian Churches*. 1993. St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, especially "The Conclusion", pp. 218-234.

opinion of Andrew Downer failure to keep within these limits is likely to go hand in hand with a disregard of orthodox believing.²⁸ Neil Darragh has discerned that in these circumstances

religious positions [in Australia and New Zealand] have to be justified in the public forum. They are not taken for granted as legitimate standpoints for public debate. They are more likely to be seen as foreign, or leftovers of a past age, or strictly personal which means they are private not public and can be expressed but not advocated. In this context, Christian theology has a public voice only if it is itself consistent and coherent, and if the message is backed by witness, that is, if Christians practise what theology preaches".²⁹

DARE WE SPEAK OF GOD IN PUBLIC?

That close link between proclamation and practice is a necessary dialectic for a public theology wherever it is situated. The actual examples already cited on both sides of the world provide "concrete" examples of Christian theology and ethics at work in the public space. This reference to the concrete stands inside the claim made by Alistair MacFadyen that theology must be put to the test in specific life situations. The very nature of a public theology presupposes this act of commitment, but MacFadyen's wariness concerning these matters must be taken into account. The temptation facing a contemporary theology he has discerned is the risk of "collapsing the transcendent into secular frames of reference – into ways of speaking about the world which pragmatically exclude God".³⁰ We inhabit public cultures that are well used to the habitual exclusion of God and consigning religious matters to individual choice and enclaves of the like-minded. Even in the community of faith we often utilise frameworks of understanding which MacFadyen argues assume the practical irrelevance of God. We make use of a range of disciplines that shape the way in which we live in our contemporary culture and organise our institutions. We might then just append what MacFadyen calls a "Post-It™ label theology". Some God-talk is added but in such a way that is not really necessary. It makes little difference to the description whether it is stuck on or removed. MacFadyen concludes that "it adds precisely nothing at the level of explanation and understanding to baptise and bless conclusions arrived at by

²⁸ Downer, A. 2003. "Sir Thomas Playford Lecture 2003". In S. Leppert & F. Sullivan (eds.) 2003. *The Church and Civil Society*. Hindmarsh: Australian Theological Forum, pp. 13-20.

²⁹ Darragh, N. "Adjusting to the Newcomer: Theology and Ecotheology". *Pacifica*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 161-180, p. 163.

³⁰ MacFadyen, A. 2000. *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 43.

secular means for secular reasons".³¹ The underlying assumption in MacFadyen's position is that theological language should not be left at a level of metaphysical and ontological abstraction. This kind of discourse has its place, but for theology to be relevant and liberative it must engage with concrete issues.

For the construction of a public theology, the case MacFadyen makes is basic. These particular examples demonstrate a range of public interfaces in societies that can be categorised as liberal and pluralist. They "happen" in the media-constructed civic domain without any *a priori* theological explanation. They occur as items that attract attention for a span of time until they are upstaged by further events that have little or no connection with them. The public is invited in the meantime to notice, but without the benefit of a sustained theory as to how and why the Christian faith should shape its thought on the common good of a society. For the sake of its own self-understanding (at the very least) it is high time that a Christian theology and its ethics clarify its public relevance.

SETTING THE AGENDA

The purpose of this paper has been designed on the basis that a public theology does not just happen. It may be that religious and theological issues come to the public notice in a more or less *ad hoc* manner. The presenting issue may be cultural diversity, immigration, refugees, economic neo-liberalism, genetic technology – or war and peace.³² It matters little. We now live in a complex post-Christian society which prizes freedom and tolerance and where there is "no compelling public proof of the absolute character of Christian revelation" and its claims on life.³³ In such a setting the Christian faith is one voice among many and is itself subject to considerable variation.³⁴ The irony of this wider post-modern social condition is that the particularity of cultural symbols, values and language is more admissible than had hitherto been the case. There is a public place for concrete traditions but these traditions cannot exercise a unifying, unitary function over the whole of that society. The most they can do is draw from the rich resources of that tradition and set about to secure a hearing in the public forum. The task is imaginative, persuasive and one that is willing to respond to and learn from others in that

³¹ *Ibid.* pp. 5-13.

³² Both Rowan Williams and Peter Jensen were regularly cited in the media on matters related to the drift to war with Iraq and whether such a war could be viewed as just.

³³ Gascoigne, R. 2001. *The Public Forum and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 92. It is often claimed that this freedom is conceived of as freedom from interference rather than freedom for a common shared reality.

³⁴ In a post-Christian society the following conundrum is lived out: does sensitivity to Christian values (however they are conceived) require a fully explicit Christian faith?

domain. It is not about “letting fly”. There is a need to win the right to be heard, and this is a difficult proposition in the wake of the events that led to the Wilcox cartoon, “Let us prey.”

In performing this task a public theology seeks to act out theology’s proper “ecology of responsibility”. The Cambridge theologian David Ford has identified that ecology as being concerned with how theology engages with the interweaving of three audiences: the church, the academy and the public domain.³⁵ The concern of a public theology is with bearing witness to faith’s own formative narratives concerning Christ and looking towards the constructing of a vision for humanity and the common good in keeping with its own “kingdom of ends”. For Robert Gascoigne such a practical outworking of this ecology lies at the heart of Christian identity, its conception of the gospel itself and its understanding of the nature of evangelisation. It is not an optional extra. For the Sydney-based Gascoigne the underlying issue at stake is the relationship between revelation and ethics.³⁶

In the Australian context this ecology is seldom recognised and often lies at an implied level and under great pressure. At the best of times faith in this country is not comfortable with paradigm shifts in method, fresh scholarly insights and the sheer necessity of theology. It is more likely to think of the task of a faith in search of understanding having already been accomplished and now is the time for finding and funding the right programmes of leadership, mission and evangelism. This package is difficult to unwrap and the consequences are far-reaching. The *ecclesia* does not necessarily have a long experience with the university concerning theology and its mix of innocence and nervousness shows. The economic rationalist ethos of the day can find it difficult to get beyond categories of ownership and servicing what it deems to be the “core business” of the denomination rather than the actual tasks of an intellectual discipline. The ever-present risk of a theology that is bound to ecclesial convention is that it can easily become overly concerned with personal salvation. It operates along the lines Daniel Hardy has described as “what consenting adults do in private”.³⁷ Gascoigne and Neil Brown reckon that the Australian churches have done precisely this, through their tendency to see faith as

³⁵ Ford, D. 1999. *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 19-21.

³⁶ See Gascoigne, R. *op. cit.*, pp. 1-10.

³⁷ Hardy, D. 1996. “The Public Nature of Theology.” In *God’s Ways With The World: Thinking and Practising Christian Faith*. T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, pp. 206-216.

more a private, rather than a public, matter – a situation that the churches, for the most part have acquiesced to and even reproduced in their own theology and practice.³⁸

The other effect of this ecology being insufficiently recognised is the modest nature of the intersection between the academy and the public. The latter is often construed in terms of responding to a raft of *ad hoc* issues and espousing a litany of core Christian principles. It can also be viewed more in the light of securing a voice in the media or an imaginative presence in the arts. All these things have their place, but they do not engage with a deeper agenda. The formal, more academic discipline of a public theology is not merely concerned with identifying the civic domain and how appropriate submissions can be made. It delves into the very structure of Christian beliefs. What is the public relevance of one Christian doctrine after another? What is the received Christian wisdom and how might this tradition draw upon its biblical and theological resources for the sake of the creation's well-being? How can theology recover its rhetoric of persuasion in the wake of the broader church's public discredit? In what ways can theology furnish a new imagination for a church and society that is increasingly governed by discourses of management, executive blindspots, and what economics permits?

There is a task to be done here. Here in this country we are in a privileged position of being able to look over our shoulders and catch a glimpse of how biblical and theological scholars in similar styles of societies have undertaken this work. In the long run we need to do our own. Whether the appropriate ecology of responsibility can be nurtured and an adequate infrastructure can be put in place is the lingering question. In the present climate of the Uniting Church it is difficult to be confident.

³⁸ Brown, N. & Gascoigne, R. (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. vii.

CIVIL RELIGION, POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND PUBLIC THEOLOGY: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?¹

Max L. Stackhouse²

The central thesis of this article is that the public role of religion, specifically the Christian religion, can be clarified if we recognise the differences between three often-confused terms: “civil religion”, “political theology” and “public theology”, each of which has a distinct pedigree and entails a particular set of assumptions and implications.³ Moreover, each of these differs from, even if it draws at points on, the confessions and practices of church religion, usually articulated in various creeds or liturgies and given extended, rationalised articulation by the dogmatic theologies of these specific Christian traditions. We should also want to distinguish these three terms from the constructions of systematic theology. Any one of them can be studied in a systematic fashion, of course; but systematic theology is primarily a work of the modern academy, which attempts to elucidate the insights of revelation in the light of critical thought, especially as these insights encounter, respond to or adopt from and adapt to developments in various methods of philosophy or science. Public theology is surely also developed with attention to these modes of study, but its main reason for coming into being is that a new and wider public is in formation. The projects of civil religion, political theology and public theology take the world’s religions and cultures more seriously than most systematic efforts. The goal of finding a more inclusive, genuinely ecumenical and catholic way of identifying a valid, viable inner convictional and ethical framework on which to build the moral and spiritual architecture of our increasingly common life is indispensable.⁴

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³ This paper is intrinsically related to “What is Public Theology? An American View”, presented at a conference on “public theology” in Prague in May 2003, co-sponsored by the Theological Faculty of Charles University and the Center for Theological Inquiry of Princeton Theological Seminary.

⁴ This view differs from three of the most important current understandings of globalisation. For instance, Immanuel Wallerstein interprets globalisation almost entirely in economic terms in *The Capitalist World-Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

To speak of ecumenical, even intra-religious dialogue and communication, raises still another point of inquiry in the midst of a postmodern mood, when many despair of, and others delight in, the presumed impossibility of finding any commonalities in a fragmented, multicultural and pluralistic world. The temptation of neo-sectarian religiosity and localistic neo-tribalism as particularist groups re-assert sub-cultural values as a form of self-celebrating religious idolatry is a present danger in the churches and in the world. It is true, as many recognise, that the age of national creeds established by political regimes, once a practice in the ancient world reasserted in modernity in the legacy of Westphalia, and resurrected in the nationalist movements of the decolonialization period, is over. To be sure, it lingers in Europe; as one can see in the difficulties in forming an EU Constitution. That difficulty is compounded by the reluctance to put any reference to religion in their proposed constitution; yet people know that Italy or Ireland cannot be understood without reference to Catholicism, or Germany or Sweden without Lutheranism, or Holland or Scotland without Calvinism. And, even more, none of them can be understood without reference to the Christian heritage. The echoes are there in influential ways, and they reappear in the de-colonialized nations, including America, in the various “civil religions” of national identity and cultural idolatry, as we saw also in the recent vicious holocausts of the Balkans and Central Africa, with all sides invoking their own religio-cultural identity to justify ethnic cleansing. I shall argue that this dynamic differs not only from dogmatic and systematic theology, but also from “political theology” and “public theology”, although there is some confusion about the differences.⁵

We know the marks of civil religion in this land as “Americanism”, sometimes called the ‘Shinto’ of the United States. We are not alone in having such a religion, and there is surely a place for a limited patriotism in the repertoire of human loyalties, even among those most faithful to their theological tradition. Yet, it may

Press, 1979). David Held *et al.*, in contrast, uses a three-level analysis of economy, politics and culture, with politics basically determining both the economic and cultural developments, in *Global Transformations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). In contrast to both, Samuel P. Huntington, in his famous *The Clash of Civilisations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) and even more in the collection he edited with Lawrence Harrison, *Culture Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), argues that cultures shaped by religion form irreconcilable civilisations that are decisive for political and economic development. None of these see theology as decisive for the critique or reformation of religion, culture, political and economic life.

⁵ E. Harold Breitenberg, Jr. has documented the variety of uses of the term in his extremely useful essay, “To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up”.

2003. *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23.2 (2003), pp. 55-96, from which I draw with the permission of the author.

be a particularly weighty issue for the US since it has, today, so much political, military, economic and cultural influence around the world, and has apparently not quite decided whether or not it should become a new empire to fill the power vacuum left by the successive collapses of the old Roman Empire, the Germanic Holy Roman Empire, and the pluralistic empires of the Turkish Ottomans, the Chinese dynasties, and the wide-flung attempts at imperialism that issued in colonialism by the European powers – of which the British generated the greatest and most enduring of them all with comparatively better legacies left in colonized lands when colonialism ended. But these are not all that has collapsed. In the living memory of many still today is the collapsed pretence of the Third Reich, the collapsed, temporary but nearly worldwide empire of the USSR, and the failure of the United Nations to respond effectively to the Balkan and Central African genocides, residual forms of Communism as in North Korea, the challenge of resurgent and militant forms of Islam, or, for that matter, fundamentalist Hinduism in India and militarized Buddhism in Burma and Sri Lanka. Besides, Americanist civil religion is often baptized—usually sprinkled, not immersed—by the symbols of the world's largest faith, namely Christianity, and currently of a distinctly Evangelical type. This baptism seems to many Americans to legitimate a Christian view of national policy. This current Evangelical emphasis is a two-edged sword. On one hand, it typically transcends the kind of sectarian pietism that besets the neo-Anabaptist camp, so popularized in the US by Stanley Hauerwas. But it is doubtful, on the other hand, if it can constrain, and may even enhance, an imperialistic impulse, and if it does encourage that impulse, it does not seem capable of guiding it toward the formation of a Pax Humanitatis. The reason is simple. Current Evangelicalism in the US lacks an articulate political or social theory except for a generalised patriotism. In contrast, both “political theology” and “public theology” do. They draw from certain indispensable aspects of theology that have been neglected and that have within them both critical analyses of populist, chauvinist religion and constructive visions of basic political and social matters – today often neglected by many scholarly observers, and overshadowed or even shouted down by a number of recent theological developments.⁶ It is, indeed, a major ideational conflict, fateful for the world, as to whether the American civil religion, sprinkled with Evangelical piety or the deeper public and political implications of Christianity, come to guide US policy. But before we turn

⁶ The attempt to challenge contemporary scholarship in the West on these matters (as well as to provide an alternative vision for the future to the “liberationism” worked out in the “new nations” in their de-colonializing period, nearly all of which generated ethnic- and class-oriented “civil religions” by combining socialist theory with traditionalist values and a primitivist reading of the Bible) is a primary purpose of the current project on *God and Globalisation* (4 vols.; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000, 2001, 2003 and forthcoming).

to the comparative analysis of these two terms and their structural implications, we should note that the discussion of “civil religion” rose in the United States especially after World War II and note why it is suspect.

While, in one sense, America had emerged as a world power while opposing imperialism in the Spanish-American War in the nineteenth century, it only became a world leader in the last half of the twentieth century. This highly pluralistic nation, long ago founded on the basis of theological orientations that supported religious freedom, constitutional democracy, human rights and open economic opportunity, had to clarify its core values again. (A *New Yorker* cartoon shows two Puritans on the ship about to land on the shores of old New England. One says to the other: “Well, first I am going to establish religious freedom and democracy, then I am going into real estate.”) But as the fervor of World War II settled down, and it became manifestly clear that the USSR was no longer an ally against a common enemy, but a serious adversary itself, backing regimes or revolutionary movements in China, Korea and the southern hemisphere, and the European nations were too weakened to resist its blandishments alone, the United States had to redefine its principles and its purposes. It was the great Jewish sociologist, Will Herberg, who published a widely discussed sociological essay that spoke of the shared values held by believers in the United States. He wrote of the ways in which Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism were, after World War II, more and more to be seen as sister denominations, branches of a single religious family that converged politically and socially at reunions as in times of tragedy or celebration.⁷ Herberg used the term “civic religion” to describe what they shared as the religious aspect of “Americanism”, a term more catchy than what a number of social historians were already treating as “the religion of the republic”. Herberg was more clear than several others that each pillar of this shared canopy of conviction retained its own distinctive faith and practice. Soon thereafter, another well-known sociologist, Robert Bellah, published one of his famous essays on “civil religion”.⁸ He drew not only from Alexis de Tocqueville, but also from Emil Durkheim’s adaptation of the term from Rousseau’s *Contrât social* (Ch. viii). And when we look closely at Rousseau’s treatment of it, we find something not unlike Herberg’s argument, but with an exclusive reference to one view of Christianity. There is a religion that many people hold, which Rousseau says is “truly Christian” (that is “purely spiritual” and thus “private to the soul”), but something else must govern the life of the nation. And that, in fact, is the view of Cicero, to whom he refers. In *De Legibus* (Book II), Cicero treats the kinds of religious beliefs and practices that should be accepted or forbidden by political authority to insure the sacred solidarity of the citizenry, so that loyalty to Rome should not be undercut

⁷ W. Herberg. 1955, rev. ed. 1960. *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

⁸ Bellah, R.N. “Civil Religion in America”. *Daedalus* 96 (1967), pp. 1-21.

by the worship of any non-native or trans-national deities. Rousseau, of course, had adopted this idea of civil religion shortly before the French Revolution, and spoke of the necessity of each nation cultivating its own symbols to express the primal freedom of “the people” and cultivating a “general will” (a concept against church dogma that puts belief on a voluntarist basis forming a national collective consciousness). The displacement of all trans-nationalist, indeed transcendental, religion by the Revolution made Christian conviction a matter of private preference only, by law. The ideologues of the revolutionary tradition then constructed for political purposes a “civil religion” built out of the presumed distinctive character of the people’s ethnic unity. It is the sort of thing that caused Augustine to call the civic virtues spelled out by Cicero, “splendid vices”, and that allowed Barth to be so hostile to natural theology and religion, which he understood to be a kind of culturally manufactured idolatry. Bellah, by the way, later modified his reliance on this history, ceased using the term, and became more overtly theological.⁹

In Europe, especially the Germanic and Scandinavian lands, but also in England, a different kind of tradition developed after World War II. It is the tradition of “political theology”, one that has its deepest philosophical roots in Aristotle, who had influenced all higher education in Catholic and Anglican lands since St Thomas, and in Lutheran ones since Melancthon. Aristotle saw the political order as the comprehending and ordering institution of all of society. That view was, of course, later modified by St Thomas because of his Augustinian understanding of the central role of the church and theology in society, distinct from the political order; nevertheless the Aristotelian view became dominant in most post-feudal European states and the primary pattern of the aristocratic politics of the Continent. It was present not only in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Central Europe, and the Catholic establishments in Italy, Poland, Spain and Ireland, but also in the later history of politically established Protestant churches after the Westphalian principle of *cuius regio, ius religio*. This not only established national churches, it also tended to subordinate those religions to the political order in an Erastian fashion. Every princely state had its own “confession”, “catechism” or “articles of faith”, and mandated “book of worship”.

When European society began to secularize and religion became more and more like a public utility, other forms of political theology were developed. While the deepest roots of political theology are in Eusebius’s view of Constantine, in the development after the Reformation of “national creeds or confessions”, and in Spinoza’s *Politico-Theological Treatise*, the term was brought into modern usage by Carl Schmitt, following Machiavelli and Hobbes, on the right, and used by Ernst

⁹ See the debates over this in R.N. Bellah *et al.* in R.L. Petersen (ed.). 1995. *Christianity and Civil Society*. New York, NY: Orbis Press.

Bloch, following Münzer and drawing on Marx, on the left. One side saw the use of coercive force at the will of the sovereign as the defining characteristic of regime (on the analogy of the will and omnipotence of God), and the other saw economic power and private property as the primary social issue, disrupting the natural order of things and needing revolutionary political action from below that would issue in a recovered communal harmony (a utopian vision of the future that is also a return to Eden). Both the right and the left offered a political programme for finding a final solution to the crises of modernising society.

After the defeat of the Nazis on the right and the rise of Stalinism on the left, a generation of revisionist political theologians turned to Gramsci, Blondel and the Frankfurt School of critical theory. They both fed and drew from the anti-colonial movements that overthrew the world dominance of European powers and established a host of independent nation-states around the world. They did not foresee that many of these would become one-party regimes with religion still playing the Erastian role of subservient subordination to, and ideological support of, cultural identity and national interest.

The statist idolatries of this heritage were, of course, challenged theologically in the European context during the last half-century under the powerful influence of Karl Barth's return to church- and dogma-centred theology, as articulated in the Barmen Declaration, as well as by the honoring of the martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And they were informed by American pro-democratic theologies in the tradition of Ernst Troeltsch, already mobilised during World War II by such voices as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, as well as by ecumenically oriented Catholic leaders who became convinced that democracy and human rights are not, as the anti-Catholic French Revolution had claimed, purely secular. Indeed they came to see that they are implications of the deepest reaches of the Christian tradition, and had to be defended and extended, by political and even military means if necessary.¹⁰

The new wave of political theology advanced on the Continent was represented by the reformist and overtly democratic political theologies of Catholic Johannes Metz and Reformed Jürgen Moltmann. They became influential, respectively, in Vatican II and the World Council of Churches. Their work signalled a form of political theology guided by the idea not only that the pastor, believer and theologian may address public matters, but in fact must do so, since the policies of every political order needs direct guidance and transformation at the hands of theological-ethical insight. And yet, all the heirs of these developments remained committed to a

¹⁰ See Elisabeth Sifton. 2003. *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton. As the daughter of Reinhold Niebuhr, she gives an "inside account" not only of the piety of the Niebuhrs, but of the religious and political leaders who gathered around her father to mobilise public religious sentiment to resist the Nazis and overcome American isolation and fundamentalism.

rather centralised state, a state not focused on colonial expansion or military conquest or nationalist solidarity, but on an integrated and politically managed economic policy. Scott Paeth has argued, on this point, that the crises of the Continent at the hands of twentieth-century totalitarianism forced democratically oriented political theologians such as Metz and Moltmann to be more statist than other aspects of their theology would suggest.¹¹ A similar argument could be made that the same is true for the progressive advocate of political theology, Duncan Forrester, and the more conservative advocate of it, Oliver O'Donovan, in Great Britain,¹² and of Reinhold Niebuhr in the USA in certain stages of his thought.

In contrast to both "civil religion" and "political theology", which remain in wide usage, a number of scholars and church leaders have turned to the term "public theology". These terms was first used in America by the well-known historian of religion, Martin Marty. For some time, he had written about "the public church" or "public religion",¹³ which shared with the concept of "civil religion" the recognition that religious influence often becomes institutionalized in general sets of cultural convictions of the people, and reinforces patriotic values. But, when writing on Reinhold Niebuhr and the developments of "Christian Realism", after World War II, he specifically tied the term "public theology" to the American experience.¹⁴

This shift of terms of course raises many questions about the relationship of theology to religion. Is theology basically the more systematic statement of religious experience and belief, as Schleiermacher argued? Is theology, at least Christian theology, opposed to religion, especially civil religion, because it focuses on faith and revelation, and not on any cultural creation, as Barth claimed? Or is theology a critical and reconstructive discipline that is developed to assess, reform and guide religious belief so that it issues in what is true, just and cross-culturally fitting to the human condition and historical existence, as Niebuhr sought to do it? Marty, in speaking of Niebuhr, not only pointed to the fact that political realism demanded the public invocation of a radical doctrine of sin, but to the fact that we can recognise the reality of sin implied an epistemic realism – one rooted in those streams of thought deriving from the Platonic tradition that appeared not only in

¹¹ I am indebted to the work of my doctoral student, Scott Paeth, on these points. See his "Jürgen Moltmann and Political Theology" (PhD dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2004).

¹² See D. Forrester. 1988. *Theology and Politics*. London: Blackwell; 1997. *Christian Justice and Public Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and O. O'Donovan and J. O'Donovan (eds.). 1999. *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

¹³ For example, see M. Marty. 1981. *The Public Church*. New York, NY: Crossroad.

¹⁴ See M.E. Marty. 1974. "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience". *Journal of Religion*, 54.4 (1974), pp. 332-59.

Augustinian motifs, but also in certain branches of the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment.

Humans have some principles of right and wrong “written on their hearts” as St. Paul stated. It is thus possible for all to recognise that there are norms of faith, hope, love and justice in spite of the fact that they are inevitably obscured by ignorance, self-interest and wilful distortion – as acknowledged in various liberal notions that grew out of a long tradition of idealistic philosophy that interacted with the biblical traditions.

The context to which this view spoke resonated due to the historic influence in the US of the “self-evident truths” of which Locke wrote, knowable by believing citizens of society prior to the formation of a state, of the “consent to being” of the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards, of the developmental patterns of faithful understanding to which Christian educator Horace Bushnell pointed, and the sense of basic justice appealed to by the Social Gospel leader, Walter Rauschenbush. All of these had influenced the American public, and used overtly theological language to interpret and to reform the basic social ethos. Many, if not all, saw the social fabric of ordinary life as both beset by sin and revealing the providential care, truth and justice of the living God. Moreover, as Marty noted, several of the founding fathers, plus Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Woodrow Wilson, saw things quite similarly; but they did not subordinate religion to either the projections of the social realities, as was frequent in civil religion, or subordinate the theological first principles to the ruling political authority, as was frequent in the Erastian motifs of much European political theology.

The term “public theology” was new; but it gained currency rather quickly, not because of its novelty or because the theological concerns to which it pointed were new, but because it seemed to capture one wide and deep, but widely neglected, strand of the classical theological tradition, often found in the “free church” traditions. It was rooted in the interaction of biblical insight, philosophical analysis, and the responsibility of the ecclesial community to engage in historical discernment of and constant reformation of the social order because it believed that certain kinds of progress could be made in human affairs. Religion that is tempted to idolatry or cultural chauvinism could be brought under critique, those forms of dogma that did not offer guidance in regard to the formation and inevitably necessary reformation of society could be refuted, and the wise combination of social realism and ethical realism could mobilise movements to constrain injustice and improve the prospects of a more just society.

This tradition in America had long honored those who built not only the churches and the missionary societies, but also the schools and the hospitals, the industries and the unions, the stores and the banks, the railroads and steam-ships, the museums and the concert halls – plus the leaders of those institutions dedicated to

the reform of all of these. Niebuhr's generation were extremely suspicious of capitalism during the depression, but became more critical of socialism in the second half of the century. Unlike the heritage of "civil religion" this kind of public theology did not celebrate the social system and its culture as it was – it changed things. And, unlike political theology, it neither sought political power nor called for radical transformations with a utopian vision; it rejoiced at modest improvements, for it knew the depth of sin. It was and is a reformist movement more than a conservative or revolutionary one, and it takes this stand for it believes that an authentic theology is by necessity realist. Indeed, in recent history, Martin Luther King, Jr. became a worldwide exemplar of public theology in its activist and optimistic mode.

The deeper roots of this tradition had long presumed that theologians, clergy and committed laity could and should draw on theological resources to teach, preach and organise publicly to advance issues of truth, faith and justice in society. They saw themselves as agents of Christ, the prophet, priest and king, who had inaugurated the Kingdom of God that works within and among the church and the civil society, often under the radar of political authority. They were convinced that they must take responsibility for the spiritual and moral architecture of the common life as the Medieval Church had done with the collapse of the Roman Empire, as the Reformers had done in the free cities of early modern Europe, and as the Puritans and Pietists had done with regard to the formation of a society in the wilderness of America, and as the Social Gospel did with the advent of modern industrialization.

Today, throughout those parts of the world that we used to call the "third world", before the "second world" collapsed, and it became recognised that the "third world" lives also in the "first world" and the "first world" in the midst of the "third world", Evangelical and Pentecostal movements often also support social agendas that are altering the common life and even the political contours of the region—less by direct political means than by altering the fabric of the institutions of the common life and changing the inherited culture.¹⁵

¹⁵ See, especially with regard to Latin America, the work of David Martin. 2001. *Tongues of Fire*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993; 2001. *Pentecostalism*. Oxford: Blackwell. See also, with special reference to Africa, Philip Jenkins. 2002. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; and in regard to East Asia, David Aikman. 2003. *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*. New York, NY: H. Regnery. These movements have no doubt about the fact that life is beset by sin, or that certain truths of morality and faith are universally valid and capable of constraining or changing sinful life in personal and social ways. This alters the perception of political life (and of economics, family patterns,

Growing out of this history, we can identify two main reasons for using the adjective “public”. One is very simple: it is a modest protest against the dominant understandings of political theology. This protest is based on the conviction that the public is prior to the republic, that the fabric of civil society, of which religious faith and organisation is inevitably the core, is more determinative of and normatively more important for politics than politics is for society and religion. Politics in human affairs makes great waves, like a hurricane or typhoon on the top of the ocean—often with great and fateful consequences; but these massive storms seldom change the deeper tides, currents or dominant wind patterns. At deeper social levels, fundamental alterations of the structures that channel the flows of energy, the powers and principalities of life, make a much greater difference over time, and even determine what political storms get played out.

Yet, public theology cannot be said to be anti-political. It is well aware that arrangements for the building of police, military, judicial, medical, educational and infrastructure (roads, bridges, harbors, etc.) institutions are inevitably necessary and that all citizens have to be willing to pay appropriate levels of taxes to do collectively what cannot be done separately. And it is aware that principles developed in the theological tradition to guide choices about the just and unjust use of coercive force are required for there to be any viable political structures to do these necessary things. It is simply that it wants politics to be the limited servant of the other institutions of society, not their master. A people tutored to see the possibilities of sin and the reality of truth and justice by a serious theology will find ways to organise and to control political institutions so that they do not seek to comprehend or dominate life.

The idea that the faith can and should not only address believers in the church in ways that touch their souls, but empower the faithful to address the world in its wider structures and dynamics by developing the kind of reasonable moral theology that is able to assess and reform the institutions of civil society, is often represented by certain themes in Catholic theology, both in its classical heritage, and in its more recent developments as it gradually overcame much of its deep suspicion (since the French Revolution) of democracy, human rights and, later, “Americanism”. The term “public theology” was not in currency, but the idea that certain doctrines held and taught by the Christian faith can and should address “all people of good will”, and are in principle clearly understandable by all was routinely stated in official documents. Moreover, the several notable Catholic thinkers who became public voices and unofficial representatives of theology in public discourse made a major mark. Let us not forget such major twentieth-century figures as the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose writings did so

cultural values, education, etc.) and limits all statist tendencies. They tend to ignore or repudiate both political theology and its cousin, liberation theology.

much to advance the cause of human rights during the drafting of the UN Declaration of Rights, or the American Jesuit John Courtney Murray, who defended the ethical validity of democracy and pluralism in ways that shaped Vatican II. Murray is especially interesting, for in his early writings he had little sympathy with the ways in which Protestant theologians dealt with social matters theologically and wanted to treat these issues strictly by the use of natural law theory. But later, he questioned the possibility of a society existing without combining philosophical reason with the biblical heritage, which implies a public theology. In fact, he began to question whether Western society can exist without just such a “religious” base. One of his major interpreters summarises his views:

If there is no consensus as to the core direction and meaning of humanity, and no public discussion of that reality, then “society is founded on a vacuum; and society, like nature itself, abhors a vacuum and cannot tolerate it...” Can society live without a public religion? ‘The historical evidence would seem to argue for a negative answer.’ It may be possible “that an individual can live without religion, but a society cannot.” [Thus] ... after years of defending the adequacy of natural law religious discourse ... Murray even suggested, or more properly cried out, that perhaps an explicitly Christian religious public discourse is necessary for social survival. Quoting John of Salisbury, Murray...asked “Whether or not civilisation, that is civil order, civil unity, civil peace, is possible without what he [John] calls in a beautiful phrase ‘the sweet and fruitful marriage of reason and the Word of God’.”¹⁶

This Catholic accent was cultivated further by a number of contemporary progressive Catholic thinkers such as theologian David Tracy, theological ethicist David Hollenbach, social ethicist Dennis McCann and political philosopher Paul Sigmund, among others. They have drawn not only from the legacies of Maritain and Murray, but from a close encounter with Protestant theology and with the widening scope of Catholic teachings in the social encyclicals, from *Rerum Novarum* on labor by Pope Leo XIII, through *Quadragesimo Anno* on the ideas of subsidiarity and of solidarity by Pius XI, to *Pacem in Terris* by John XXIII, and perhaps most powerfully in *Centessimus Annus*, by Pope John Paul II. This reading of the tradition influenced Vatican statements to the UN on racism, war, human rights and pluralism, drawing on philosophical-theological traditions and shaping the message to wider civilisational issues. The theologian David Tracy sought to find the basis of a truly catholic theology, and used Troeltschian modes of thought to

¹⁶ Hooper, L. 1986. *The Ethics of Discourse: The Social Ethics of John Courtney Murray*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, pp. 113-14.

grasp the sense of pluralism in social and theological history. Various modes of analysis are needed to discern meaning. He identifies three: one is the church, another is the wider society, and the third is academia, where the intellectual community tests the possible validity of every proposal.¹⁷

Implicit in the remarks about the various publics that are emerging as dominating influences on a global scale, is the prospect that a highly pluralistic global civil society may be emerging, what some believe could become the basis of a worldwide, complex civilisation. And the most notable fact about this development is that it is developing without an integrated political order to guide it, and there are competing conceptions as to how a civilisation can and should be ordered. With the United Nations in relative disarray and unwilling to act to enforce its own resolutions, America is tempted to become a new imperial power, a very odd one, I must say, for nothing in the tradition of the US approves of imperialism, and its several interventions in other societies have been justified by its opposition to imperialist and tyrannical tendencies on the part of others. Even in the attitudes of those who support the present policies in Iraq, the belief is widespread that America is not only interested in protecting the oil of the region from monopolistic control by tyrants, but deeply concerned for ethical reasons with extending the principles of freedom of religion, a pluralistic civil society with human rights, and a constitutional democracy with a limited state in areas where dominant religio-cultural traditions make these possibilities unlikely.

If we are to avoid the danger of a more malicious imperialism – a danger to the USA and to the world – we will need to see how it is that the various publics of an increasingly complex and worldwide civil society can be ordered into a viable system. It is a major empirical and theoretical issue of great practical consequence: whether the various public spheres are and should be prior to or the result of a regime. At stake is whether these spheres exist in ways that require a political order, and whether they can reconstruct a political order. To put the matter another way, public theology differs from political theology precisely because public theology tends to adopt a social theory of politics, and political theology inclines to have a political view of society. Public theology is, oddly, more like socialism is in theory, for it too sees the fabric of society as decisive for every area of the common life. It differs from socialism, however, in that it does not see the polarization of the classes as the fundamental characteristic of society – either in theory or in fact – and does not expect the state to control economic life by

¹⁷ D. Tracy's *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) shows dependence on the work of the liberal Lutheran, Ernst Troeltsch, as well as on Catholic sources. His subsequent *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) articulates these three areas of "public" that must be addressed by theology. See note 3 above.

centralised planning and capitalisation. This contrasts with political theology in that it tends to see politics, focused on a centralised government, as the comprehending institution of society and the primary manifestation and guarantor of public justice. Politics, in this view, is dedicated to the accumulation, organisation and exercise of the kind of power that sees itself as responsible for the control and guidance of all the social institutions within it. It may be more or less benevolent, authoritarian or totalitarian; but it is always deeply concerned with the power to guide, limit, empower or command every subject or citizen and every other institution in a geographical territory, and the threat of the use of force stands behind its actions. In this, it is closer to the way socialism actually works. This is the model that was adopted by most governments – gently in Sweden and Greece, harshly in Russia and China in the past, with many European countries in between, and it is the model that was exported to the “new” nations in the decolonializing period. Indeed, it was advocated by a number of American “developmentalists” and political theologians who sought major capital loans for economic development to the centralised governments of the decolonializing states, presuming that a well-financed government could build a good civil society. But when the funds were siphoned off for all sorts of family favoritism, corrupt cronies and political payoffs, economic development stalled and the borrowing governments could not pay the loans. The “debt crisis” hit many of the poorest regions and the people, still living in undeveloped societies, suffered.

A non-socialist social theory of politics sees every political order as subject over time to the more primary powers in society – those spheres of life that embody those moral and spiritual orientations that become embodied in social and ethical tissues and associations of the common life and that are prior to the formation of political orders. In this view, political parties, regimes and policies come and go; they are always necessary, but they are also the by-product of those religious, cultural, familial, economic and social traditions that are prior to government, and every government is, sooner or later, accountable to them. If political leaders attempt to control these sectors of social life, they will foment resistance and reform movements to transform the ruling parties or the form of government altogether. Thus the most decisive questions are how the pre-political organisations of life are ordered and, behind that, what religious or ethical presumptions they seek to incarnate – basic questions for every public theology. For this reason, a public theology has a preference for certain social theories of life and history and thus of politics. It turns to those social theories that hold that cultural, familial, economic and intellectual traditions are deeply shaped by religion, and specifically to those that believe in the possibility of conversion. Such matters are more comprehensive than any political order.

One key question, in view of these factors, is what Christians might have to offer as a public theology for a world situation in which a civil society is now being formed

– without a clear and centred political order (although with a dominant political hegemony that could become imperialistic, as I have already suggested). Does Christianity have normative models of how to order complex civil societies that reach beyond any single nation-state? I think it does. Should a public theology based in Christian doctrine assume the responsibility of helping give shape to “the new world order”, and can it do so without cultural imperialism? I think so, as others and I have argued elsewhere.¹⁸

Sometimes named “that order which is called freedom”, Christian public theology points toward a social order that is as close to how God wants us to live together as humanity has yet discerned. It often appeared first in ecclesiology, then in civil society, and through the influence of these as carried by ordinary believers into the political realm. A key example of this way of viewing matters is represented by the thought of Althusius, who saw society as a “consociation of consociations”, a “federation” of “covenanted” communities.

Another example, a more recent one, is Abraham Kuyper, who developed the basic theory of the relative sovereignty of the “spheres” of life.¹⁹ And, in another way, Emil Brunner’s Gifford Lectures of 1948, sadly neglected, engaged these issues in a most imaginative way. All of these Reformational Protestants depend on the basic doctrine of the sovereignty of God, a doctrine that implies that all areas of life are under God, and thus no earthly power can be sovereign over them all. Such doctrines pose the key question as to how we should seek to order their relationship while keeping maximum freedom, under God, for each area of life, yet work with other religions, cultures and traditions since they too share the basic capacity to discern the principles of right and wrong and live in societies also built on analogous spheres of social life – even if they have differing views of ultimate salvation.

¹⁸ This contrast was drawn by James Hastings Nichols. 1951. *Democracy and the Churches*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press; F.W. Dillistone. 1951. *The Structure of the Divine Society*. London: Lutherworth Press; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press; William J. Everett, in his *God’s Federal Republic* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1988); and Jewish political philosopher who has a high appreciation of the Reformed tradition, Daniel Elazar. 1995-1998. *The Covenant Tradition in Politics* (4 vols.). Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

¹⁹ See his famous *Lectures on Calvinism*. 1931. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; and the essays written for the 100th anniversary celebration of them, edited by Luis Lugo: 2000 *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper’s Legacy for the Twenty-First Century*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. Cf. also one of the best current treatments of these themes: James Skillen and R.M. McCarthy (eds.). 1991. *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.

I am encouraged in this view by the new research conducted by John Nurser, who has written the very significant new study, *A Global Ethos for a Global Order: The Ecumenical Movement Churches and Human Rights 1938–1948*. In brief he argues that when Hitler and Stalin were on the prowl, certain wide-visioned ecumenical church leaders saw not only that they must be stopped by the use of force, but that a revised, non-territorial and non-coercive interpretation of “Christendom” could help shape a new global order on the far side of the conflict. It is not so much the familiar story that some of the most famous theological leaders from that period (Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer, Barth, Tillich) made major contributions in resisting tyranny. Rather it was that a host of lesser-known figures, led by theologians Fred Nolde and Searle Bates, plus half a dozen others who worked with a number of Catholic and Jewish leaders, translated the basic presuppositions of the wider tradition into terms that could be endorsed on interfaith, cross-cultural and international bases. From the early consultations at Dunbarton Oaks, where the first plans were laid for the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF and the UN Declaration of Human Rights, these leaders supplied the intellectual firepower and the zeal for the cause that tirelessly prodded believing leaders of diplomatic corps, and mobilised notables in religious and ecumenical institutions to think about the articulation of an ethical vision and the formation of institutions that could most likely prevent the neo-pagan barbarism of Fascism and the hyper-secular utopianism of Communism from terrorizing the world in the future. It may be that the institutions they envisioned need, already, re-examination and reform, and it is clear that they did not fully foresee the challenges that Islamic and Hindu Fundamentalism could later pose, but they generated the first basic designs behind the most important international institutions of today – the capstone of which was the Declaration of Human Rights that has now become the *jus gentium* of most of the world.

In brief, then, civil religion is, essentially, as Rousseau in one way and Durheim and their American followers (like Feuerbach in Germany) in other ways argued, a projection by a civic order of its experiences and values onto the cosmic order for the sake of social solidarity. It is, so to speak, society worshiping the image of itself, from the bottom up. A political theology, in this respect like a public theology, claims that its origins are essentially divine, from the top down as it were, and not simply a human construction of those seeking power. However, a political theology also tends to see the political order as the only comprehending one, and seeks to use governmental power to shape the policies of all “subordinate” organisations so that they aid the whole – as defined by the political order. This means, however, an ever-expanding rule by a centralised power that takes all political, economic, military, educational, cultural, legal, and eventually religious authority in its own hands.

A public theology, as I understand it, agrees with political theology in that it is not simply the religious sentiments or experience of a particular community, projected into the artefact of a cultural self-celebration, that is the source of normative thought and life, but that it is a revelatory source that stands as the norm. However, it sees this “top-down” reality as not having implications for the political order in the first instance, but first of all for inner personal convictions, the communities of faith, and the associations that they generate in an open society – and these will inevitably be plural and in contention. The principles and purposes they advocate, however, do not stay in the religious community or in private associations. They work their way through the convictions of the people and the policies of the multiple institutions of civil society where the people live and work and play, that make up the primary public realm. Indeed, it holds that these convictional-commitment-incarnate multiple centres in the lives of the public are, together, the most decisive core of civilisational life. With the proper cultivation and development, they are refined as they work their way not from the bottom up, nor from the top down, but from the center out. They show up eventually in the formation of a limited constitutional political order that serves the people, protects their human rights, and allows the multiple institutions and spheres of a pluralistic society to flourish in the glory of God, and by their constantly prophetic, priestly and princely mutual correction, serve the well-being of an unavoidably sinful, but morally and spiritually edified, community of communities.

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A “PRIVATE SIDE” TO PUBLIC THEOLOGY? MYSTICISM REVISITED

Len Hansen¹

“Politics begins in mysticism, and mysticism always ends in politics”.

Charles Péguy²

1. INTRODUCTION

At first glance few people will agree with the above statement of Charles Péguy’s. When one thinks of public theology, the notion of mysticism seldom comes to mind. For many scholars and certainly for most lay Christians the word “mystic” for a long time conjured up a picture of monks or nuns living in medieval ascetic surroundings with little or no contact with the outside world, generally suffering from a serious case of *contemptus mundi*. However, since the end of the 19th century there has been a change in this perception among some scholars. In the latter half of the 20th century public theology in some of its guises reflected and confirmed the retrieval of forgotten elements of mysticism by scholars of spirituality. This article will first give some definitions of public theology. Then a cursory summary account will follow of the changing definition of mysticism since the late 19th century and how these are reflected in the recent definitions of mysticism proposed by two of the foremost scholars of spirituality, Bernard McGinn and Kees Waaijman. Finally an overview will be given of the retrieved elements of mysticism in McGinn’s and Waaijman’s definitions that can be discerned in the work of several proponents of so-called mystical-political – or, more fittingly, mystical-*prophetic* – theology who propose, from the viewpoint of mysticism, that prophetic action might be interpreted as a constitutive element of mysticism instead of its irreconcilable opposite.

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² Quoted by Egan, R.J. S.J., 2001:ix.

2. PUBLIC THEOLOGY: MYSTICISM ENCOUNTERED IN UNLIKELY PLACES

As with mysticism, there are various definitions of public theology. According to Robert Simons (1995:xv), “[w]hen theology is described as public, the meaning of ‘public’ is that such theology is accessible to intelligent, reasonable and responsible members of a society, despite otherwise crucial differences in their beliefs and practices”. Simons therefore identifies the aim of public theology as explaining or defending theological claims and their consequences to believers and society as a whole. This is also the emphasis in David Hollenbach’s description of public theology as the effort to discover and communicate the socially significant meaning of Christian symbols and tradition for believers and society (1979). Similarly, for Martin Marty the aim of public theology is “to bring the wisdom of the Christian tradition into public conversation to contribute to the well-being of society” (1986:1). On a more practical level, according to Nico Koopman, the aims of public theology are pursued in different ways and forums: in publications, seminars, conferences, public declarations, civil protests (such as marches, hunger strikes and memoranda to the government), welfare programmes and the quest for economic and political justice, and even in formal confessions, e.g. the Confession of Belhar (2003:3ff). Finally, according to the famous dictum of David Tracy, “all theology is public discourse” (1981:3; my emphasis), the only differences being the primary “publics” of the theologian: the academy for the fundamental theologian, the church for the systematic theologian, and the wider society for the practical theologian (*ibid.*:6ff). Even if one does not agree with Tracy’s dictum, few would argue that mystical-prophetic theologians like Tracy himself, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Edward Schillebeeckx, Jean Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann or Dorothee Sölle are not public theologians. What, then, do we make of the mystical element in their theologies? Furthermore, if one agrees with Tracy that “all theology is public discourse” or with Marty that “purely private faith is incomplete” (*ibid.*), this raises the question: What becomes of mystical theology and mysticism as traditionally referring to private, individual mystical experience?

3. MYSTICISM RETRIEVED

Many have long viewed mysticism with suspicion.³ What makes this attitude difficult to address is the fact that “[e]veryone in our day who proposes to speak or write of mysticism must begin by deploring both the ambiguity of the word itself and the difficulty of defining it in any of its meanings” (Knowles, 1979:9).

³ This applies not only to large sections of society in general, but also to different confessional traditions, especially but not exclusively to Protestantism. Cf., for example, Steggink, 2003:25; Waaijman, 2002:357; Carozzo, 1994:19; McGinn, 1994:65, 267-269; cf. also Forde, 1984:15-26.

The Christian meaning and use of the word "mysticism" is related to the very specific meaning of the word *mysterion* ("mystery"/"secret") as used by the Greek patristic fathers when referring to the mystery of God's love for humankind as revealed in Jesus Christ.⁴ It is not a "secret" because it is kept secret – indeed, it is proclaimed – but precisely because it is the revelation of God's love for *humankind*. The mystery lies in God's love for humankind, and in how this is appropriated for us through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. More specifically, the patristic use of the word *mystikos* had *three* meanings: (1) the so-called mystical meaning of Scripture, (2) the mystical significance of the sacraments (mysteries), and (3) mystical theology, i.e. knowing God as he revealed himself in Christ and being incorporated into this revelation through baptism that then comes to fruition by living it out in the sacramental life and growth in faith, hope and love. The first meaning – that of the "mystical", hidden meaning of the Bible – was the most common use of the word in patristic times. It did not refer to an arbitrary, "allegorical" meaning of the text, but to a way of understanding Scripture where the reader grasps the meaning of the mystery of Christ – or rather, where he/she *grasped* by it. For the church fathers, understanding the Bible was not a merely academic exercise. It was something prepared for in prayer, humility and love, so that by listening to Scripture one might encounter God through the power of the Spirit and be transformed according to the Image of God the Son and in this way be enabled to contemplate the Father. This was the "mysticism" of the church fathers and it would be wrong to force a wedge between the above "spiritual interpretation" of Scripture and "mysticism" or "mystical theology". The same applies to the sacraments: to speak of their mystical meaning is to speak of the reality of which they enable humankind to partake – the mystery of Christ, the Easter mystery of his death and resurrection. To be "in Christ" (1 Co 15:22; Ro 6) is not something static, but implies a new life orientation that starts in and through Christ; it is a life implanted, as it were, at baptism and which manifests itself in a life that shares in the death of Christ and shows the signs of his resurrection.⁵

The patristic mystical legacy lived on in the 5th-century writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, where one also finds the threefold meaning of the term *mystikos* as the deeper meaning of the Scriptures in which God reveals the mystery of his love, the importance of the sacraments through which believers partake of this mystery, and the "mystical theology", which looks not so much at the means by which this happens but rather to the ends of partaking of God: surrendering the soul to God. Dionysius also speaks of the progression from *grasping* the meaning of

⁴ I am aware that such an "etymological" approach to defining mysticism is not the only possible approach, nor above reproach, as are others – like the typological or phenomenological, the latter being favoured by Waaijman. (cf. Waaijman, 2002: 856-860).

⁵ Cf. McGinn, *ibid.*:185; Louth, 1983:272-3.

signs and concepts used to explain the mystery of God's love to *being grasped* by it and being transformed by it into that love itself (Louth, 1983:272-3).

However, during the Middle Ages a gradual change in the above perception occurred. As it gained momentum, the character of what was seen as mysticism shifted away from one of a life-changing encounter with God and objective state of unity with God defined in terms of the mystery of faith that could occur in the soul of potentially any believer. By the 17th century mysticism was either seen as the prerogative of a spiritual elite or was regarded with suspicion and negatively, as something "secretive", a derogatory term equated with the *Schwärmerei* of Romanticism, part of the study of human beings as religious animals, or a question of the psychological states of unstable individuals subjected to medical-positivistic disqualifications of the 19th century.

The above image began to be challenged only by the end of the 19th century. This was a long and complex process impossible to relate here in detail,⁶ but two Roman Catholic theological groupings deserve special mention for our purposes: the so-called Neoscholastics and the Transcendental Thomists. France, the chief centre of Neoscholasticism, was also the arena for much of the scholastic discussion on the nature of mysticism. One of these debates, lasting for decades, was between the supporters of François Poulain, S.J. (1836-1919) and those of Abbé August Saudreau (1859-1942). The former defined true mystical union as experiencing the presence of God by way of "spiritual touch", distinguishing it from all accompanying phenomena and resisting the overemphasis on extraordinary mystical experiences. Nevertheless, Poulain insisted that there was no universal call to mystical experience. Contrary to this view, Saudreau insisted that mystical contemplation was indeed the accepted goal of the Christian life to which all were called, whether they achieved it or not. He also differed from Poulain's view that the essence of the mystical state rested in some form of direct perception of the

⁶ It includes the American philosopher William James's incorporation of mysticism into a comprehensive theory of religion as the lived experience of individuals (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902); Baron Friedrich von Hügel's vindication of the "mystical-volitional" element of religion as a constitutive element of religion (*The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and her Friends*, 1908); Evelyn Underhill's identification of one of the characteristics of true mysticism as its active and ethical alignment (*Mysticism*, 1911) and Kenneth Escot Kirk's 1928 Bampton Lectures and Edward Cuthbert Butler's *Western Mysticism: The Teaching of Saints Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life* (1923), which advocated the retrieval of mysticism for all believers. For the view of mysticism as the experience of the presence of God and as process, see the work of Joseph Maréchal and Michel de Certeau, and the philosophical contributions of Henri Bergson, Maurice Blondel and Jacques Maritan (cf. McGinn, 1994a:297ff).

divine presence, insisting that the divine presence was ordinarily known only in an indirect fashion.

Although it grew less intense after World War II, Roman Catholic theological discussion of mysticism continued the pre-war debate. This coincided with the Second Vatican Council's call (in its decree *Gaudium et Spes*) to pay attention to and interpret the "signs of the times" and to proclaim the gospel accordingly (Baers, 2003:203). Even before this, though, there was a shift in Catholic theology away from the dominant Neoscholastic model, making for the triumph of the so-called Transcendental Thomists. The latter were given official encouragement by the abandonment of scholastic language and categories in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and in the 1950s and 1960s is connected with the names of Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan in particular.⁷ Lonergan's thinking was not irrelevant, but especially Karl Rahner proved to have a defining influence on many "mystical-prophetic theologians". Rahner, who has been called the *doctor mysticus* of the 20th century, was interested in the historical and constructive dimensions of mysticism throughout his career and was a powerful spokesperson for the apophatic mystical tradition. He was also the foremost European representative figure in the "turn to the subject" or the anthropological turn in Roman Catholic theology since the Second Vatican Council. Central to this is a sense of the historical situatedness of human subjects and efforts to discover the basis of knowledge of the reality of God in ordinary or "secular" experience (McGinn, 1994a:286). The central theme of Rahner's theology is the orientation of the finite subject to the infinite God. For him, God always remains the ultimate mystery. Like many Christian mystics, he held that progress towards perfection consisted in the ever-deepening and more direct awareness of the divine incomprehensibility (*ibid.*) The dogmatic key to Rahner's notion of mysticism rests in his distinction between the transcendental experience (i.e., the a priori openness of humankind to the ultimate mystery) and the supernatural experience, in which divine transcendence is no longer remote but is communicated to the subject in closeness and immediacy. Rahner insisted on the reciprocal unity (not identity) of the experience of God and the experience of the self, which is achieved in interpersonal relations: "unity between love of God and love of neighbor is conceivable only on the assumption that the experience of God and the experience of the self are one" (*ibid.*). He also distinguished between the experience itself and its subsequent

⁷ The 1960s also saw intense debate on atheism, secularity and the "death of God", as well as on the doctrine of God in which "the classical theistic tradition with its affirmations of God's aseity, omnipotence, omniscience, immutability, impassivity, and neo-orthodoxy's biblically determined faith in God's revelation alone were subjected to criticism and reinterpretation" (Carr, 1981:314). Many European and American theologians attempted to demonstrate the reality of God in ordinary human experience and promoted concepts of God that took these experiences more fully into account.

thematization in conscious reflection. This is why Rahner speaks of mysticism in two ways: 1) “the mysticism of everyday life” – i.e. finding and serving God in all aspects of human existence, even the most ordinary and routine; the unthematized experience of transcendence at the basis of all human activity, and 2) “special” mystical experiences. Although Rahner rejected any “elitist” view that would find in mysticism a higher form of Christian perfection beyond loving service to the neighbour, he did speak of special mystical experiences as a paradigmatic intensification of the experience of God, which is open to all.

The second half of the 20th century also saw increased reflection on the social role of mysticism. For example, Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) in an article published as “Cultural and Spiritual Experience” in *Spirituality in the Secular City* (1996, *Concilium* vol. 19) stressed that mystical experience, though of profound significance in the personal life of the individual mystic, was necessarily a social phenomenon in which the mystic always reflected a socio-religious world and in turn affected, even transformed, that world through the creation of new types of discourse and sometimes through the formation of new religious groups. In 1978 Steven Katz edited *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* and in his contribution, “Language, Epistemology and Mysticism”, also advocated a return to the contextual study of mysticism according to the decisive historical, social, religious and theological influences on it. A particularly interesting example for the purposes of this article is the 1996 article by Richard Woods, which revisits the relationship between social action and mysticism. Woods, espousing the idea of mysticism as process, relates that:

In early western Christianity, the developmental process was eventually described in terms of a model ... including episodes of withdrawal, transformation and return ... [In] the transformative interval between the alternating movements, the mystic is prepared for further prophetic work in the world by means of experiences of bodily and social renunciation, contemplation and unification ... In this light ... society [is] revealed as the inescapable location of the final phase of the mystic’s journey into God (1996:159-160).

The main part of Woods’s article explains the statement by the American philosopher William Ernest Hocking (1873-1966) in *The Meaning of God in Human Experience* (1963) that:

The prophet is but the mystic in control of the forces of history, declaring their necessary outcome: the mystic in action is the prophet. In the prophet, the cognitive certainty of the mystic becomes historic and particular, and this is the necessary destiny of that certainty:

mystic experience must complete itself in the prophetic consciousness" (in Woods, 1996:168).

Hocking saw in the mystic's withdrawal and detachment (not necessarily bodily but at least as a "renunciation of socially conditioned ideas, norms, values and behavior, including notions of what 'God' is" in Woods, 1996:162) that he/she is "gradually 'mortified' in body, mind and spirit – reduced, that is, to the state of feeling utter dependence on God alone" (*ibid.*:165). Thus the mystic also gains a different perspective on reality, and greater freedom to evaluate and judge social norms and the institutions embodying it. Morally, this temporary detachment sensitises the mystic's conscience to both justice and injustice, and increases his/her capacity for friendship and love. However, the latter is not the stimulus for the mystic's return to society but rather the compunction to share, in words and deeds, "the answers to the questions – her society's questions" which in her withdrawal "were raised to consciousness in the process of reflection, assessment, and reintegration ... Thus, by temporarily withdrawing a person from society, lived religion can be considered as society's way of rejuvenating its most profound inner resources by enhancing the experience of its most sensitive members" (*ibid.*:164). "This does not mean that this is the main purpose of religion on the individual level, which is, rather, closer union with God. It is to say that closer union with God has important social consequences which are inseparable from the nature of religion as a social phenomenon" (*ibid.*:164, 166).

Many of the abovementioned views are not exempt from criticism, but do show some of the implications of the increasing interest in mysticism. Many of these insights have, however, been incorporated into the definitions of leading scholars of mysticism such as Bernard McGinn and Kees Waaijman.

4. MYSTICISM DEFINED: MCGINN AND WAAIJMAN

In following the above insights into mysticism, McGinn and Waaijman propose definitions of mysticism as a *process* that includes both the element of transformative mystical *experience of the presence of God* as well as that of *its resultant manifestation in the life of the believer*.⁸ For McGinn, mysticism "[must] be seen primarily as a *process* or a way of life" defined by an "encounter with God" and usually, but not always, described "in terms of some experience of union with God. But this essential characteristic, however described, must not be considered in isolation from the transformative consequences it is intended to produce in those who experience it and the roles they take up in the Christian community" (1994b:ix).

⁸ In a sense McGinn's *magnum opus*, the three-volumed work *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, is an account of the fate of this view of mysticism.

Further on, McGinn concludes after “reading ... the texts that have been accepted as mystical classics in the history of Christianity, both East and West ... [that] the term ‘presence’ [is] a more central and more useful category for grasping the unifying knot in the varieties of Christian mysticism. Thus we can say that the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God” (*ibid.*:xvii).

Waaïjman (2003: 57-58) concurs with the essence of McGinn’s definition:

Binne de studie van de mystiek wordt onderscheiden tussen de mystieke ervaring en de mystieke weg. De mystieke ervaring duidt op het begin van de mystieke weg ... De mystieke weg is de doorwerking van de mystieke ervaring in het leven van de mystikus, het spoor dat de ervaring nalaat in zijn denken, willen herinneren, voelen en handelen ... [H]eel de mens wordt door de mystieke ervaring geraakt: zijn persoonskern, zijn gedrags- en denkpatronen, zijn affectieve structuren, zijn relaties, zijn maatschappelijk en cultureel beleven en zijn omgang met de natuur”.

As I shall show later on, in the light of some mystical-prophetic theologies it is extremely significant to note that both McGinn and Waaïjman qualify their use of the phrase “the *presence* of God” to denote the mystical encounter with God:

Though this encounter is often expressed in terms of some form of union with God, I have argued that a more flexible understanding of this in terms of the consciousness of the immediate or direct presence of God – a presence that paradoxically is often expressed through such thorough going negation of all created forms of being and awareness that it appears as absence ... [M]any mystics from Dionysius on have insisted that it is the consciousness of God as negation, which is a form of the absence of God, that is the core of the mystic’s journey (McGinn, 1994b, ix, xviii; *cf.* Waaïjman, 2003: 64; *my italics*).

Finally, but equally importantly, Waaïjman also notes that, because “[d]e mystieke ervaring werkt onweerstaanbaar door in het concrete leven en sameleven”, for many mystics the latter rather than the experience itself is “hét teken van authenticiteit: aan de goede vruchten ken je de goed boom” (*ibid.*:67). With few exceptions, like Rahner, the changes in the perceptions of mysticism mentioned in paragraph 3 and the above definitions have been the work of philosophers or scholars of spirituality. To see how the retrieval of mysticism is related to prophetic action (and to public theology) for systematic theologians, we shall now turn to the mystical-prophetic theologies of the 20th century.

5. MYSTICAL-PROPHETIC THEOLOGY: REDEFINING PUBLIC THEOLOGY

To show their concurrence with McGinn's and Waaijman's definitions of mysticism, two important elements of mysticism will be identified in the work of some mystical-prophetic theologians: mysticism as 1) an encounter with God/the experience of the presence – or, more commonly, the paradoxical presence – of God in his apparent absence (the mystical experience); and 2) a process where this transformative encounter expresses itself in the life of the believer, in mystical-prophetic terms, in prophetic action (the mystical way).

The term "mystical-prophetic" appeared long after the first 20th-century efforts to explain, albeit in other terminology, the relationship between mysticism and prophetic action.⁹ The term "mystical-political" is associated with the 96th issue of the Roman Catholic theological journal *Concilium*, entitled *The Mystical and Political Dimension of Christian Faith* (1974). In this volume, under joint editorship of Gustavo Gutiérrez (widely regarded as the father of Latin American liberation theology) and Claude Geffré, each author "in his own way ... tries to show how, on the basis of the specific experience of the Christian communities of Latin America, there is now evident a new connection between the mystical and political dimensions of Christian faith" (Gutiérrez, 1974a:8). Gutiérrez's introduction already contains signs of a view of mysticism as process including both the experience of the presence of God as well as political/prophetic action as a constitutive element of this encounter:

[F]or Latin American Christians ... [the] experience of faith on the basis of the world of the poor opens up new horizons for Christian mysticism ... [The] experience of evangelical conversion as a continual

⁹ Past commentators on this issue, usually referred to as the relationship between action and contemplation, included the likes of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, John Cassian, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart and Ignatius of Loyola. Well-known 20th-century spiritual writers on the subject include Thomas Merton and Simone Weil (cf. Merton, T. 1971. *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, pp.132-3, 365; Merton, T. 1971. *Contemplative Prayer*. Garden city, N.Y.: Doubleday, p.66; Kaplan, E.K. 1983. "Contemplative Inwardness and Prophetic Action: Thomas Merton's Dialogue With Judaism" in D. Grayston & M.W. Higgins (eds.). *Thomas Merton. Pilgrim in Progress*. Toronto: Griffin House Graphics Ltd., pp. 85-105; Russel, K.C. 1983. "Merton on the Lay Contemplative: Explicit Statements and Refracted Light". *Ibid.*: pp. 121-131; Nava, A. 1998. "The Mystery of Evil and the Hiddenness of God. Some Thoughts on Simone Weil" in H. Häring. & D. Tracy (eds.). *The Fascination of Evil*. London: SCM Press; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, p.74-84; Nava, A. 2001. *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press). In the 1970s Adam Curle also wrote on the issue as concerning "mystics and militants" (1972. *Mystics and Militants. A Study of Awareness, Identity and Social Action*. London: Travistock Publications).

breaking with the egotistic sufficiency of the “old man” [sic] in order to enter as a “new man” into the world of the ‘other’, in order to transform it, becomes for Latin American Christians the exercise of liberating love ... It is [a] ... rediscovering, by means of integration, [of] the biblical, historical and committed dimensions of contemplation ... *This mystical experience presents indivisibly a double dimension of one and the same original event: the meeting with the person of Christ and the experience of the presence of Christ in one’s brother, above all in the “least” of one’s brothers.* The second encounter is the sacrament of the first. Hence it is not a matter of putting contemplation at the service of liberation but of developing its own qualities and, in this case, its biblical dimension of commitment. *To speak in those terms, it is to put the socio-political dimension at the heart of Christian mystical experience, as one of its essential constituents.* In fact encounter with Christ necessarily occurs through the mediation of the poor brother who exists as an exploited class, as a forgotten race and as a marginalized culture” (Gutiérrez, *ibid.*:15-16; 1974b:65; my italics).

Although Gutiérrez’s major work, *A Theology of Liberation* (1973), spells out the foundations of his theology, the mystical content of his thought comes to light most clearly in *We Drink from the Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (1984) and *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (1987). Although every work on liberation theology by Gutiérrez also deals with spirituality,¹⁰ it was systematised in *We Drink from Our Own Wells*. The main thesis of this book was that a new spirituality was being born in Latin America that consisted in a different form of following Jesus and that originated in the special circumstances and events in the Latin American church and society. In that respect, Latin American emergent spirituality “drinks from its own wells”.¹¹ Spirituality for Gutiérrez is the itinerary in search of God that stems from an *encounter* with the Lord and consists in a *following* of Christ that demands an alteration of all our ways of thinking, believing and acting; *it is an entire way of life* (1984:45, 72ff). This is the mystical-prophetic heart of liberation theology. In the search for God, an encounter with the poor and being committed to their cause leads to encountering God in Christ in the poor, not because they are vested with special moral qualities, but because they are the special object of the gratuitous love of God and the main bearers of the values of the kingdom. The acceptance of this gratuitously loving God in turn leads the

¹⁰ Spirituality has been a constitutive element of liberation theology since its inception (*cf.* Gutiérrez, 1974:136, 203-208).

¹¹ The title of the book has its origin in the work of none other than the great mystic Bernard of Clairvaux, for whom in matters of spirituality people must “drink from their own wells” (1984:5).

believer back to the poor and manifests itself in a liberating practice of discipleship.¹²

In *On Job* the above itinerary of the search for God is expressed in terms of two moments: the moment of silence, which includes both contemplation and committed praxis, and the moment of speech, the word of theology, in which that which has been contemplated and practised first is reflected upon and formulated (1987:13-17). This work also shows other traditional aspects of mysticism. Written in the context of theodicy, it touches on both the apparent absence of God in the midst of human suffering and the aspect of negation. In *Job* Gutiérrez finds an unparalleled illustration of the transforming impact of a human encounter with God: someone who had to let go of his friends' abstract theology divorced from his concrete situation. Also, in the final instance, Job's encounter with God makes him realise that God's gratuitousness can be neither reduced to human understanding of justice nor fully comprehended by the human mind. The encounter therefore empowers him to abandon himself to God's unfathomable love, a love beyond justice (*ibid.*:82-92) that manifests God's greatness and freedom, but most of all God's gratuitousness.

Edward Schillebeeckx's clearest reflections on mysticism and politics are found in a series of lectures he gave at the Free University of Amsterdam in 1986, published as *Als Politiek niet alles is ... Jezus in de waterse cultuur* (translated as *On Christian Faith. The Spiritual, Ethical, and Political Dimensions*, 1987). In this series, Schillebeeckx speaks "over God in zijn of haar verhouding tot de mens en derhalve over de mystieke of theologale, de etische en de politieke dimensie van dit godsgeloof, en dit alles gezien vanuit de focus van Jezus van Nazaret" (1986:7), and develops the categories of *mysticism* and *politics* as he reflects on the experiences of middle-class Christians in the West trying to live in solidarity with those who suffer. Politics is "een intense vorm van maatschappelijk engagement (en dus niet per se het politieke handwerk van beroepspolitici), een engagement toegankelijk voor iedereen", while mysticism is "een intensieve vorm van godservaring of godsliefde" (1986:69; my italics). The idea of mysticism as the experience of presence as well as a resultant way of life can be seen in Schillebeeckx's explanation of mysticism with regard to the "three constants" in mystics' accounts of their "mystieke levensweg" (my italics) as: 1) a source experience ("a realisation that something fundamental is happening, a kind of 'enlightenment' ... in which the earlier worldview and view of the self (the 'ego') is radically broken down ... which changes the whole of his/her way of life"), 2) "the

¹² Cf. Nava (1998:160): "For him [Gutiérrez], at the very soul of liberation theology is the relationship between mystical language and experiences of God in a key of love, peace, and joy, on the one hand, and prophetic speech and awareness of the harsh reality of exploitation, poverty, and oppression ..." Cf. Martinez, 2001:247.

phase of doubt ... was it all real?" and 3) mystical unification ("... finding the features of the Beloved in the traces he had left behind in the being of the mystic") (1986:66-67; my translation). However, regarding McGinn's view of the "experience of God", Schillebeeckx makes an explicit qualification: human experience of God is always *mediated* in some way (1986:65). Because of our finitude, we do not experience the absolute presence of God "pure and undiluted". Although, from God's perspective, he is absolutely present to us, our own experience of this is always interpreted experience. Just as we *need* concepts of God in order to believe, we *need* "bemiddelde onmiddelijkheid" (mediated immediacy) in order to experience the presence of God. This is the paradox of faith *and* of mysticism as intense form of the life of faith: Faith without concepts of God is nonsensical and impossible. However, as the mystical "dark night" shows, the absolute presence of God reveals the inadequacy of our concepts of God and shatters them time and again. In order to move beyond this mystical dark night we need the concepts of the Christian ethical life. This is found first and foremost in the life and message of Jesus Christ, who revealed the essence of God in his *love* for humankind. The ethical dimension of Christian faith, so clearly expressed in the two great commandments in Luke 10, is the bond that unites mysticism and politics and that creates a fitting contemporary possibility for Christian experience (*ibid.*:68). The love of neighbour is simultaneously the sign of our love for God. In love for the neighbour the love of God is implicitly present, hidden but real; and in our time, love of God and love of neighbour need to be experienced in a new form, a *political* form, as *political love*:

in een moderne tijd, waarin we tot het besef zijn gekomen dat maatschappelijk-politieke structuren (die mensen vaak knechten) ook veranderbaar zijn, krijgt de naastenliefde ... ook de gestalte van politieke liefde, die dan ook gedragen wordt door dezelfde presentie van impliciete godsliefde ... Zonder gebed of mystiek wordt politiek vlug grimmig en barbaars; zonder politieke liefde word gebed of mystiek vlug sentimenteel of vrijblijvende innerlijkheid (*ibid.*:68, 74).

In 1977 Jean Baptist Metz published his most systematic account of his political theology, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (translated as *Faith in History and Society*, 1980). He developed his own "turn to the subject", first within the German context of the threat of secularisation and unbelief, but later widening his scope in a situation and theology "after Auschwitz", where the reality that contextualises and threatens modern belief is the horrifying worldwide prominence of inhuman suffering:

A theology after Auschwitz wants to draw our attention to a principle that ... Christian theology is ... at its very roots a remembrancing ... This remembrancing cannot repress and forget, or idealistically

overcome humanity's history of suffering. [Therefore a] new sensitivity for theodicy ... belongs on the agenda for theological discourse. I might even say that political theology here in Germany wants to make the cries of the victims from Auschwitz unforgettable in Christian theology ... This would signify a farewell to every theology that closes itself off idealistically, and ... to the forgetfulness of the forgotten, hidden, as I see it, in its concepts of truth and of God (Metz, 1998:26).

Metz's increased interest in theodicy after 1980 will be taken here as key to his understanding of the mystical-prophetic element of Christianity and to show how his understanding of mysticism is one that also shows it to be both an experience of the presence of God and a process encompassing transformative action. The notion of memory – especially that of suffering, *memoria passionis* – is central to Metz's theology. It is also central to his theodicy and Christology. He sees the suffering of Christ not as an aspect of inner Trinitarian dynamics (*leiden in Gott*), but as prototypical of what happens in society, especially to the poor and the defeated. Christ's suffering shows the true depth of suffering in the world and therefore becomes prophetic, subversive and denouncing, empowered to unmask and criticise the triumphant ideology of a society that talks about freedom, success and bounty while oppressing the poor and destroying every resistance to its own advance. For Metz, the theodicy question is *the* theological question of today (1998:58), but not as a rational justification of God in the light of the evil in the world: as the question of how it is possible to talk about God in the light of the history of suffering of a world that belongs to God. According to Metz, what distinguished pre-Christian Israel from its neighbours was its "poverty of spirit", i.e. its inability to idealise or mythicise the contradictions, "the chasms and terrors of its context"; a spirit characterised by a remembrance of stories of suffering and crises. Israel always turned with the question of suffering to God, as is clearly the case in Job, in the prophets, in the Psalms, in Exodus, and finally in Jesus. Metz calls this "God-mysticism": finding the presence of God not in peaceful tranquillity but in protest before God about evil in the world, questioning God, a "*mysticism of suffering unto God*" (*Mystic des leidens an Gott*; 1998:16).¹³ Christianity, for Metz, is not a religion of happiness and easy answers, but a religion of apocalyptic crisis and eschatological hope; it disquiets, interrupts, contradicts, endangers, and forces one to have hope against all hope in an unending praxis of universal justice,

¹³ Jesus' God-mysticism is part of this tradition: "His is in an exemplary way a mysticism of suffering unto God. His cry from the cross is the cry of one forsaken by God, who for his part had never forsaken God. It is this that points inexorably into Jesus' God-mysticism: he holds firmly to the Godhead. In the God-forsakenness of the cross, he affirms a God who is still other and different from the echo of our wishes, however ardent; who is ever more and other than the answers to our questions" (*ibid.*: 67).

solidarity and peace that is always suspended by the catastrophes of history. Herein also lies the element of the presence of God amidst his apparent absence as also was seen in the mystical tradition, Gutiérrez and Schillebeeckx:

Mourning is in no way foreign to the Christian witness to God. How could it be? After all, to mourn obviously means to sense something as substantively absent. Does this mean: to sense God's absence? Absolutely! That sense of absence plays between mourning and hope (1998:159).

The God of Christianity is the incomprehensible God who must be trusted and to whom the believer must surrender precisely when experiencing being forsaken, as does Jesus on the cross, and without having answers to such a contradiction.

How is this mysticism also political? Metz's ecclesiology shows best how political action flows from the "God-mysticism", the lament, the "suffering unto God". Whereas the mystical dimension of "suffering unto God" is the universal dimension of Christianity, the political refers to the historically particular. The mystical-political praxis of the Church as a community of disciples of Christ gives witness to his liberating message in a practical way. It will be political because Christianity has a historical and public character that is centred in the *memoria passionis* and thus demands an alignment with the poor, the destitute and the defeated in order to show that the Kingdom of God is near. Metz's mysticism of "open eyes" (1998:69) thus remembers *and* sees past and present human "suffering unto God" in which the *presence* of God is experienced but is also reacted to (mysticism as process encompassing transformative action), "for the remembrance of someone else's suffering is by nature no passive observation; against its horizon resistance to suffering is unconditionally commanded, a resistance that is not guided by the myth of complete freedom from suffering, of course, but rather has a sober recognition that there will always be situations that create suffering among men and women ..." (1998:144-145).

Among the Catholic voices above, one is surprised to find two of the clearest accounts of mystical-prophetic theology in Protestant voices, that of German theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Sölle. In his article "Theology of Mystical Experience" (1979b), Moltmann also refers to mysticism as a process or way of life rather than a once-off psychological experience, especially since he sees mystical experience as incapable of being communicated in doctrinal propositions, so that "'theology of mystical experience' always tells only *the way, the journey*, the transition to that unutterable and incommunicable experience of God" (*ibid.*:501, my italics). Moltmann distinguishes between three types of mystics and mysticism: the monk, the martyr and, as one finds in Rahner, the mysticism of everyday life. All three are manifestations of a search, "a compelling longing, a hungering heart"

that can find satisfaction in God alone. In this sense, "[w]hat ... mystics depict is basically the history of the liberation of human passion from the failed and melancholy forms of satisfaction. What they describe is in fact the history of love between man and God" (*ibid.*:502). Though there are differences in how this search is undertaken, all share the element of encountering God in his apparent absence. For the monk, the way of meditation upon the history of Christ and contemplation of his spiritual presence in us leads to the renewal of his own image in the image of God. This is a way of "stripping away, of separation, of poverty, of abandoning of everything, and in the end the self-annihilation of the soul", Meister Eckhart's famous *Abgeschiedenheit*, a turning away from world and self. "For the mystics this meant, in their paradoxical formulation, *learning to live in the absence of the God who is present*, or in the presence of the God who is absent, and enduring the 'dark night of the soul'" (*ibid.*:505-506, my italics). The latter is "the abandoning of God for the sake of God", "when the soul in its isolation comes to resemble the isolation of God, 'then from knowledge it becomes without knowledge, and from love, without love, and from light, darkness' [Eckhart] ... [before, finally] the soul is at home ... then the passion ends in endless enjoyment, then like is with like" (*ibid.*:511-513). In the second and third types of mysticism suffering is a vital key to understanding and appreciating mysticism. For the second type of mysticism, the *Sitz im Leben* of this path is not religious (the monk, the monastery) but political [sic]: the martyr, the prison. It is also here where Moltmann's view of mysticism as both experience of the presence of Christ *and* its manifestation in prophetic action – "mysticism is no escape from action, but preparation for public discipleship" (*ibid.*:515) – is clear:

The way of mystical experience is in reality discipleship of Christ and resistance to the oppression of humanity. The locus of mystical experience is indeed the cell – the prison cell. The "witness" to the truth of Christ is despised, insulted, persecuted, dishonoured, and rejected. In his fate he experiences the fate of Christ. The mystics called this the *conformitas crucis*. So he also experiences the presence of the risen Christ in his sharing in the suffering of Christ ... God in the cell, God in the trial, God in the night that surrounds the soul – that is the mysticism of the martyrs ... In prison the spiritual presence of Christ is experienced. In prison the soul finds the *unio mystica* (*ibid.*:514).

What is true of the martyr is also true of the third form of mysticism, that of everyday life, though here

[i]t is not only in spiritual exercises, and certainly not only in public martyrdom, that the soul dies with Christ and becomes "cruciform", but already in the ordinary pains of life and the sufferings of love ...

So the experience of the risen “Christ in us” is given not only on the summits of spiritual contemplation, and certainly not only in the depths of death, but also in the little experiences of pain borne and transformed ... Living with Christ gives strength to live on, and brings about the resurrection of love. It strengthens the power of resistance of the weak and the small when they are threatened and overpowered by the strong (*ibid.*:516, my italics).

In short, it is not surprising that all three types of mysticism are closely connected to Moltmann’s view of mystical unification with – in his famous formulation – the *crucified* God. It is in the cross of the risen Christ in which “are sunk the sins and sufferings of the entire world”, and under the cross that the eschatological vision of God in all things and all things in God (1 Co 15:28) appears. And it is this vision that “lives in the experience of the persecuted and the martyrs who trace the presence of God in prison ... in the mystics who discover the presence in the dark night of the soul ... in the piety of the simple to whom God is present and in the darkness of the experienced moment” (*ibid.*: 520).

We pick up Dorothee Sölle’s reflections on mysticism in the late 1960s with the so-called “political evening prayer services” in Cologne, in which she participated and which was inspired by her thought. The basic premise of these services was that faith and politics are inseparable: the gospel demands that it be given a chance to impart social realities in a critical and constructive way so as to open new perspectives as well as possibilities for active engagement (Sölle & Steffensky, 1970:7, 9; cf. Schottroff, 2003:45-46; Bieler, 2003:55). In the sixties Sölle envisioned two foci of action: being a lobby for the Third World and liberating the First World from consumerism. In the 1970s she focused especially on the second point but without neglecting the first, envisioning a new piety in which radicalism and piety take hands and reinforce one another. In her 1975 book *Die Hinreise* (translated as *De Heenreis. Gedachten over religieuze ervaring – 1976*, and *Death by Bread Alone – 1978*), she expressed this radical piety as a journey outwards that breaks the bonds of a consumer society devoid of transcendence towards God amidst a society that wants to be “[k]ontaktloos ... zonder pijn willen leven, voor brood alleen funktioneren en van brood alleen leven, geweld toestaan en in stand houden, de orde leifhebben, die het voortduren van deze toestand garandeert”.¹⁴ The journey had a clear inward side:

¹⁴ Cf. Sölle, “Life without Suffering a Utopia?” in *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Feminist Christian Identity*, transl. Rita and Robert Kimber, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984, p. 28: “We have inverted the relationships between love and suffering ... Our highest goal is to remain free of it right up to the moment of death ... The apathetic freedom from suffering, this freedom from want and from pain and from commitment to people has

De "reis" is een oud beeld voor de ervaringen, die de ziel opdoet op weg naar zichzelf. De "heenreis" start met meditatie en vormt de hulp die de religie biedt aan de mens op weg naar zijn identiteit. Het christelijk geloof legt het accent op de "terugreis" naar de verantwoordelijkheid in de wereld. Maar daartoe is een dieper gevoel van zekerheid nodig dan wij – met doen alleen – kunnen bereiken: namelijk de "heenreis" (1976:6).

The above theme of Sölle's is continued and probably finds its best expression in her 1997 work *Mystik und Widerstand/"Du stilles Geschrei"* (*Mystiek en Verzet. "Gij stil geschreeuw"* – 1998). The key to Sölle's view on mysticism and its relationship to prophetic action is found here: "[D]e mystieke ervaring van God ontstaat uit de concrete historische situatie en keert noodzaakelijkerwijs daarin terug: veranderd, handelen en lijdend" (1998:209). Sölle reads and interprets the great mystic texts from this basic insight. For example, the traditional "dark night of the soul" "... ontstaat niet buiten de historische wereld in een verondersteld zuiver 'tegenover' van God enerzijds en de ziel van de individu anderzijds", but is founded in the "dark night of the world" (*ibid.*:209-210). One finds Sölle's view of mysticism as the experience of an *encounter with God* in her account of the "places of mystical experience", which can be any place – she gives as examples nature, erotic love, suffering, community and joy (*ibid.*:141-264). Especially suffering plays an important role in Sölle's theology. The idea of encountering God amid suffering is clear in one of her early works, *Suffering*¹⁵ – in it one finds for example her comment, as quoted by Keshegian (2003:96), on Elie Wiesel's account of the hanging of a young boy in Auschwitz (to which one of the spectators asked: "Where is God now?"): "To interpret this story within the framework of the Christian tradition, it is Christ who suffers and dies here ... God is on the side of the victim, he is hanged".¹⁶ Regarding such encounters and their relationship with prophetic action, Keshgegian remarks: "Therefore, the boy in the story and all who are victimised are not alone in their suffering. God is present, rather than absent. Further, God needs human action to preserve the memory of those who died and to effect change in the present. Soelle suggests there is no alternative to this claiming of the past suffering for present purposes if the suffering is to have meaning". *Mysticism as a process* that includes transformative prophetic action

been promoted to our highest value ... The goals of being capable of love are subordinated to the goal of getting through life 'well' which is to say getting through unscathed, untouched" (in Bieler, 2003:60).

¹⁵ Transl. Everett R. Kalin, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, p. 146.

¹⁶ Cf. also Sölle, 1984 and 1989 ("God's pain is our pain"), where she makes the bold statement, "All who suffer are in God's presence" (1989:332). Cf. Pinnock, 2003. Hawkins, 2003, esp. pp. 172-175.

therefore also forms part of Sölle's views on it. In fact, for her, the relationship between mysticism and prophetic action (resistance) is so extremely close that she does not hesitate to say that, "Het verzet is ... niet het gevolg van mystiek, maar de mystiek zelf" (*ibid.*: 278, 272).¹⁷ In her reflection on "20th-century mysticism of suffering" she states that:

een spiritualiteit die zich ontplooit met voorbijgaan aan de reële geschiedenis en die niet door haar wil worden beïnvloed, mag dan beantwoorden aan bepaalde kenmerken van vroomheid, maar "mystiek" in de hier bedoelde zin is ze niet *als* ze weigert de prijs van de nabijheid van God in het handelen en lijden in de wereld te betalen (1998:209).

Sölle calls her kind of mysticism a "mysticism of liberation". She distinguishes between mystics and non-mystics in that the former cannot but perceive the world other than with the eyes of the just, meaning that he/she "laat zich niet afleiden van de reële ellende". Via the traditional way of negation, the self-less self ("ik-loosheid") (*ibid.*:291ff), homelessness, stripped of the First-World security of possessions ("bezitloosheid") and power ("machtloosheid") (*ibid.*:272), the true mystic is – in the traditional mystical phrase – "united with God". But:

één wordt met God in de waarneming, in de kennis, in oefen in de wijze van zien zoals God ... zie wat God ziet. Hoor wat God hoort. Lach, waar God lacht. Huil, waar God huilt ... een waarneming van het kleine, van het onbeduidende, het luisteren naar het jammeren van Gods kinderen, die in Egypte in slavernij zijn ... Wat in de mystieke eenwording werkelijk gebeurt is niet een nieuw zicht op God, maar een andere relatie tot de wereld – een relatie die de ogen van God heeft geleend (*ibid.*:405-6, 21).

In this way Sölle also aims at "democratising mysticism", an effort to show that "wij zijn alle mystici", in a movement away from the longstanding idea of

¹⁷ Cf. Bieler, 2003:60: "Soelle claims the anthropological notion of human beings as *cooperatores dei* as central to her understanding of prayer. We are invited to work for the coming of God's reign and to participate in the miracle of transformation and resurrection. Resurrection, as a fragmented experience, can be realised in prayer. It becomes the place of identification with people who suffer, the place for acknowledging one's own responsibility and complicity, and it becomes the place for political decisions. Prayer without any political consequences is hypocrisy". Cf. Pinnock, 2003:140 with reference to the long list of mystics Sölle in *Mystiek en Verzet*: "Even looking solely at the Christian mystics cited, parallels are drawn between diverse historical figures and eras, eliding their differences and stressing similarities. Soelle's purpose is to demonstrate that resistance is consistently central to Christian mystics".

mysticism being the prerogative of a spiritual elite to one of mysticism being the prerogative of all, but especially of the poor and those who are in solidarity with them.

The final theologian featured here is the American Roman Catholic David Tracy, with whom one finds a somewhat different point of entry from the above theologians. Tracy's interest in mystical-prophetic theology, though not devoid of an interest in liberation, rather is connected to one of the main themes of his whole theological project: theological methodology.¹⁸ In the background of the latter theme also stands 20th-century Transcendental Thomism, though not so much in the person of Rahner as that of Lonergan. Tracy's first major publication was on the latter's methodology (*The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan*, 1970). That was followed by *Blessed Rage for Order. The New Pluralism in Theology* (1978), an account of his own favoured methodology at the time: a revisionist theology of critical correlation. In his next major work, *The Analogical Imagination. Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (1981), Tracy perceives theology more and more as a hermeneutical enterprise (1981:104). For this he finds the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer useful, especially Gadamer's model of interpretation as dialogue – a search for "a fusion of horizons", for "similarities-in-difference" (i.e. analogies) – since Tracy here defines theology as a search for analogical relations between *the* Christian "classic" (i.e. "the event and person of Jesus Christ" as expressed in the Bible¹⁹) and the contemporary situation. In order to come to some kind of consensus between the multitude of possible results of this theological search – theological pluralism being another major theme in Tracy's work – an "analogical imagination" is needed (cf. 1981:405ff). Related to the issue of theological pluralism and especially important for the purposes of this article, is Tracy's view of the two "conceptual languages" that underlie the "secondary manifestations" (i.e. in creeds, liturgy and ethical codes of conduct) of the Christian faith. The first, "more Roman Catholic" conceptual language is "analogical language", which emphasises a cosmos-wide pattern of sacramental, analogical relationships between God and creation. The latter emanates from the incarnation of Christ, the paradigmatic sacrament of God, and reveals a radical, all-pervasive grace that results in a fundamental belief in the goodness of matter and history even in the face of absurdity and chaos (1981:412-413). "Dialectical", "more Protestant" language emphasises a radical distinction between the sacred and human culture, a "rupture at the heart of human pretension, guilt and sin – a rupture disclosed in the absolute paradox of Jesus Christ proclaimed in the judging, negating, releasing word" – the latter referring to both Christ as primary and Scripture as secondary means of revelation of the Holy. This language system does not focus on "sacrament", but

¹⁸ Cf. Sanks, 1993:719.

¹⁹ For Tracy's understanding of the "classic", cf. 1981:68, 233, 239.

on the “preached word” of grace and judgement, also judgement on “all poisonous dreams of establishing any easy continuities between Christianity and culture” (*ibid.*:414-415). This “traditional Christian dialectic of sacrament and word” is a continuation of what Tracy calls the “more primordial religious dialectic of ‘manifestation’ and ‘proclamation’” (*cf.* 1981:377; 1990:6-7). Elements of the former continues in many contemporary theologies,

from Schleiermacher to Cobb, Gilkey and Ogden in the Liberal Protestant tradition; from Aquinas to Rahner, Lonergan and major aspects of the theologies of Küng and Schillebeeckx in the Catholic tradition – [that] reexpress ... the reality of some route of philosophical mediation to the religious-intellectual experience of the mediated immediacy of the power of manifestation ... [They] tend to be analogous in structure and spirit: their similar trust in mediating powers of critical and/or speculative reason, their openness to metaphysical inquiry, their love for the logos tradition of christology, their openness, however guarded, to mystical experience (1981: 379).

Those continuing elements of proclamation the Reformers and neo-orthodox Protestant theologians

shifted away from all experiences of manifestation into empowering experience of God’s decisive word of address in Jesus Christ. No depth experience, no quest for the ultimate, no mysticism, they urge, can save us in this situation. Only if God comes as eschatological event, as unexpected and decisive Word addressing each and all; only if God comes to disclose our true godforsakenness and our possible liberation can we become healed (*ibid.*:386).

However, what is even more important here is Tracy’s identification of a third category of theologians for whom neither of these classic routes is sufficient – even if they started out from a form of manifestation (e.g. Metz and Gutiérrez) or proclamation (e.g. Moltmann, Sölle, James Cone and Rosemary Radford Ruether). They have moved on to the sphere of action and history, to performative personal, social and political praxis; they “attack ... the ‘individualism’ of past personalist, existentialist and transcendental journeys”, insist on “the primacy of praxis in all theology”, and recovered “the political, historical, eschatological not-yet at the heart of the Christian vision ... [and] the God of the oppressed who suffers and works with all peoples for their fully human – their personal, political, societal, cultural, religious – liberation” (1981:390, 395).

This brings us to Tracy’s appreciation of mystical-political theology. In his essay “Recent Catholic Spirituality: Unity Amid Diversity” (1989), Tracy identifies the

mystical-political as one of the prominent 20th-century Roman Catholic spiritualities. He prefers the term *mystico-prophetic*, thereby widening its scope beyond concerns with political liberation to include not only liberation spirituality, but also creation-centred spirituality emphasising a cosmocentric rather than an anthropocentric spirituality and, finally, a spirituality taking its cue from the Second Vatican Council's interest in ecumenism and inter- and intra-religious dialogue, which "has encouraged a search among many Christians for a Christian mystico-prophetic spirituality that could prove responsive to the riches of the full Christian heritage and fruitful for the religious needs, both historical and cosmic, of our day" (*ibid.*:169).

It is precisely within the context of Tracy's own inter-religious dialogue with Buddhism that he wrote *Dialogue With the Other. The Inter-religious Dialogue* (1990), where one finds a clear formulation of what constitutes mystical-prophetic theology for Tracy. It is at the same time a continuation of his ongoing conversation with modernism, his critique of its "totalising project" and his increasing appreciation of postmodern reactions against this in its "turn to the other", its appreciation of difference whereby "the most marginalized group of our heritage – mystics, hysterics, the mad, fools, apocalyptic groups, dissenters of all kind, avant-garde artists claim the attention of many post-modern searchers for an alternative version of a usable past" (1990:2; cf. 1999a:171 & 1994:3).

In his dialogue with Buddhism, Tracy found an other "who names Ultimate Reality not God, but Emptiness" and "declares that there is no self" (*ibid.*:68), and so challenges contemporary Western "possessive individualism", i.e. "the self-deceptive belief in a united, coherent, non-relational ego" (1990:74). This leads Tracy to rediscover Christianity's closest parallel to the Buddhist no-self in the great Rhineland mystic Meister Eckhart, who lets go of the self, *encounters* the "Godhead-beyond-God", a God beyond Eurocentric perceptions of God as a mere "projected Other to whom we egoistically cling" (*ibid.*). But, since Christianity cannot remain with the radical apophatic mysticism of Eckhart or the no-self of Buddhism, this mysticism has to *manifest itself in a return to the world ...* which Tracy finds in the Trinitarian *mysticism* of another Rhineland mystic, Jan van Ruysbroeck:

Ruysbroeck in his post-Eckhart Trinitarian mysticism ... had a further insight beyond Eckhart ... That insight is the need for a fully mystico-prophetic contemporary Christian theology where the mystically transformed, reflecting on the profound implications of the one God as essentially Triune, returns to the world freed for life in all its earthiness and all its search for justice and love (1990:83; cf. *ibid.*:92).

Finally, in Tracy's most recent work he again reformulates the dialectic between word/sacrament, manifestation/proclamation, mystical/prophetic even more clearly within the context of the modernism/postmodernism debate. This marks the most recent turn in his theological project, that of adequately naming God in "an age that cannot name itself" (1994:3). With regard to religion, postmodernists react to "the bizarre parade since the late seventeenth century of the modern ways of naming God: that series of '-isms' for naming God in modern and theological thought ... [which] were intended rationally to control the discussion of the ultimate religious other" (*ibid.*). In the process they retrieved the category, initially used by some artists of Romanticism, of "fragments" and with it the category of the "Impossible":

Fragments show the need to shatter any reigning totality system ... And at the very same time fragments embody a quite positive meaning: a break out of totality into infinity by discovering one's own routes and one's own traditions. In the process, one discovers all the others and the different, in the very same way, as possible disclosures of infinity (1999b:30).²⁰

Particularly favoured were the most disruptive, fragmenting, marginalised, "transgressive" and "excessive" proponents of religion ... like the mystics. Tracy intends to use the category of fragments in a planned three-volume work, *This Side of God*, to come to "a fully Christian theo-centric vision, a Christian naming of God". For this, he hopes to retrieve and develop the two great fragmenting forms of Judaism and Christianity: the prophetic-apocalyptic, naming God as hidden and the apophatic-mystical, which insists on the incomprehensibility of God (2000:77).

For Tracy, the latter (of which Pseudo-Dionysius is the example *par excellence*) shows the impossibility of, and fragments, any intellectual or linguistic totality system. However, especially important for me here is the prophetic/apocalyptic, which fragments "any triumphalist totality system for understanding history and time and releases the fragments of the memory of suffering of whole peoples and the memory of the passion of Jesus Christ to a theology of the cross" (*ibid.*:84). This is particularly clear in the prophetic/apocalyptic "hiddenness of God" in Luther's theology of the cross, where God is revealed *sub contrariis*: life through death, wisdom through foolishness, power through weakness. For Tracy, one of the

²⁰ Tracy is not the only "mystical-prophetic theologian" taking part in the modernism/postmodernism debate. This is also true of Gutiérrez, for example, but especially of Metz, with his Enlightenment critique via influences of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Metz also insists on "weak categories" when speaking of God, which comes close to Tracy's category of "fragments" in opposition to modernistic grand narratives.

greatest insights of liberation theology is its insistence on "God's revelation ... in the suffering of oppressed and marginalized peoples ... [So that] [t]oday that insight of God through the hiddenness of suffering, negativity, cross can be rendered not merely into the highly brilliant terms of Luther but in the historical political terms as seen in so many liberation and political theologies" (*ibid.*:81).

Interestingly enough, as we have seen, it is exactly this "hiddenness of God" amidst suffering and oppression that, more often than not, forms part of or *the mystical* element of liberation and political theologies. This I interpreted as agreeing with McGinn and Waaijman's view of mysticism as the experience of the *presence of God* amidst his *apparent absence*. My contention therefore is: even if – perhaps exactly *because* – Tracy identifies God's presence in his apparent absence as the *prophetic element*, it shows even more clearly the close relationship between mysticism and prophecy, a relationship so close that prophetic action can indeed be construed as part of the mystical process or way of life – something close to Sölle's dictum "mystiek is verzet". In other words: perhaps the *mystical* does contain two elements – in Tracy's terminology, that of incomprehensibility but also that of the hiddenness of God in the face of suffering. And where else but on the cross of Christ do both these elements find their greatest exemplification? Is it not, in Paul's terms, in the incomprehensible "scandal of the cross" (1 Co 1:23) that the loving and almighty God is also most hidden and thus most *sub contrariis* revealed? And as to the relationship between these two elements? In Tracy's words:

The contemporary apophatic namings of God name God as Incomprehensible. Apocalyptic also desires to name God in terms of the Impossible but not merely to render that naming in language and thought [as the apophatic "impossibly comprehensible" does – LDH] but more importantly to render it in time and in history where the Impossible becomes a matter of justice, justice which, to be sure, seems entirely impossible given the present world's reign, is promised and threatened as the Hidden-Incomprehensible God's own possibility for us (*ibid.*:88).

6. CONCLUSION

In this article, I explained how mysticism has shifted from the position of a completely "private affair" to one that contains a distinct public theological element, from being suspect to being re-valued as an important subject of theological reflection – even amongst Protestants, long its fiercest critics. I illustrated my point not only with reference to scholars of spirituality and mysticism, but also showed it to be the case amongst leading 20th-century theologians – and not only from the perspective of so-called liberation or political theologians. However, the use of the term "mystical" by these theologians is not

above suspicion. None other than Waaijman himself, in collaboration with Otger Steggink, feels that in “mystical-political” theologies,

[m]ystiek funktioneer hier op verschillende manieren. Nu eens drukt het de nie-persoonlijke bewogenheid uit waarmee men zich politiek engageert. Dan weer wijst mystiek op het “meer dan structurele” dat men van de “politiek” verwacht. Tenslotte funktioneer het woord mystiek als religieuze legitimatie voor een politieke inzet: politieke inzet is “meer”. Doorgaans wordt er geen mystieke ervaring in strikte zin mee bedoeld (Steggink & Waaijman, 1985:31; Steggink, 2003:26).

Unfortunately, Waaijman and Steggink do not give a more detailed explanation for their view with reference to specific proponents of mystical-prophetic theologies. Perhaps their view has to do with an aspect of McGinn’s definition of mysticism as the “*immediate or direct presence of God*” (*vide supra*; my italics). As was seen with most proponents of mystical-prophetic theology discussed above, much depends on the encounter with God in the suffering, oppressed, marginalised other, which might be interpreted as a mediated rather than a direct presence of God. This was particularly clear from Schillebeeckx’s view that all human experience is interpreted and mediated experience. In fact, Schillebeeckx defends himself against the criticism of this view of his with regard to mysticism as “ook dan als mystici bij de verwoording van hun ervaringen van ‘onmiddellijkheid’ spreken, verraadt hun analyse dat die onmiddellijkheid bemiddeld is, vooral bij Johannes van het Kruis en zelfs bij Eckhart” (1986:65).²¹ However, it should also be kept in mind that Waaijman (2003:58) states that the mystical experience brings to the mystic a new perspective of reality and is not bound to specific settings, and that only sometimes it “dringt zich als het ware van binnenuit op aan de mysticus. Men noemt dit wezensmystiek”. Sometimes, however, “ontwaakte de mystieke ervaring binnen ontmoetingen met medemensen” – for Martin Buber within the immediate circle, his wife, children, friends and artists – and “[s]oms ontwaakte de mystieke ervaring binnen de grotere sameleving” – for Francis of Assisi it was the encounter with the leper, from the lowest strata of society. “Deze ‘bittere doorbraak’ word een ‘zoete’, wanneer Frans in het gelaat van de melaatse zijn Heer ontmoet ... Tenslotte kan een mystieke ervaring doorbreken in contact met de natuur. De mystiek die hier geboren wordt, noemt men natuurmystiek” – such as is found with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Waaijman, 2003:58). Ironically, Schillebeeckx (1986:67) expresses his view in almost identical words and with some of the same examples! Equally interesting is the fact that he names a setting for the encounter

²¹ Cf. Schillebeeckx (1980:731-43) for the view that even in personal prayer, the immediacy of God is mediated by “the historical human and natural world of creation, the constitutive symbol of the real presence of God for us”.

with God "bij lezen van de Tora of de Schrift". (For a similar view, cf. Galilea, 1974:29). With the patristic usage of the word "mysticism" in mind as, amongst others, the mystical meaning of the Scripture (as explained above in par. 3), one has to wonder if one does not find here a further retrieval of a forgotten aspect of mysticism: one that once more emphasises the Word of God as the setting of an encounter with God. This will surely meet with approval, certainly from many Protestants, traditional critics of mysticism. Moreover, according to McGinn,

[the] essential note – or better, goal – of mysticism may be conceived of as a particular kind of encounter between God and the human, between Infinite Spirit and the finite human spirit, [and] everything that leads up to and prepares for this encounter, as well as all that flows from or is supposed to flow from it for the life of the individual in the belief of the community, is also mystical, even if in a secondary sense (McGinn, 1994a, xvi).

In the light of this, one wonders if Waaijman and Steggink's reservations on the use of mysticism in mystical-prophetic theologies as the "nie-persoonlijke bewogenheid uit waarmee men zich politiek engageert" or the "religieuze legitimatie voor een politieke inzet" is not simply a question of perspective in that it views mysticism from the perspective of political action – as might well be the case with some mystical-prophetic theologians, most of whom are not without reason described as liberation or political theologians. However, if one looks at political action from the perspective of mysticism, the former can indeed be interpreted as part and parcel of the latter. In any case, it is important to take serious note of McGinn's warning that to isolate "the goal [of mysticism] from the process and the effect has led to much misunderstanding of the nature of mysticism" (*ibid.*), and that one has to concur with the interpretation of the prophetic element of mystical-prophetic theologies as indeed being mysticism, at least "in a secondary sense". An equally unfortunate and common mistake would be to identify the goal, essential characteristic, or defining knot of mysticism as the experience of some form of union with God, a union of absorption or identity in which individual personality is completely lost. If this be the case, McGinn comments (*ibid.*), then there would actually be very few mystics in the history of Christianity. In the final instance, one cannot concur with the dictum of Péguy that "[all] politics begins in mysticism". That would be similar to reformulating Sölle's view that "mysticism is resistance" to "resistance is mysticism". However, from the viewpoint of mysticism, one can at least concur that "mysticism" – in order to be authentic mysticism – "should end in politics".

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THE CHRISTIAN AS THE CHRIST IN SOCIETY: KARL BARTH'S PUBLIC THEOLOGY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA TODAY

Rothney S. Tshaka¹

1. INTRODUCTION

For those who had always understood Barth's theology as a theology directed towards the public, any attempt to contemplate whether his theology is "public theology" demands more clarity. Calls for theology to be public seem to be supported by concerns that theology is not public enough, because it is accepted as a private matter. Viewed as such, a number of questions flow naturally from this concern. There is a need to unpack the notion "public" in public theology. What is understood by it and how does the church interpret that which is public? How was it interpreted in the past and how does it differ today? With the dawn of modernity – which brought with it the awareness of the quintessence of democracy – the concept "public" has been rendered problematic and complicated. Modernity seems to have addressed some of these new concerns and questions in such a way that the notion became more complex than it used to be. It is therefore not as easy to speak about what is public as it was in pre-modern times. In other instances, the insistence that theology ought to be public mostly seems to be governed by emotions: that Christian theology is a factor to be reckoned with, particularly in contexts where it does not enjoy the privileges that it used to. Such talk can thus be construed as nostalgic reminiscence of some good old days when Christian theology was the only theology that really mattered in the public sphere.

Barth's theology remains belligerently and unapologetically public. Fundamentally, this theology has been no stranger to the South African theological and political scene. It was especially useful during the church's struggle against the theological sanctioning of apartheid, yet I believe that this theology remains useful also for a democratic South Africa. However, this concept impels Barth's theological enterprise and the theological metamorphosis of this great theologian. Given the magnitude of his theological oeuvre and the conviction that to look only at certain sections of his work in order to make conclusive statements on his theology is dangerously improper to him, this paper shall confine itself primarily to his early works, but with a view to showing that his early theological

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undertakings already exhibit a theology that is clearly directed towards society and the public. This paper shall therefore initially endeavour to map out the influences that led Barth to be a public theologian. Having established who the person Barth is and what influences affected him, the contribution will examine the Christian public character of Barth's theology.

It will also be argued that Barth's theology was not only public in character, but that he also aspired at all times to render Christian theology to the public. We shall look at how the concept of "public theology" was obvious in Barth's theological reflection, although it was not used in the same way as in the case of modernity. To concede that for Barth all theology ought to be public also begs the question as to why it ought to be so, and if there is a specific function theology wishes to render to the public.

Finally, it will be argued that the democratisation of South Africa has brought with it a number of new challenges for which the South African church and its theology are ill-prepared to deal with. Admittedly theological reflections during Barth's era and the current democratic situation will differ, but we cannot merely accept this confusing period in the history of South African Reformed theology. The new political dispensation compels the church to deal thoroughly with the theory that underpins it, before it proceeds to seek practical solutions for the complexities accompanying it. Theology should continue to be public; but more importantly, it should vigorously seek to be *Christian* public theology. This does not suggest that theology should ignore other faiths – on the contrary, it cannot – but it has to understand that what makes theology *Christian* is its subjection to the principles that underpin Christianity, chiefly Holy Scripture.

2. KARL BARTH: A THEOLOGICAL PHENOMENON

Karl Barth is widely considered to be one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century. His contribution to theology cannot be over-emphasised. Having had the opportunity to study at both conservative and liberal theological schools, Barth was blessed with an informed ability to choose which theological approach would later characterise his own theological outlook. He confessed on a number of occasions that he was not at all impressed with the old Protestant manner of theologising. It was because of his disenchantment with this form of theology that his theological studies in Bern were nothing but a boring subject for him.²

His views were, however, challenged when he later met the liberal theologians of Germany. He became a devout disciple of Hermann and took his teachings on

² Cf. Busch. 1976:38f.

systematic theology and ethics very seriously. It was in Berlin that he was furthermore impressed by Adolf von Harnack. After having encountered these liberal theologians (amongst others), Barth for the very first time admitted that theology now appealed to him. His friendship with Eduard Thurneysen led him to cross paths with people such as Ragaz, Kutter, the Blumhardts and many more.

During all this time Barth was being prepared for the ministry, a place where he would test the essence of all that he had imbibed. During his ministry, first as vicar in Geneva and later as minister in an industrial area of Safinwil, Barth realised that liberal theology was inadequate to deal with the real issues that affected members of his pastorate. More significantly, the theological legitimacy that gave his former teachers to the First World War seriously challenged the theology that he had found appealing since then. Barth's decision to surrender himself to the Bible and to allow it to be the determining factor in his theological reflections made it easy for him to deal with the inadequacies of liberal theology. One important work that testifies to this farewell to liberal theology and to the central role that the Bible was henceforth to play in his theological enterprise is entitled "The strange new world within the Bible".³

Apart from the realisation of the inadequacies of liberal theology in dealing with the socio-economic and political issues of his congregants, Barth also came to realise that theology remained intrinsically intertwined with politics. One cannot ignore the seriousness with which Barth executed both his early and his more mature theological and political undertakings. While still at Safinwil, he became involved in a number of projects that had to do with the wellbeing of his community. His exchange with one W. Hüsey reveals a Barth who knew already by then that the church existed within the world and that it was not enough to be content with the view that the church ought to confine itself to the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.⁴ In Safinwil Barth was also responsible for the establishment of three labour unions and was involved in educating the workers on issues that concerned them.⁵ And, even though there can be no doubt that Barth's praxis changed drastically upon his entry into academia, it does not mean that his theology had lost its political edge once he became professor of Reformed theology at Göttingen. Rather, it is fair to assume that he then related his theology to politics in somewhat different modes upon his entry

³ Cf. Barth, K. 1966. *Karl Barth: How I changed my mind*. Edinburg: St Andrews Press, p. 23.

⁴ Hüsey owned some private property in Safinwil and was alarmed by Barth's socialist sermons, which in his view seemed to galvanize the masses for attacking those who owned private property. He wrote to Barth after having heard one of his sermons in which Barth stresses, "Private property must fall – not private property in general, but private property as a means of production". Cf. Barth, 1976:38.

⁵ Cf. Marquardt, 1976:53.

into the academic world, when he began to gain a renewed admiration for Calvin and particularly the Reformed teachings and confessions.⁶

It is unfortunate that not many have seen the political and ethical character of Barth's theology because of his insistence on taking the essence of God as his theological point of departure. Barth has often been accused of not taking politics very seriously – those spearheading this view are, among others, theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Emil Brunner and Charles West.⁷ Niebuhr argued that Barth viewed the political terrain from “an eschatological airplane”, soaring at such a “very high altitude” that his theology was “too transcendent to offer any guidance for the discriminating choices that political responsibility challenges us to”.⁸ Furthermore, the character of Barth's political judgement has also been the object of criticism. He was, for example, criticised by West in particular for neglecting the necessary function of empirical analysis. It is for this reason that West contended that Barth had failed to concentrate “on the facts of human experience”.⁹ Emil Brunner criticised Barth's lack of zeal in condemning communism and held that Barth's critical sympathy for communism emanated from beliefs residing “in his subconscious but not his conscious approach to things”.¹⁰

This inability to see Barth as someone who took politics seriously impelled Hunsinger to raise a few questions which justify and provide the background for understanding the “controversial” work by Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths*.¹¹ Hunsinger asked those who preferred not to see Barth as a serious theologian who took politics equally seriously:

If politics is peripheral to his theology, then why did Barth so often insist that there was a political thrust to his formal thought? If his theology actually leads to such complacency, then what accounts for Barth's leadership in the resistance of Nazism? If his theology is incapable of discriminate political choices, then what explains his subtle, if controversial, discrimination between Communism and Nazism?¹²

⁶ For a thorough view of John Calvin's influence on the theology of Barth and of Barth's high regard for Reformed dogmatics and confessions, see Tshaka, 2005:1-81.

⁷ Cf. Hunsinger, 1976:181f.

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr cited in Hunsinger (ed.), *ibid.*:p.182.

⁹ Charles West cited in Hunsinger (ed.), *ibid.*

¹⁰ Emil Brunner cited in Hunsinger (ed.), *ibid.*: p.183.

¹¹ (1972) Munich: Kaiser Verlag.

¹² Cf. Hunsinger, *ibid.*:184.

These questions present to us a Barth totally different from the one introduced by Niebuhr, West and Brunner, and it is therefore not by chance that Hunsinger associated him in another study with liberation theologians such as Segundo and Gutiérrez, because he (Barth) believed that theological integrity was subject to certain practical and basic political tests.¹³

3. KARL BARTH'S PUBLIC THEOLOGY?

At the outset this paper deliberately bypassed the polemical period of the mature Barth's theology and its engagement with politics. This was done in the conviction that his early theology already contained clear allusions to how he would later deal with his theology in relation to politics.¹⁴ Furthermore, attempts to deal with Barth's theology holistically impel one to pay attention in a non-selective way to the issues that he dealt with later in this work.

From Barth's early views on theology and politics one can already conclude that his theology was by its very nature public – and would remain so. Already in his Tambach address one is confronted with a theologian who laid out the responsibility of Christian theology in the public sphere. With this address he sought to clarify at least three issues: the nature and content of the summons to be Christian in society; the nature of society in which the Christian has to act and exist; and the basis for the Christian's political action.¹⁵

For Barth the Christian in public is the Christ in public. Having said this, however, he cautioned that being in public and acknowledging how society functions did not imply a theological affirmation of all public actions and institutions. It is for this reason that he asserted

All combinations like "Christian-social," "evangelical-social," "religious-social," are conveniently handy, but it is especially important to ask the question, whether the hyphens which we use with reasonable boldness are not dangerous short cuts. The paradox that God's service (*Gottesdienst*) is or must become service to mankind (*Menschen dienst*) is very ingenuous, but whether our hasty service to humanity becomes through such an enlightenment service to God, even when it occurs in the name of purest love, such is another book. The evangelical is very true that the seed is the Word and the world the field, but what is the Word and who from us possess it? ... The divine is something total, something closed, something in the nature of the new, the different

¹³ Cf. Hunsinger, 2004:44.

¹⁴ Marquardt has convincingly illustrated how the influence of the periods in Barth's early theology affected his later, more mature theology. Cf. Marquardt, 1976:47ff.

¹⁵ Cf. Hood, 1985:39.

over the world. It cannot be glued on and conform to something. It cannot be separated or divided up because it is something more than religion.¹⁶

Since his break with liberalism, Barth came to be known as one of the greatest opponents of liberal theology, yet it is important not to confine Barth to these categorisations. Barth opposed liberal theology because he saw it as a form of anthropology that was wrestling to find a way to accommodate God. Barth wished the opposite to occur. He wanted to see theology focused on the Word of God and related from that point to human beings.

I have mentioned that the notion “public theology” has been problematised in modernity; it is thus fair to look at the concept of public theology from the point of view of how it was understood in liberalism. Suffice it to say that one characteristic of liberalism has been its insistence on discriminating between state and church, public and private, etc. In most instances this distinction is necessary, should be safeguarded and does not constitute a postmodern view, as many think. Barth realised the need of the church to be independent from the state. However, problems arise when such a distinction renders theology strictly separate from the sphere of politics and public discourse. The frivolity of questions that seek to establish the public nature of his theology is countered in the important work that he wrote on the subject of the church and its relationship to the state, *Community, State and Church*.¹⁷

To ask about the public nature of Barth’s theology is also to ask whether his theology does justice to ethics or whether his theology takes the political context in which it is exercised seriously. It is furthermore important to ask why theology has to be public at all – one may, of course, just as well ask why theology has to be private. In either case, whether theology may be public or private, it may still lack the freedom to act as a tool in the service of the proclamation of the Word.¹⁸ In 1963, during a visit by Nico Smith, then Professor of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch and later pastor in the black township of Mamelodi, Pretoria, Barth

¹⁶ Cf. Tshaka, 2005: 20.

¹⁷ (1960) New York, NY: Doubleday.

¹⁸ In my lectures on Reformed dogmatics and ethics in Zimbabwe I was challenged by the political and theological situation of that country to rethink the essence of theology for the public. Although the students admitted that Zimbabwe profess to be a Christian country, it was made clear that what the church has to say in public could sometimes be construed as unpatriotic, especially if what it said contradict the projects and aspirations of the government. The concept “patriotic” is wittingly used here in the light of the manner that it has been misconstrued in present-day Zimbabwe. It seems to have acquired a new meaning: “patriotism” refers simply to those who seem to be affirming the projects and policies of the ruling party, ZANU-PF.

asked Smith whether he was free to preach the gospel in apartheid South Africa. This question must have flowed from a conversation in which both agreed that Christian theology in South Africa was at least public.¹⁹ The significance of Barth's theology for the public realm is best understood when it is viewed as a theology that wanted to render a particular service. His theology was and remained public not because it wanted to gain favour with politicians, but because it took the socio-economic and political context in which it was exercised seriously *and* because it vigorously insisted on the Word of God as its point of departure in engaging politics.

I have argued elsewhere that the entire theological oeuvre of Karl Barth has to be read as confessional theology. In substantiation of this claim I identified five characteristics that remained consistent in Barth's theological reflection: his theology was based on the centrality of the Word of God; the church was the subject of his theology; his theology was a public witness to Jesus Christ; it considered the socio-economic and political contexts in which it was exercised; and it always had ethical implications.²⁰ All these characteristics taken together constitute Barth's confessional theology and this confessional way of looking at theology gave Barth the opportunity to engage the public in the very manner which he did. His participation in the German Church struggle was no accident, as his work on the relationship between church and state will reveal. Not only is this engagement important, but it is even more important to note the biblical and theological language that Barth employed when engaging with public issues.

4. BARTH'S VIEWS CONCERNING CHRISTIAN ACTION IN THE WORLD

When Barth wrote his *Rechtfertigung und Recht* ("Justification and Justice", later translated as *Community, State and Church*) in 1938, he attempted to expound a satisfactory interpretation of theology and its role in the public sphere in the light of his Christocentric theological outlook. Wanamaker (1988:97) argues that around 1930 Barth, being influenced by his study of Anselm, abandoned the dialectical method of theology which had dominated his work since the second edition of his work on Romans. Replacing the negative tendency to relativise all human experience in the face of the sovereignty of God and divine judgement, Barth began to employ a much more positive theological method that understood theology as faith seeking rational understanding. It is McCormack's opinion that Barth never abandoned the dialectical method, but that it merely matured as he

¹⁹ Cf. Cowell, 1985:22.

²⁰ Cf. Tshaka, *ibid.*:50.

came into contact with other influences – hence McCormack’s innovative work entitled: *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*.²¹

Following Barth’s mature conception of his theology, he emphasised that the Bible as the written Word of God was the major source for understanding the relation between God and the world, between Christ on the one hand and creation and redemption on the other. In other words, the “infinite qualitative distinction” between God and humanity was replaced by an emphasis on the relationship between God and humanity through God’s Word. In concurrence with Wanamaker, it must be said that this new methodological insight laid the foundation for his *Church Dogmatics* (the first volume of which appeared in 1932) as well as his new attempt at interpreting Romans 13:1-7 as well as addressing the subject of the connection between church and state.²²

There can be no doubt that *Community, Church and State* represents Barth’s definitive interpretation of Romans 13:1-7. With reference to this passage, Barth undertook to articulate a fully biblical understanding of the church-state question for the sake of the German Church and the struggle against Hitler and Nazism.²³ In his study on justification and justice (*vide supra*) Barth also turned to John 19:2 and pointed out the fact that Jesus had confirmed Pilate’s claim that the latter had power over him. What Christ meant there was that such power was not accidental or presumptuous, but that it was a power given to Pilate from above. According to Barth, this power was neither an end in itself nor was it evil. He arrived at this conclusion after having consulted 1 Timothy 2:1-7 as well as Romans 13:1-7. With reference to the latter he explained that the “*essence of the state*” was a necessary step in determining the relation between church and state.

It is by taking this into account that Hood’s (1985) description of Barth’s Christological basis for the state becomes clear. It is informed by Hood’s view that, throughout Barth’s theological career, he (Barth) insisted on establishing ethical issues which grew out of his understanding of the person and work of Christ. These new insights on the nature of the state are thus also a result of Barth’s continued exegetical labours. In his work on church and state, in contrast with his work on his commentary on Romans, he made use of historical criticism and noted that the Greek term *exousias* (powers and authorities) could also refer to angelic powers, conceding that they could therefore also become perverted. He mentioned another important feature of these perverted powers, namely that their fate was

²¹ McCormack, B. 1997. *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its genesis and development 1909-1936*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

²² Cf. Wanamaker, 1988:98.

²³ It was this same Barth and his involvement in the Confessing Movement that was later used by South African theologians to find ways of engaging with a government and its policies that were making a travesty of the Christian gospel.

also subordinate to Christ and through him to God, and that these powers were therefore also created beings.²⁴ Instead of attempting to demythologise this biblical account of the heavenly world or to expound it in symbolic terms, Barth treated it as a realistic presentation of reality and then related it to Romans 13:1-7.

Wanamaker declares that, for Barth, the God depicted in Romans 13 cannot be understood apart from the person and work of Christ; therefore, any interpretation that focuses on God under the general rubric of "Creator and Ruler" must be rejected.²⁵ Having established that the state, like the church, exist in the Christological framework, Barth's next step was to attempt to explain the specific connection between the two. He used as key to that the exhortation to Christians in 1 Timothy 2:1-7. According to his interpretation of this passage, a reciprocal relationship exists between the church and the state.²⁶

It was inevitable that for Barth 1 Timothy 2: 1-7 would constitute the primary exhortation to the church concerning its relation to the state. It provided the basis for his understanding of the command of Romans 13:1-7 to "be in subordination to the ruling authorities". Because of the reciprocity between church and state, I believe that this subjection can never be absolute and unquestionable, for it must always be held in balance with the church's obligation to preach justice. In essence, the subjection required of Christians cannot mean that they must accept and take upon themselves the responsibility for the intentions and undertakings of the state, which are aimed directly or indirectly at curtailing the church's freedom to preach and its pastoral involvement.

It is one thing to deal with the Christian's action in society when a particular society professes to be subscribing to the laws of God. But what happens to the relationship between church and polis in a situation where the state as such does not embody the laws of God, and if these laws are exposed only in the context of the revelation of God's gospel? Barth acknowledged the reality of the modern polis. He wrote in 1935 that the Constantinian alliance of the church and state, "the Christian-bourgeois or bourgeois-Christian age has come to an end ... that is, Christendom no longer exists in the form we have known ... the world is reclaiming ... its freedom (from the church) ... But with that, the gospel's freedom over against the world has been restored to it". For the church this did not mean freedom from the world, but a "freedom in the world" that that alliance had never afforded.²⁷

²⁴ Cf. Barth, 1960:116.

²⁵ Cf. Wanamaker, 1988:99.

²⁶ Cf. Barth, *ibid.*: 130.

²⁷ Barth cited in Busch, 2004:170.

5. KARL BARTH IN A CHANGED AND CHANGING DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA

Heiko Oberman was correct to argue in his posthumous work on Calvin entitled *Sola scriptura civitate interpretata* that, for Calvin, Scripture alone was the final authority. However, with reference to the title, Smit (2004) explains succinctly that this means “the scriptures read and interpreted with a view to the city, with a view to public life, to the questions and issues, the challenges and crises of society”. The same must be said of Barth and his theology. In fact, it can be said that his theology was so strongly orientated towards the society/city that it would be sheer folly to think otherwise.

It must, however, also be pointed out that the society in which he lived and reflected on in his theology differed tremendously from the current democratic South African society. But it cannot be denied that his theological approach also transcended his theological context and was found to be relevant outside of it and across the globe. More importantly, it must be conceded that modernity befuddled theology in that it made it difficult to be as clear a voice today as it had in an era when it was struggling against a common enemy of the gospel – apartheid. Nevertheless, let it be enough to point out that Barth’s theology proved to be a useful tool that could also be applied at different times and in different contexts. Its flexibility impels us too to look at ways of doing theology in a modern epoch without forsaking the issues that make Christian theology stand out as Christian.

During his lifetime Karl Barth cautioned that his theology should never be used without taking into account its context and that to which it hoped to respond.²⁸ This should galvanise us into looking at ways of doing Christian theology in our

²⁸ In the summer of 1968 Barth received a letter from a writer from Singapore who was unknown to him. The writer, Kosuke Koyama, had translated *Christian Dogmatics* into Japanese. Koyama was a Japanese missionary and had been involved for some years with the Theological Seminary of Thailand, becoming dean of the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology. He later took over the position of editor of the *South East Asia Journal of Theology*. Koyama wrote to Barth with a request that he write something about his theology for that journal. At the time Barth was ailing and permitted his assistant Eberhard Busch to see to this request. Busch compiled some of the issues that Barth was thinking about at the time and Barth endorsed them. However, there were a number of important issues that Barth thought he had to communicate to those Christians. In the letter Barth made it clear that “boring theology” was unacceptable and that it had become time for those Christians to understand that it was now the time that they spoke and that he listened. He continued to make it clear that theology had to be conducted with a degree of humour and, more importantly, that they had to understand that the God that they were talking about was also his God. Barth made it clear that they should not repeat what he had said in a different context, but should appropriate that which would be relevant in their context. Cf. Tshaka, 2005:211.

own changed and changing theological situation. However, the complexities of the South African situation are daunting. No serious observer of South African affairs today will deny that it is a country with pluralities, but that at the same time it is also a very polarised country – of course, both aspects derive from the history of the development of South Africa.

Since the dawn of democratic South Africa its religious plurality has become all the more evident. We live in a society that is home to many religious faiths and communities. This situation impels the Christian church to find ways of co-existing with other faiths. Even more than this, it impels the church and its theology to find clarity on their role in a society where Christianity is no longer favoured as a religion with a superior status. In its search to find ways of co-existing amicably with other religions, however, the church also has to ask itself constantly whether it still takes the Word of God as its point of departure in all its theological reflections. Furthermore, and of equal importance, the church needs to ponder the question of whether, in its attempts to become intelligible and accessible to today's society, it is still in the language of Scripture, able to discern the "lordless powers" of the day in their continuously changing forms and appearances.

Despite the existence of religious plurality and its challenges to Christian theology in South Africa, there also exists a deep sense of polarisation within the Christian faith itself. Different ecclesiastical traditions have different views of the church's role in public. Polarisation exists even *within* specific ecclesial traditions – as, for example, within the Reformed tradition – and the history of this polarisation is fundamental if one is to understand the role of theology for the public today. Within the Reformed tradition the role of the church and theology has been understood diversely – some accepted that the Bible can be used to justify the theological legitimacy of apartheid, while others questioned the authenticity of such hermeneutics. Having been exposed to the injustices that a theology subservient to apartheid produced, many were convinced that the church and its theology had a definite role to play in public, namely to see to it that apartheid is conquered. Although life under apartheid was difficult, the church at least had the certainty that its struggle against the regime was justified.

With the many new freedoms afforded South Africans under the new dispensation, South African society has become more complex and consequently things have become more confusing for the church. Modernity has precipitated many new categories in politics, so that it has become naïve to speak simply about the political service of the church to the state. Modernity and democracy have furthermore also made it difficult for the church to deal with particular political issues, because it assumes that it has the attention and can appeal to the consciences of those in government since the majority of them are apparently aligned with the Christian faith. For these and other reasons the church and

theology are struggling to find their proper role and responsibility in relation to the public.

Although it sometimes seems as if the church has successfully established the fact that it remains a force in a democratic context, it does not seem to get beyond that to the question as to the kind of theology that it has to produce for this new context. This inability is closely related with the euphoria that accompanied the advent of democracy in 1994. Apart from the fact that this democracy found theology ill-prepared to deal with its role in the given context, theology and the church are increasingly realising that they have inherited a number of unresolved challenges from their past – among them social, economic and human problems. This legacy of apartheid will continue to haunt the church as it sets out to find a credible voice and role today. Especially the polarisation within the family of Reformed churches which was precipitated by apartheid poses serious challenges for the way in which they execute their public witness to Jesus Christ, and they have also brought with them feelings of distrust and enmity within the body of Christ.

6. THE CHRISTIAN AS THE CHRIST IN SOCIETY: SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Karl Barth's idea of the Christian as the Christ in society calls to mind aspects of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's idea of discipleship.²⁹ For Bonhoeffer the Christian is the one who *stands on the side of the Christ*, he/she is the one who emulates the Christ. The Christian as the Christ is the one who is aware of the suffering and alienation that comes with standing on the side of this Christ and with taking up Christ's call to be his disciple. Because of this consciousness, the Christian as the Christ must constantly remain aware of other ideologies that are vying for his/her loyalties.

For Barth "the very thought of the Christian's place in society fills him with a curious blend of hope and questioning".³⁰ This thought interestingly corresponds with the Polish neo-Marxist Leszek Kolakowski's analysis of the philosophy of the priest, where he contrasted the priest with the clown.³¹ Kolakowski's analysis of the priest and the clown is fascinating in that each character is associated with a particular characteristic that is typical of each. The priest is known for his conservatism and the seriousness with which he takes everything. The clown is known for his satirical approach to reality. The clown questions almost everything that the priest sees as worth protecting. The Christian as the Christ in society is someone that has the characteristics of both the priest and the clown. Barth

²⁹ Cf. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1966).

³⁰ Cf. Barth, 1957:272.

³¹ Kolakowski cited by Theron in Smit (ed.), 1984:72.

referred to humour as being an essential ingredient of his theology (see his note to Koyama above). The Christian as the Christ in society is someone who has accepted that he/she exists *in* the world without being *of* this world. It cannot be denied that our past makes it difficult for us (both black and white) to see ourselves merely as Christians in society. It has become a characteristic of South African Reformed Christians to insist on adjectives to describe and to distinguish themselves from other Christians – white Reformed Christians, black Reformed people, and later on we started speaking of African Reformed Christians. These adjectives may be fundamental in their own right. Because the South African Reformed family is composed of different members who were divided and affected in different ways by apartheid, there can be no doubt that its reaction and response to particular civic issues will seldom be harmonious.³² The Reformed church in South Africa will have to keep its history in mind every time it contemplates the role of the Christian in public. However, it is always wise to remind ourselves that the categories in which we have been placed by our past can also be dangerous impediments to our ability to allow the Christ in us to surface, as Barth cautioned his socialist Christians friends in his Tambach address.

These categorisations make the squabbles that continue to rage in Reformed ecclesial circles today quite understandable. Such squabbles, which have made sincere debate on church unity in South Africa quite a formidable challenge, are not unique to our context. They were prevalent in Barth's Safinwil days, during his academic career and beyond. More often than not, the classification of Christian groups has only led to impasses. This is why Barth preferred not to speak about "Christians" in society but of *the Christian*. Aware that we are not clean slates, Barth emphasised that being Christian refers to that within ourselves that is not of ourselves, but *Christ within us*. It is only when we have understood that the Christ within us transcends boundaries drawn by ourselves, that we as Christians shall have something to say to society, something that is worth listening to. Therefore the question ultimately remains whether the modern Christian is still able to detect the Christ within, or has such language become unintelligible for today's modern Christian in the democratic South Africa?

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³² A number of current affairs issues can be cited in this regard to illustrate the church's divisiveness, e.g. the issue of affirmative action, which has direct roots in the past, has become a very contentious subject today, to mention but this one example.

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AGAINST ESCAPISM: DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S CONTRIBUTION TO PUBLIC THEOLOGY

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Good public theology does not directly need “a public”. Dietrich Bonhoeffer delivered his most important contribution to public theology while he was locked up behind a prison door and wrote personal letters, which had to be smuggled out secretly, to a friend. No large audience was intended anyway. However, by their authenticity, style and content, his *Letters and Papers from Prison (LPP)* represents the kind of theology that most of today’s practitioners of public theology would like to develop. Because it was (1) an *authentic* theology, not abstracted from the concrete personal life of the one who was doing it, but was rooted in a powerful Christian engagement; it was (2) a *dialogical* theology, not an isolated product of the interior monologue of an academic theologian in a study, but the experimental and fragmentary result of an open process of questioning and response; and above all, it was (3) a theology that spoke of God in the midst of life, not at its borders. It was a theology that asked believers to live a *worldly* life without reservations and without the escape into what Bonhoeffer called “religion”.

1. RELIGION AS ESCAPE: INWARDNESS AND THE LIVING IN TWO SPHERES

However, if we want to understand what makes Bonhoeffer’s theology so relevant for public theologians today, we have to take a closer look at its theological content, rather than at its form and style.

What would have been Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on hearing the – quite recent and trendy – term “public theology”? Probably, in the first place, that it refers to a theology that is not concentrated on the inner private life of the believer, but on God’s transformative presence at the crossroads of common human life. To Bonhoeffer its opposite, private theology, represented a kind of escapism, in direct opposition to the spirit of the gospel.

In his letters and papers from prison Bonhoeffer developed some critical insights into European Christianity:

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Man has learnt to deal with himself in all questions of importance without recourse to the “working hypothesis” called “God” ... [I]t is becoming evident that everything also gets along without “God” – and, in fact, just as well, as before ... “God” is being pushed more and more out of life, losing more and more ground (letter of 8 June, 1944; *LPP* 113).

A month later, Bonhoeffer notes how in European history Christian faith became a private religion and betrayed itself:

The displacement of God from the world, and from the public part of human life, led to the attempt to keep his place secure at least in the sphere of the “personal”, the “inner” and the “private”. And as every human still has a private sphere somewhere, that is where he was thought to be the most vulnerable. The secrets known to a man’s valet [*die Kammerdienergeheimnisse*] – that is, to put it crudely, the range of his intimate life, from prayer to his sexual life – have become the hunting ground of modern pastoral workers (letter of July, 8, 1944; *LPP* 123).

In European culture God became superfluous in the public domains of science, economy, politics and technology. Inwardness was the only place where the Christian God still seemed to be able to survive.

To Bonhoeffer, the theological affirmation of this cultural development in modernity – now globalising itself – signified a betrayal of the essentials of Christian faith. The rhetorical strategy with which he reminded Christian theology of its public relevance and responsibility was by creating a sharp distinction and opposition between “religion”, on the one hand and “faith” on the other. In his letter of 5 May 1944 he asked, “What does it mean to ‘interpret in a religious sense?’” and answered, “I think it means to speak on the one hand metaphysically and on the other hand individualistically. Neither of these is relevant to the biblical message or to the man of today” (*LPP* 91f.).

To Bonhoeffer, “religion” stands for the escape from reality into the inner life of the individual soul (*Persönlichkeit*), the only place where the transcendent God can be metaphysically present. Already in his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer analysed this development by which Christian faith loses all of its public relevance. There he speaks of the “obstructing Colossus” that thinking in terms of two spheres represents to our reflection on the powerful reality of God as revealed in Jesus Christ:

Since the beginnings of Christian ethics after New Testament times, the dominant basic conception, consciously or unconsciously determi-

ning all ethical thought, has been that two realms [Räume] bump against each other; one divine, holy, supernatural and Christian, the other worldly, profane, natural and un-christian ... Reality as a whole splits into two parts, and the concern of ethics becomes the right relation of both parts to each other (*Ethics* (b) 55f.).

How can modern people who do not want to withdraw like monks from the profane world (the Medieval "solution" for escaping the uneasiness of the sacred with the profane) take part in the experience of the divine? By withdrawing themselves into the private sphere. Their inner citadel functions as the religious refuge for the sacred in the modern world – an inner-worldly, though invisible space, the monastery cell of modern individuals. There they spiritually lick their wounds, inflicted in the profanity of secular life; there they feed their secular personality with "inspiration" and "meaning". In *Ethics* Bonhoeffer already developed a severe critique of this thinking on two spheres. To begin with, this dichotomy was intellectually untenable:

For the Christian there is nowhere to retreat from the world, neither externally nor into the inner life. Every attempt to evade the world will have to be paid for sooner or later with a sinful surrender to the world ... In the eyes of a worldly observer, there is usually something tragicomic about the cultivation of a Christian inwardness undisturbed by the world; for the sharp-eyed world recognises itself most clearly at the very place where Christian inwardness, deceiving itself, dreams it is furthest away from the world (*Ethics* (b) 61f.).

Escaping into and confining God to the interior sphere show not only a lack of courage; it not only is an act of weakness, it is an illusion. What seems to be private in this "inner world" is in fact public; what seems to be sacred is profane:

It is thought that a man's essential nature consists of his inmost and most intimate background; that is defined as his "inner life", and it is precisely in those secret human places that God is now said to have his domain! (letter of 8 July 1944, *LPP* 124).

You do not need to become a Freudian to discover that the most inward and private areas in the human mind are also governed by the rules of public profanity – places where one is confronted with the fantasies and desires of one's own conflicting self, instead of with the transcendent God.

2. FAITH AS PARTICIPATION IN THE REALITY OF GOD

But the escape into interiority is untenable not only for reasons of intellectual honesty. Above all, it is untenable for theological reasons, because it contradicts the experience of God's active presence in Jesus Christ as witnessed by the biblical narrative. It shows a lack of confidence and courage of faith. It is a sign of weakness and unfaithfulness, not daring to share in God's turn towards the world as it was revealed in his incarnation in Christ. In his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer stated:

There are no two realities, but *only one reality*, and that is God's reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world. Partaking in [*teilhabend an*] Christ we stand at the same time in the reality of God and in the reality of the world (*Ethics* (b) 58).

To Bonhoeffer, theology and Christology became almost synonymous. His whole theological existence consisted of engaged reflection on God incarnated, crucified and resurrected. To him, Christology did not only represent an element of theology, located in the doctrine of redemption. It formed the heart of theology, because it was the key to understanding both God and reality. What does the fact that God became human in Christ mean? It means that no longer are there two realities, the sacred and the profane, but that the reality of God went into the reality of the world and accepted it as his own. There is but one reality, and that is the reality of God-in-Christ. The Word became flesh. The God above us became the God amongst us. God is present in our reality or, in even stronger terms, he encompasses, includes our reality. Therefore, "All things appear as in a distorted mirror if they are not seen and recognised in God" (*Ethics* (b) 48). For Bonhoeffer, the task of theology consisted of struggling for a good definition of reality.² For the one who defines reality, decides reality. In his *Ethics*, therefore, Bonhoeffer tried to elaborate on an ontology of the incarnated God. We cannot interpret reality, he said, without reading it through the lenses of the incarnation (which invites us to engage with humaneness), the crucifixion (which summons us to a struggle against evil), and the resurrection (which brings us hope for the future) of God in Christ. These three Christological principles function in *Ethics* as a kind of categorical grid, in the Kantian sense of the word, through which reality is structured and receives its ultimate meaning.

Radical implications for the act of faith do follow. In a two-sphere view of religion, God is believed to exist in heaven. Divine and worldly realities are ontologically separated and entering into a relationship with God is possible only in the private, inward life of prayer and religious experience. If, however, our reality is encompassed by God's reality in Christ, as Bonhoeffer said, then the act of

² Cf. Dumas, 1968:236.

believing consists in participating with our whole existence in this reality. Then "faith" no longer means holding for true (*assensus*), but is an act of *fiducia*: an existential trust in, a total surrender to, this reality.

Participation in the reality of God, as Bonhoeffer conceived it, seems to be synonymous with what St. Paul called "living in Christ". The task of Christian ethics is asking how we can live "in the reality of God":

[T]he question is how the reality in Christ – which has long embraced us and our world within itself – works here and now or, in other words, how life is to be lived in it. What matters is *participation in the reality of God and the world of Jesus Christ today*, and doing so in such a way that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God (*Ethics* (b) 55).

To Bonhoeffer, to have faith in God is to get involved in his incarnation, to share in the life of Christ, to take part in his suffering in the world. Both in his *Ethics* and in his letters and papers from prison, Bonhoeffer develops a centripetal, worldly-oriented spirituality. The dynamic of God is one that stretches from the inside outwards, from the self towards others, from inwardness to outward concreteness. Faith means the dynamic sharing of this movement:

Man is summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world ... He must live a "worldly" life, and thereby share in God's sufferings ... It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. That is *metanoia*: not in the first place thinking about one's own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event (letter of 18 July 1944, *LPP* 129f.).

The spirituality of the thinking in two spheres undergoes a complete reversal: faith does not consist in the partial withdrawal into private interiority, but in the total surrender ("an act of life") to life with others. "Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life" (letter of 18 July 1944, *LPP* 131).

Bonhoeffer's first and most important contribution to public theology is this uncompromising concentration on the Christological heart of the gospel. Theology's task is to depict the movement that the incarnated God has made towards the world in the here and now. Since he had read Barth's volume of articles *The Word of God and the Word of Humans* in 1925, Bonhoeffer's thought was decisively affected by the turn that Barth had taken in theology – from God to the world, and not the other way round, as liberal theology did – and became his

critical ally. Theology is based on the premise *Deus dixit*. “Only where God alone speaks, do we know something about God” (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke (DBW) 11, 199*). God is the subject of faith before he is its object.

However, whereas Barth initially placed all emphasis on the act of God’s sovereign freedom in his speaking, Bonhoeffer emphasised that God has *given* his word in Christ and is present amongst us in those who share his life. This starting point in Christology is a structural element in all of Bonhoeffer’s theology. Christ represented for him the presence of transforming, liberating transcendence in the world. It became even more emphatic as his theology deepened and developed. To Bonhoeffer, the presence of God in Christ not only stood for a theological construct, but represented a living reality. Believing to him meant participating in that reality with unconditional commitment.³ Without this authentic personal engagement and this theological substance, the role Bonhoeffer played in his time and context as “public theologian” *avant la lettre* cannot be understood. In 1936 he admitted to a close friend, Elisabeth Zinn, that he was no longer the ambitious academic theologian of the earlier years. He had changed during the previous few years:

For the first time I discovered the Bible ... I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the Church, and talked and preached about it – but I had not yet become a Christian (*DBW 14, 113*).

Bonhoeffer’s theology cannot be comprehended apart from this “conversion” – as Bethge calls it in his biography. Though he used the expression for the church as a whole, one might say that Bonhoeffer personally also experienced what it meant to be “drawn ceaselessly into the event of Christ” (*Ethics (b) 66*).

Sometime during the 1930s the turn – what he later called “from phraseology to reality” took place (letter of 22 April 1944, *LPP, 85*). The two must be connected in some causal way or another – the discovery of the reality of Christ, on the one hand, and a realistic theological style on the other. The change in style revealed itself in the way Bonhoeffer wrote. While his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* and habilitation *Akt und Sein* were written in the learned language of the German professor, later on Bonhoeffer developed a simple (*schlicht*), albeit dense German style, accessible also to an audience of non-academics. From then on Bonhoeffer also tried to avoid any escape into theological style and language.

³ In this respect a public theologian differs from a public intellectual: the theologian is bound, the intellectual is *freischwebend*.

3. "WHO IS CHRIST *FOR US TODAY*?"

Bonhoeffer could have remained on the leeward side of academic existence, even during the turbulent years of the rise of Nazism and the war. Like many of his colleagues he might have withdrawn into an *innere Emigration*. In the summer of 1939 he had the chance to leave the scene, to flee danger and save his own life by accepting a professorship in the USA. However, for him personally the theologically confessed participation in the reality of the incarnated God implied the concrete decision "to share the trials of this time with my people" – as he clarified his motives for returning to Germany in a letter to Reinhold Niebuhr (DBW 15, 210).

As only an academic, Bonhoeffer could not have written the theology he did. For the central question in it was not what the Christian faith means in general, but – as Bonhoeffer formulated it in his famous letter written in prison dated 30 April 1944 – "who Christ really is, *for us today*" (LPP, 88; WE, 305; my italics).⁴ Speaking theologically about God is therefore always localised and embedded in a concrete context ("for us today"). "The God that exists in general, does not exist," Bonhoeffer wrote already in his habilitation *Akt und Sein* [*Ein Gott den "es gibt", gibt es nicht*]. In his effort to make the ecumenical movement an effective instrument of peace, he noted:

The church is not allowed to preach principles that are always true; only commandments that are true today. Because what "always" is true, is not true "today": God is "always" *God to us today*. [*Gott ist uns "immer" gerade "heute" Gott*"] (DBW 11, 332, *Zur theologischen Begründung der Weltbundarbeit*, 1932).

At that time Bonhoeffer was preparing for an academic career, and the phrase might have remained a witty *bon mot*.

However, the careful planning of a controlled career was ended by his enduring theological concentration on the here and now as the find-spot of God. Since Bonhoeffer was convinced that God reveals himself at the crossroads of concrete reality, a theologian cannot barricade himself on the leeward side of the library. Even when he/she does that for a while – in fact, this is needed in order to be a good theologian – it is done only temporarily "in inner concentration for the outward directed service" [*in innerste Konzentration für den Dienst nach aussen*] (DBW 14, 77; letter of 6 September 1935 on the establishment of the Finkenwalde

⁴ Cf. *Ethics* (a) 99: "We can and should not speak about what the good is, can be, or should be for each and every time, but about *how Christ may take form among us today and here*" (Bonhoeffer's italics).

seminary). Participating in the living reality of God is a dynamic as that reality itself is dynamic.

Both Bonhoeffer's biography and theology give an account of this dynamic mobility. The rather chaotic image they represent to us now, as witnesses after the fact, is not only the expression of a young, ambitious spirit who loved travelling to new horizons, or just a consequence of the political turbulence of the thirties and forties of the last century; it also reflects a theology that circles around a God who constantly reveals himself anew, every time incarnated in a different place. Bonhoeffer is continuously searching for God's actual command for that specific time [*Gebot der Stunde*]. Only in penetrating the reality that imposed itself in all its concreteness did he trace the presence of God. "Reality is the sacrament of the command of God," Bonhoeffer once wrote (*DBW* 11, 334 [*Zur theologischen Begründung der Weltbundarbeit*, 1932]). Bonhoeffer always did theology "at the given place" (*Ethics* (b) 268: *am gegebenen Ort*) – be it in the church, the university, or in prison – and at every specific spot he tried to understand God's concrete reality and to respond to it appropriately.

4. CONTEXTUALITY AND COMMUNICABILITY

As a theologian, Bonhoeffer was extremely sensitive to time and place. One should be conscious of the *kairos*, the decisive sacred moment for acting. "The main thing is that we keep step with God, and do not keep pressing on a few steps ahead – nor keep dawdling a step behind," he wrote in prison (*LPP*, 46).

In an essay he wrote in prison on telling the truth, Bonhoeffer stated that:

"[T]elling the truth" may mean something different according to the particular situation in which one stands. Account must be taken of one's relationship at each particular time. The question must be asked whether and in what way a man is entitled to demand truthful speech of others (*Ethics* (a) 326).

Truth depends on who says something, on behalf of whom and to whom:

The truthful word is not in itself constant; it is as much alive as life itself. If it is detached from life and from its reference to the concrete other man, if "the truth is told" without taking into account to whom it is addressed, then this truth has only the appearance of truth, but it lacks its essential character (*ibid.*).

Every word should have its place and context.

The question as to whether Bonhoeffer's oeuvre forms a unity only becomes a problem when its concrete historical context is lost to sight. For a long time in the

reception of Bonhoeffer's thought the question dominated about whether one should speak of continuity or discontinuity in his work. However, it seems far more rewarding to read his work synchronically in the context of its time, rather than diachronically as an unbroken development. One still may discern in his theology three periods, in which, depending on what dominated the agenda of that time, already acquired basic intuitions were maintained and new themes simultaneously emerged.

Even when interpreted in a chronological perspective, the decisive criterion for evaluating Bonhoeffer's theology should not be its systematic consistency in time, but rather whether it responded adequately to the questions of its day.

The concentration on the Christ event represents a basic intuition in all of Bonhoeffer's work that only became stronger and deeper. His understanding of faith as participation in that event inspired his doctrine of the church from *Sanctorum Communio* ("Christ existing as community") through to his letters and papers from prison (Jesus as the man for others, the church for others). But the questions for the church changed. Though they did not establish the content of his theology, they decisively determined its agenda and style in different periods.

- The first period – during which Bonhoeffer published *Sanctorum Communio* and *Akt und Sein* – was dominated by the development of a theological response to the democratic experiment of the Weimar Republic, and the search for social cohesion and social justice. Christ was present in the poor and the working class people, the lonely and powerless. Bonhoeffer's location was still the university. The means he used were mainly academic – dissertations and lectures.
- The second period, after Hitler had come to power, during which Bonhoeffer wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*, was the time of growing dictatorship, a persecuted church and the flagrant violation of human rights. Christ was to be recognised in the Jew. Bonhoeffer's theological location was the Confessing Church. The means he used were largely church related – sermons, letters, meditations and theological publications for a large church audience such as *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Living Together*.
- In the final period, resulting in the posthumous publication of *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, the moral and religious sources for the resistance by civilians and military officers may apply as the central question in his work and the construction of the fundamentals for a new society after the war was the main concern. Christ was to be recognised in the good citizen who took responsibility. Bonhoeffer's theology was located in the living room of the Bonhoeffer family and later in the prison cell. He wrote memoranda, moral investigations, poems, letters, and plans for the future of church and society.

A constant factor in all these periods is Bonhoeffer's willingness and eagerness to communicate, even though he was not a social animal who could survive only in the company of others. He perceived in himself a certain reticence, which hindered him in his social relationships (letter of 18 January 1944, *LPP* 54; letter of 7 May 1944, *LPP* 93). Despite his fascination with the monastic life, once he was imprisoned he soon had to admit that he was "not a born Trappist" (letter of 15 May 1943, *LPP* 5). His intense relationship with Eberhard Bethge, however, shows that he had a great talent for friendship. Raised in a large, close family, he acknowledged that to him "human relationships are the most important thing in life" (letter of 14 August 1944, *LPP* 141). Bonhoeffer's search for communication is mirrored in his theology, which is in its totality described by Clifford Green (1999) as a "theology of sociality". He interpreted Christ as the human being for others; the church a Christ existing as community (*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*); he knew how important it was to practise the art of being alone for a while, but only because it serves life with others; he knew the importance of being silent, but only because it qualified speaking with others; in his practice of theology he was constantly looking for partners, teachers, family, friends and students with whom he could sharpen his insights and put them to a test; the books he wrote can be counted on the fingers of one hand; his letters, however, number in the thousands.

5. THE CHURCH AS BASIS AND AUDIENCE

A final remark on the church: in some concepts of public theology, the term "public" stands against "church oriented", since public theology is a theology that does not have the church as its sole or main audience, but speaks about God in the public domain. Public theology searches for dialogue with the academy, society, culture, and – in any case not exclusively – with the church. Bonhoeffer also had this wider theological horizon in view. He agreed with Karl Barth that theology had to be church *based*. However, that did not mean that it should be exclusively church *oriented*. It also would be wise for Christians not to put all their eggs in one basket. Raised in the open air of liberal theology, Bonhoeffer revealed an openness towards the world of science, philosophy and art – an attitude and knowledge of which he reappraised in prison. He then discussed theology as readily as literature and music. God is present in the midst of life, and serving the church is just one divine mandate amongst others. In a letter of 3 August 1944, in which he enclosed the outline for the book he was writing in prison, he said to Bethge:

The church must come out of its stagnation. We must move again into the open air of intellectual discussion with the world, and risk saying questionable things, if we are to get down to the serious problems of life. I feel obliged to tackle these questions as one who, although a

“modern” theologian, is still aware of the debt that he owes to liberal theology (*LPP* 137).

The church also made itself guilty of religious escapism by withdrawing into its own spiritual domain:

Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to mankind and the world (“Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge”, *LPP* 101).

So Bonhoeffer defended no church-centred theology. From the beginning he aimed at the liberation of human beings unto “genuine worldliness”, a struggle in which the church often was an obstacle rather than a support. The Christian is not a goal in him-/herself; a christianisation, ecclesialisation or divinisation of reality is not at all what God desires. Bonhoeffer became a theologian because he became more and more convinced of the fact that without Christ no genuine worldliness, no real humaneness, was possible (*Ethics* (b) 400v.).

Despite his critical stance on the church, it is striking how Bonhoeffer remained a man of the church and addressed it as his main audience until the end. Occasions where he directly addressed a non-ecclesial public were relatively rare (a radio address, a lecture at the technical high school and an account of ten years of resistance come to mind). His criticism of the church as being too narrowly church-centered is usually directed at ... the church. Though Bonhoeffer defended no church-centred theology, his theology nevertheless remained church oriented. His “public theology” did not turn its back to the church, but it put almost all its efforts into the preparation of the church for its task in the world.

A Christian does not live only in the church; Bonhoeffer the conspirator knew this as no other did. In his *Ethics* he depicted the church as one divine mandate next to the mandates of work, marriage and government. These spheres of life do not relate hierarchically to each other, but fulfil their divine task in being with-one-another, for-one-another and over-against-one-another (*Ethics* (b) 394). In each of them a Christian has to fulfil his or her vocation. The church has no right to clericalise the world. At the same time, the church has a special and unique mission to preach Christ and be that part of the world where Christ is obeyed and concretely takes form amongst and in people. The church is not a goal in itself, but was to Bonhoeffer nevertheless indispensable as a means to realising Christ’s transformative presence. In the church Christ exists as community. Does the real existing church ever meet these standards or is it just an unreachable ideal?

Bonhoeffer's expectations of the church were uncommonly high. For him, Christology and ecclesiology were inextricably bound up to the point of identification (Christ = church). At the end of his life Bonhoeffer must have been deeply disappointed in his expectations of the church. The Evangelical Church succumbed to Nazism; the ecumenical movement failed to be an instrument of peace; the Confessing Church struggled only on behalf of itself and not on behalf of the Jews. Bonhoeffer held the church directly responsible for the fact that the liberating Word of God had become powerless. "That is our own fault," in his analysis (*LPP* 101). Despite this, up till the very end he kept believing in a church that lived for others, as Christ himself had done and encouraged the church to become such a church, even though he would never experienced it:

The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human social life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell people of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others. ("Outline for a Book", *LPP* 140)

Perhaps a public theologian can relate only in a similar, paradoxical way to the church: as someone who, on behalf of and in love for the church, constantly reminds it of the fact that God is more concerned about its witness to and participation in God's liberating transformation of the world than about its security.

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“THEONOMOUS CULTURE” AS MOTIF IN PAUL TILlich’S PUBLIC THEOLOGY

Clint Le Bruyns¹

1. INTRODUCTION

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) stands prominently among the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. While his impact is extensive in many quarters of the theological world, his legacy in the majority of the world has not been as intensive as the likes of Reinhold Niebuhr or Karl Barth or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A notable case in point is South Africa, with its past and ongoing reception of the insights of Barth and Bonhoeffer in making sense of its public challenges, but slightly more than a trace of substantial Tillichian influence discernible. Several reasons of a doctrinal, philosophical or political nature could account for this general indifference to Tillich’s thought in South Africa and other parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

This notwithstanding, it is the intention of this article to draw renewed attention to the potential resourcefulness of Tillich’s theological insights for understanding and engaging public challenges in contemporary society. In the first place, an overview of various aspects of his life and thought is offered for its value in shedding light on the public orientation of his theological contributions. In the second place, a discussion of Tillich’s notion of “theonomous culture” is presented to facilitate an appreciation and recognition of how he attempts to correlate religious faith and secular life in a meaningful and propitious manner that might possibly assist the churches in their public agency today. In the third place, some concluding remarks are noted concerning the implications of Tillich’s public theology.

2. THE PUBLIC ORIENTATION OF TILlich’S THEOLOGY

Tillich is aptly labelled a theologian “of the boundaries” whose “writings had power because in them he risked being in touch with the unrepeatability of his present” (Taylor, 1991:11). He himself employed the symbol of a boundary to

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describe his development and thinking: "At almost every point, I have had to stand between alternative possibilities of existence, to be completely at home in neither and to take no definitive stand against either" (Tillich, 1966:13). As Jean-François Collange explains, his theology "was always situated 'on the frontier' between two worlds or two versions of reality" where "this frontier was not so much a dividing line as an element joining two versions of reality that contrived, appropriately, to enter into a reciprocal correlation" (2005:1584). These were the two worlds of Christian faith and culture which, "far from being opposed, were called on to provide mutual illumination and reveal their full reciprocal potential" (*ibid.*).

The foundation to Tillich's boundary encounters during which Christian faith and secular life were placed in critical dialogue rests with several turning points on his narrative journey. A seminal discovery revolved around his early years as a chaplain in the German army during World War I (1914-1918). Keeping in mind the background of the absolutism and anthropocentrism of the nineteenth century, his high view of humanity with its expectation of stability and progress was invalidated by the outbreak of the war and his particular experiences in the army, revealing "the demonic and destructive character" of public life (Tillich, 1966:95). He returned a radically altered person: "the traditional monarchist had become a religious socialist, the Christian believer a cultural pessimist, and the repressed puritanical boy a 'wild man'" (Kelsey in Ford & Muers, 2005:62).

Following the army years, Tillich's academic career in religious studies and philosophy (1919-1933) forged another turning point that paved the way for his understanding of religion and culture. As he came to teach religious studies or philosophy at the universities of Berlin, Marburg, Dresden and Frankfurt, it brought him into contact with points of intersection between religious tradition and secular culture. He would eventually embrace "input from many secular quarters and [seek] to correlate philosophy with theology" in his accommodation of "a decidedly philosophical and metaphysical platform, at home in every period in the history of philosophy and theology, and employing the contributions of recent thought" (Miller & Grenz, 1998:56).

The latter part of Tillich's Frankfurt years brought him into direct confrontation with the public atrocities of the Nazi regime. His exposure to the religious socialist movement allowed for his participation in advocacy and protest actions as a religious socialist member, which provided a crucial clarification of his own understanding of reality and its socio-political challenges in public life. Owing to his scathing criticism of the Nazi ideology in his book *Die sozialistische Entscheidung* in 1933, the authorities retaliated with brutal force that led to his suspension from his post and forced him to take professional refuge later that year in the United States of America on the invitation of Reinhold Niebuhr. His suspension from his

native land along with his emigration to an alien land served as a most painful turning point, but one that opened up new vistas reflecting a new setting with a different culture, language and reality (1933-1965). He became a professor of philosophical theology at Union Theological Seminary, later moved to Harvard University, and finally served at the University of Chicago until his death in 1965.

Each of these turning points facilitated a critical rethinking of life (philosophy) and faith (theology, church). Tillich spent much time and energy reflecting deeply upon the existential questions of humanity in the light of the war and other ambiguities of life, on the relevancy and irrelevancy of the Christian message and its symbols for engaging meaningfully and constructively within such ambiguous settings, and especially on the question of the nature and shape of a theology that could fulfil a role of "mediation" (between theology and modern culture) rather than comprising a role of mere "repetition" or "offence" in modern culture (in Foster, 1996:8ff.). Important was that his theology be an "answering theology" (Tillich, 1951:6). Out of his engagement with the religious socialist tradition coupled with existentialist philosophy, Tillich discerned a way of uniting the religious power of so-called neo-orthodox theology with the duty of every theology to address itself to the modern mind through his conception of "the 'method of correlation' as a way of uniting message and situation" (1951:8).

For Tillich it was important for Christians and theologians to think and engage amidst various boundary situations in life within the dynamic and promising interplay between the two worlds of Christian faith and modern culture. Christian theology and its structures and symbols had to speak meaningfully and critically to the burning issues of human life if they were to possess any public relevancy. Through this "method of correlation" (1951:59-66) he contended that theology was really about its business insofar as it sought to correlate the questions being asked by a culture at any given time and the answers offered within the Christian tradition, since to mediate between contemporary culture and historical Christianity was "to show that faith need not be unacceptable to contemporary culture and that contemporary culture need not be unacceptable to faith" (Kelsey in Ford & Muers, 2005:63). For, "If we do not take up the heavy burden ... manifestations of irrelevancy put upon us, we cannot joyfully say yes to the church with honesty" (in Foster, 1996:13).

3. ON THE NOTION OF A "THEONOMOUS CULTURE"

Tillich discusses culture as a dimension within "the multidimensional unity of life" (1963:12ff.) with functions such as science, the arts, ethics, and politics (1963:14). It is "the self-creativity of life under the dimension of spirit" (1963:57). It has to do with the dynamic interplay between human beings and that which they encounter – how they take care of something, keep it alive, and make it grow – along with the

resulting “something new beyond the encountered reality” that emerges through this interplay encounter (1963:57). Language, technology, theoretical conceptions, aesthetic acts, social relations, personal development, and justice are a few of the obvious examples of the cultural self-creativity of life (*cf.* 1963:57-68). As people transact with the world, they participate in meaningful cultural projects that nurture or oppress new life, and so they become culturally responsible for what they support or withdraw from in the act of creativity as part of life’s inherent horizontal drive (1963:50ff).

Culture is, however, plagued with ambiguities as its orientation wavers between self-transcendence and existential estrangement: “In so far as the person is the bearer of the cultural self-creation of life, he is subjected to all the tensions of culture ... and all the ambiguities of culture” (1963:68). Ambiguity enters through cultural destructivity as people support that which is not life-affirming or as they withdraw from that which is life-affirming. For Tillich, “the humanistic idea” (1963:85) is fundamentally important for affirming the role of humanity in creating meaning and in fulfilling the ultimate aim within cultural self-creation: “Culture, creating a universe of meaning, does not create this universe in the empty space of mere validity. It creates meaning as the actualisation of what is potential in the bearer of the spirit – in man” (1963:84). In other words, “man is seen as the point at which and the instrument through which a universe of meaning is actualised. Spirit and man are bound to each other, and only in man does the universe reach up to an anticipatory and fragmentary fulfillment” (1963:85).

The self-transcendence of life is, therefore, exceedingly important in Tillich’s discussion of culture, and this is where he underlines the relation of culture with religion: “The religious element in culture is the inexhaustible depth of a genuine creation. One may call it substance or the ground from which culture lives. It is the element of ultimacy which culture lacks in itself but to which it points” (1963:95). In this context, Tillich’s notion of “theonomous culture” comes to the fore as the idea of a culture under the impact of the Spirit (1963:249).

3.1 Spiritual Presence in culture?

Implied in Tillich’s notion of “theonomous culture” is the presence of the Spirit in culture. The “Spiritual Presence” is his way of talking about the Spirit as the revelatory Christian symbol for “God present” in all spheres of life fulfilling an actualisation mode towards overcoming and healing life’s ambiguities (1963:108-109, 111ff.). This dynamic is mediated through “word” and “sacrament”, understood in the broad sense of including all media that serve as vehicles of the Spiritual Presence (1963:120ff.) in forging an ecstatic process that leads to faith – “the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern” (1957:*passim*) – and into love – “the state of being taken by the Spiritual Presence into the transcendent unity of

unambiguous life" (1963:129ff.). All these functional dimensions of the human spirit under the impact of the Spiritual Presence take place in fragmentary and social ways. As cultural self-creativity becomes unambiguous – albeit fragmentarily – under the impact of the Spiritual Presence, Tillich labels these moments "theonomous".

Tillich's affirmation of the Spiritual Presence in secular culture is based on at least three principles. Firstly, "the consecration of the secular", by which he underlines the freedom of the Spirit to impact life beyond the confines of the church: "the secular ... is open to the impact of the Spirit even without the mediation of a church" (1963:247). He is particularly critical of those who argue "that, in order to overcome the often destructive ambiguities of culture, 'religion' must be strengthened", which is a mistake "of thinking that the divine Spirit is bound to religion in order to exercise its impact on culture" (1963:247). In fact, such a mistake is really "the demonic identification of churches with the Spiritual Community and an attempt to limit the freedom of the Spirit by the absolute claim of a religious group" (1963:247). Tillich points out that this principle extends even to those "movements, groups, and individuals who are ... openly hostile to the churches and beyond this to religion itself in all its forms" in the light of the ways "the Spiritual Presence has used antireligious media to transform not only a secular culture but also the churches" (1963:247).

Secondly, there is the principle of the "convergence of the holy and the secular", by which Tillich refers to the secular inherent drive "towards the holy" (1963:248). The secular is unable to "resist indefinitely the function of self-transcendence, which is present in every life, however secularised, for the resistance against it produces the emptiness and meaninglessness which characterises the finite when cut off from the infinite" (1963:248). This "exhaustible, self-rejecting life" produced is thus "driven to the question of an inexhaustible life above itself and so into self-transcendence" (1963:248). This "union with the holy" is actually "a reunion because the holy and the secular belong to each other" (1963:248).

Thirdly, there is the principle of the "essential belongingness of religion and culture to each other", by which Tillich adds to the emphasis of the previous principle in offering his well-known assertion "that religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion" (1963:248). He explains: "religion cannot express itself even in a meaningful silence without culture, from which it takes all forms of meaningful expression" and "culture loses its depth and inexhaustibility without the ultimacy of the ultimate" (1963:249).

Each of these principles affirms the healing presence of the Spirit in secular life as a whole and within the manifold realms of the multidimensional unity of life, fragmentarily and socially. Secular culture is principally open to the reception of the Spirit in its inherent self-transcending vertical drive towards the holy. The role

of religion is vitally important for understanding and engaging modern culture as it seeks to provide substance and depth to secular life through its various cultural expressions and forms.

3.2 Culture as theonomous?

The Spirit is not only present in culture, but moreover is actively present in directing culture towards its ultimate being and aim (1963:249). Building upon the force of humanism as concerned with “the development of all human potentialities” (1963:249), Tillich describes “theonomous culture” as “Spirit-determined and Spirit-directed culture” that “is not antihumanistic” but rather has “the humanistic indefiniteness about the ‘where-to’ [turned] into a direction which transcends every particular human aim” (1963:250). As “a key to the interpretation of history” theonomy is part and parcel of contemporary society: “Its victory is always fragmentary because of the existential estrangement underlying human history, and its defeat is always limited by the fact that human nature is essentially theonomous” (1963:250).

Tillich proceeds to offer several qualities of a theonomous culture. Firstly, “it communicates the experience of holiness, of something ultimate in being and meaning, in all its creations” (1963:251). Evidence of the impact of the Spiritual Presence in culture is discernible symbolically in how “cultural creation expresses the ultimacy of meaning even in the most limited vehicles of meaning – a painted flower, a family habit, a technical tool, an epistemological theory, a political document” (1963:250).

Secondly, a theonomous culture is affirming of the autonomous forms of the creative process (1963:251). Tillich is careful to point out that autonomy is not about “the freedom of the individual to be a law to himself” (1951:83); on the contrary, it concerns “the obedience of the individual to the law of reason, which he finds in himself as a rational being” (1951:84). Theonomy is thus not necessarily in conflict with autonomous forms of modern culture. To repudiate a valid logical conclusion or a valid demand for justice or a valid act of personal self-development or a new style of artistic creation supposedly in the name of theonomy is in fact a distortion of what theonomy means, which Tillich labels “heteronomy” (1963:251).

Thirdly, a theonomous culture is one in which “its permanent struggle against both an independent heteronomy and an independent autonomy” is discernible (1963:251). While autonomous forms of the creative process are essentially affirming of life, an autonomy in culture can be in bondage to itself and consequently impede the culture from developing its potentialities (1963:251). As philosophy and the sciences, poetry and the other arts “achieve independence, they lose their transcendent foundation which gave them depth, unity, and ultimate meaning” (1963:252). At this point “the reaction of heteronomy starts”

(1963:252), as "another law" from the outside sets in, equally in conflict with the essential divine substance and depth offered by the Spirit within modern culture. Heteronomy as "a reaction against an autonomy which has lost its depth and has become empty and powerless" threatens to destroy further the integrity of life through its counterfeit replacement of genuine autonomy (1951:84-85). So, for Tillich, theonomy "does not mean the acceptance of a divine [or other] law imposed on reason by a highest authority; it means autonomous reason united with its own depth" so that in a theonomous situation "reason actualises itself in obedience to its structural laws and in the power of its own inexhaustible ground" for which God is the ground of being (1951:85).

3.3 Power and justice as theonomous cases in point

Tillich holds that "the Spiritual Presence drives toward the conquest of the ambiguities of culture by creating theonomous forms in the different realms of the cultural self-creation of life" (1963:252). An important question, then, is to consider what happens to these cultural ambiguities under the impact of the Spiritual Presence. Tillich attempts to describe the theological dynamics in regard to truth and expressiveness (1963:252-258), purpose and humanity (1963:258-262), and power and justice (1963:262-265). The communal realm of power and justice in modern culture is a dimension of life inundated with perplexing ambiguities and, consequently, in demand of the reception and impact of the Spiritual Presence. Tillich highlights several notable problems vis-à-vis the establishment or maintenance or transformation of community life including that of exclusiveness and inequality.

On the issue of exclusion, Tillich sees the impact of the Spiritual Presence on the churches as a crucial component in modelling and facilitating a transforming public life: "The churches, in so far as they represent the Spiritual Community, are [themselves] transformed from religious communities with demonic exclusiveness into a holy community with universal inclusiveness, without losing their identity" (1963:262). How well the churches maintain and work for their ecumenical cohesion is necessary not only for themselves, but also for their influence on secular forms of community. Tillich explains: "The ambiguity of cohesion and rejection is conquered by the creation of more embracing unities through which those who are rejected by the unavoidable exclusiveness of any concrete group are included in a larger group – finally in mankind" (1963:262). "On this basis," he continues, "family-exclusiveness is fragmentarily overcome by friendship-inclusiveness, friendship-rejection by acceptance in local communities, class-exclusiveness by national-inclusiveness, and so on" (1963:262).

On the issue of inequality, Tillich distinguishes (in similar vein to the way that quite a few modern religious people differentiate) between "ultimate equality" and

“existential inequality”, which can potentially facilitate a lukewarm concern about inequalities in social life. But he is aware of this possibility: “The ultimate equality, however, cannot be separated from the existential inequality; the latter is under a continuous Spiritual judgement, because it tends to produce social situations in which ultimate equality becomes invisible and ineffective” (1963:263). He discerns, therefore, the justice action of the Spiritual Presence in all situations where injustices, slavery, exploitation and various other ambiguities are being confronted and overcome.

4. CONCLUSION

This chapter has merely scratched the theological surface of Tillich’s promise for understanding and engaging public challenges in contemporary society. While his work demands a more focused and in-depth treatment, the following represents a list of critical insights worth noting and exploring further:

- the public nature and orientation of Tillich’s life and thought;
- the criteria of life-affirming and life-denying for understanding and assessing the integrity of cultural self-creation projects;
- the affirmation of the Spiritual Presence in all of life;
- the role not only of the churches, but even of anti-religious media in the work of transforming secular culture and also the churches;
- the tension between culture’s self-rejection of life versus its self-transcendence of life;
- the limitations of an independent humanistic principle and the power of a Spirit-directed principle in modern culture;
- the affirmation of the presence of theonomous content in every realm and situation of life, implying the secular – sacred divide as a false dichotomy;
- the danger of heteronomous authorities in cultural life, be they in the form of national powers or religious principles;
- the influence of the churches through the Spiritual Presence in the community realm of life in relation to inclusion and equality.

These and other Tillichian insights are potentially resourceful for understanding and engaging public challenges today. The content of these points and other frameworks of Tillich will possibly help deepen and strengthen the contribution that public theology could provide in its reciprocal interaction with other disciplines (such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, political science, law) and with other issues (such as globalisation, racism, poverty, sexism, injustices).

For example, what are some of the cursory remarks we could make in reference to economic globalisation and its (often negative) impact in contemporary culture? Firstly, the way in which Tillich lived and thought as a theologian “of the

boundaries" underlines the reality of the two worlds of Christian faith and modern culture that require "reciprocal correlation" and "mutual illumination" in our context of globalisation. Tillich claimed that the position on the boundary was fruitful for thought, since thinking presupposes receptiveness to new possibilities (Taylor, 1991:13). The importance of thinking theologically about global realities and especially about the deepest existential questions is obvious. The correlative principle of understanding theological thought as providing answers to existential questions demands renewed attention.

How, for example, should we re-envision baptism or the eucharist as answers to the burning questions preoccupying the poor and other "losers" in the globalisation enterprise? To what extent are we equipping theological learners in and beyond South Africa for ministries of "repetition" (i.e. doing theology devoid of the correlative principle) or "mediation" (i.e. doing theology in a correlative engagement)? Given the serious complexity of globalisation, simplistic answers and simplistic theological paradigms will not do; a moment of truth exists for systematic theologians to draw deeply from the wells of their rich tradition steeped in history, Scripture, reason and experience to this end. Any talk of "alternatives" in the globalisation era is meaningless outside of this kind of boundary engagement.

Secondly, while the characteristic complexity and ambiguity of globalisation and life under globalisation is discernible and understandably overwhelming for the churches as they ponder the question of their engagement, an important principle should serve them well in distinguishing between the good and the demonic elements of the globalisation project: "the integrity of life". The Spirit of the churches is the Spirit of life, not of death. For this reason, the statement by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1995 rightly took issue with globalisation in the light of such problems as impoverishment because the project was revealing images of death rather than life: "We affirm life against death. We have to share the dream of a just society, and refuse to let it die" (WARC-SAARC, 1995:Acting §6).

Similarly, William Schweiker laments the problem of "overhumanisation" to account for the prevailing "global struggle about the worth and dignity of humanity" in an age of globality: "Overhumanisation designates the triumph of the will and with it the conviction that all that is of worth, what should direct actions, relations, and social projects, is the extension of the human power to shape and create realities" (Schweiker, 2004:viii). Tillich's remarks on an independent autonomy and independent heteronomy come to mind. Schweiker formulates what he argues for as an imperative of responsibility: "in all actions and relations respect and enhance the integrity of life" (2004:xiv) and ultimately pleads for a new theological humanism (2004:199ff.).

Thirdly, the affirmation of the Spiritual Presence in the manifest as well as the latent church underlines the need for an ecumenical, inter-faith, but broadly collaborative mode of engagement. With the hope of impacting in modest and radical ways on the public arena – politics, economics, civil society, public opinion – ecumenical agencies could engage in all spheres of society for the realisation of “a better life for all”. Their roles of advocacy, critique and change within their local and global networks become vitally important for affirming the human rights and human dignity of all people in a globalising world, in line with the Spiritual ideals of justice and power.

The notion of theonomous culture as a key motif in the public theology of Tillich is neatly and profoundly encapsulated in the final words of his 1963 Earl Lectures as he, the now fully rounded theologian, addressed pastors and teachers on the relevance of the Christian message to the contemporary world with special reference to the identity and calling of the church (in Foster 1996:62-63):

The church is several things. She is a treasure chest which is often closed, which we must open again and again. She is a counterbalance against the secular indifference to which our human predicament makes us prone. She is a representative of the depth and height of the vertical line. In principle, prayer and contemplation should not be special acts. But sometimes we need to flee into them from the restlessness of the horizontal line. Yet they should never be made into absolutes, as the church should never be made absolute. Hear this one important warning! Never consider the secular realm Godless just because it does not speak of God. To speak of a realm of divine creation and providence as Godless *is* Godless. It denies God’s power over the world. It would force Godself to religion and church.

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“DAMNED IF YOU DO, DAMNED IF YOU DON’T”: REREADING THE PUBLIC THEOLOGY OF THE CHRISTIAN INSTITUTE FOR THE CONTEMPORARY PRACTITIONER¹

James R. Cochrane²

The Christian Institute of Southern Africa (CI) was established in 1963 after the Sharpeville shootings, the subsequent crisis meeting of churches at Cottesloe, and the withdrawal of the Dutch Reformed Churches because of the criticism of state policy expressed in the findings of the Cottesloe Conference. From the outset, the CI was a body in crisis – inserted into crisis; reacting to crisis; in the end, facing its own crisis.

As the Greek *kairos* suggests, the time of crisis is “the right time”, a time of fundamental decision-making, a turning point, that knife-edge moment in history when a thing slips over the edge of “normality” and alters everything, when the weave of time shifts to initiate new patterns of thought and action. It is a boundary condition that calls for boundary leaders, for those who are able to live with risk in the face of uncertainty for something they know matters a great deal but whose outcome is still unknown.

Because this is what the CI represents, par excellence, and because its witness was distinctly public even as it was initially aimed more at trying to draw the different Dutch Reformed Churches back into relationship, it immediately became suspect. It was suspect for many Christians, for the state, and for those citizens – at that time, by definition, whites – who were beneficiaries of the existing political dispensation. On the other hand, it stood on a prophetic precipice, for which reason many others saw it as the necessary public embodiment of their faith and their hope; and, over time, they wished to see it take even stronger positions and act even more decisively.

The Christian Institute also sat loose to tradition, and in doing so, it demonstrated the limits of tradition. The tradition it confronted at that time was, of course, that of Calvinism, a particular neo-Kuyperian brand of Calvinism at that. Yet it is not a matter of a specific deformation in one tradition that is the critical issue. What counts a great deal more in explaining the character of the Christian Institute in its

¹ Public lecture delivered at the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at the Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch, on 17 March 2005.

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public activity, is the way in which it was able to place itself on the boundaries, between the boundaries and in the interstices of traditions.

For the CI, living on the boundaries in the interstices of the dominant social order of the time brought a cost that would become evident. Eventually the state attacked it through special law, judging it to be a cover for either “communists” or black liberation movement “terrorists” or both, and thus declaring it “affected”, thereby cutting off crucial international funds from ecumenical partners. At the same time, many CI supporters, simultaneously drawn to its witness *and* fearful of the personal or institutional consequences of that witness, took to the view that “where there is smoke, there must be fire”, and began to withdraw or back off as well.

So the CI was damned by some, including fair-weather friends, for doing what it did; and it would have been damned by others, those for whom its witness brought encouragement and hope, had it not done what it did.

In the end, sufficient doubt about the Christian Institute had been sown by the state in the minds of the white minority that it was relatively easily able to ban the Institute and its leadership. This took place on October 19, 1977, along with the whole range of Black Consciousness organisations. This fact alone signals what its public theology came to mean for South Africa, and I am one of those who believe a full account and appreciation of it has yet to be given.

Still, we are now almost thirty years hence. Why *should* one bother with the CI and its public theology now? The *kairos* that was so central to its existence and contribution is over, and if indeed we now face a new one, it is of a completely different kind and order. Is there then anything to be learned from CI now? And for that matter, who am I to attempt to convey some such learnings? That question probably deserves at least some response. I grew up under the tutelage of a Methodist pastor, Theo Kotze, who in 1968, at Beyers Naudé’s request, left the Sea Point Methodist Church and became the Director of the Cape Office and national Deputy Director of the CI. Here I worked with the CI as a junior member, sometimes acting in Theo’s capacity when he travelled, and later becoming one of the five Cape staff members of the Special Programme for Christian Action in Society, SPRO-CAS II.³

When the CI was banned in 1977, and because I still had a passport while beginning my doctoral work at UCT, I travelled on behalf of the CI to its partner organisations in Europe and the USA to explain what had happened and to carry

³ SPRO-CAS I (the Study Project of Christianity in Apartheid Society) ran from 1969-1971 under the auspices of the Christian Institute and the SACC jointly. SPRO-CAS II was a subsequent action programme designed to build on the recommendations flowing from SPRO-CAS I.

messages for the now banned CI Executive. It is a little known fact that the CI continued for a while to operate illegally at executive level within South Africa, though banned people were not supposed to be in touch with each other. Some strange places and times were the occasion for meetings as a result, and I represented Kotze in these meetings of the “inner circle” thereafter, until it was no more. Since then, I guess I could say that I have dedicated my professional life to public theology and research and writing on religion in the public sphere. My reflections arise, therefore, from both a practical and a theoretical engagement with the issues.

1. LEARNINGS

In thinking of what we might learn about public theology from the CI, I want first to focus on *the critical experience of interpretation*. This may seem an odd place to begin, but I would regard it in fact to be the most important dimension of the public theology that emerged from the CI, specifically as theology rather than as social commentary.

Consider the history of the Christian Institute in its time. It began, one may say, not out of moral conviction alone, but out of a rereading of a normative text. On the basis of their reading of the biblical text, twelve Dutch Reformed theologians questioned the racial policies that were beginning to emerge in the 1950s. One, Dr Albert Geysers, was given the task of doing the necessary biblical research, and his conclusions challenged everything that was taken for granted at that time, and for this he was tried for heresy. Professor Ben Engelbrecht supported him, and in a short time *Dominee* Beyers Naudé, by now Moderator of the Southern Transvaal Synod, took up the challenge he had opened up.

This rereading of a normative text echoes the revolutionary transformation that Martin Luther introduced into the church with enduring political and economic impact. There is, of course, a hidden dialectic here, between the experiences that prompt a rereading and the reflective act upon those experiences that this rereading represents. Still, the freedom to read the text anew, to discern one’s own complicities and limits in the process, to project the world of its meanings into our time and to find a new relationship with them, to infuse that meaning with the practical exigencies of this time, and to embody an ethical response to them, constitutes one fundamental core of any sound public theology. Just as Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of cheap grace, so in the context of public theology might we speak of cheap theology: a sloganeering theology, a theology content with oft-repeated clichés and ossified formulae, a theology without intellectual or practical cost. A serious public theology requires a mature faith and an applied intelligence.

In the founding of the CI, it was the rereading of the New Testament and its claim for justice among all, given freely to all, inclusive and not exclusive, that introduced the critical edge, that drove the sword of the gospel into the split between political practice and the gospel vision, showing the cracks between proclamation and deed to be in fact a chasm.

What then prescribes that gospel vision? At the end, I will come to a biblical answer to that question, given by Beyers Naudé, which should address Christians clearly. But now I wish to pay attention to *our general responsibility for society*, whether we are Christian or not; hence I will not turn to the Bible in the first instance, but to an ethics of creative responsibility, of human maturity or *Mündigkeit*.

By virtue of the fact that we share a certain kind of citizenship with each other, that the self does not exist without another, we are constrained, if we are responsible, to build a society with each other. One may use biblical allusions to describe this society, but for now let me refer to a formulation that comes from Paul Ricoeur (1992): In his words, the goal of life is “to live well together in just institutions”. Not one substantive word in this formulation can be ignored.

Like the biblical vision, it suggests that we have responsible work to do in shaping a life together with each other. Life, in the first instance, is the ethical touchstone, in all its complexity; and this sets us, *ipso facto*, against all causes of death. But life lived well makes it clear that we are not speaking merely of survival or biological indicators here. We are speaking of quality, depth, comprehensive wholeness, for the interior, the exterior and the social body. To speak of living well together is simply to emphasise that life is not atomic but fractal in nature, complexly relational, unfolding at all levels of existence. Wellbeing is ecological in this sense, and it places the notion of living well together within the totality of life rather than within the limits of individual existence or even of human existence divorced from its conditions of life. It is a cosmological view of life (“for God so loved the *kosmos* ...” – John 3:16), and it is the *kosmos* that is to be saved.

That we are called to recognise each other in such a way, and to establish fitting arrangements for how we will live together well, makes it clear that just institutions are a *sine qua non* for an ethical existence. Quality is necessarily accompanied by equality, dignity of the self by respect for the other, opportunity by equity. Such a vision is not fulfillable – it remains a vision always just out of reach, hence never ceasing its call; in theological terms, it is an eschatological vision. But even if this vision always acts as a lure (Whitehead, De Chardin), as “that which is still to come” (Derrida), and not as a fixed and visible end, it is a requirement of any public theology worth the name. If some such vision does not drive public life, and public theology in particular, we should expect faith and its expressions to work themselves out in public as a cause of death rather than a

cause of life, if not by commission then by omission. For otherwise, we remain anchored to actuality, captive to what is, and unable to embody new possibilities, to express the freedom that comes with and is already a manifestation of that which is still to come. It is a principle, the ontological foundation even, of transcendence, of life in the face of death, of spirit and imagination in the face even of apparently irrevocable limits.⁴

Though *theology and theological formulations* were always important to the public witness of the Christian Institute, in the final reckoning this was not the touchstone of the Institute's powerful presence in the public sphere. Rather, it was the capacity of its leaders and key members to listen to others, especially those whose voice was normally excluded or diminished, to act as a group in solidarity with each other, to act in a way that was healing for each other and for all who came within its reach, to communicate consistently and regularly with all who chose to hear what it had to say, to interact with ordinary people on the ground and diplomats in their embassies and consulates and everyone between, to actively move to establish programmes that would expose people to the realities that they might discover their truths for themselves, to set up workshops and educational programmes to explain and advocate what was seen to be important, and to spend endless time in personal support for anyone who needed it.

To an extraordinary extent, commentators, journalists, analysts, policy makers and other publicly influential people from outside South Africa saw the CI as the one deeply *reliable, up to date source of information and insight*. This was a role made easier by its religious (as opposed to specifically political) foundations and links: because this meant many local people went, often first, to the CI for help or to pass on critical information about what was going on “on the ground”; because it was not easy for a professedly “Christian” state to be seen to attack other Christians; because the information could be trusted to be less agenda-ridden than other possible sources; and because the network of trusted personal links across the global *ecumené* themselves often had significant resources for disseminating what was provided, including direct channels to governments and other international agencies.

In this respect, the small size – in membership and supporters – of the CI, in Cape Town as elsewhere, was completely disproportionate to its influence. It was a generative matrix for two generations of committed actors against apartheid.

There are several points we might draw from what has been said above. First, for a meaningful public theology, we are required to bind a commitment to justice with

⁴ Aware of this dimension to reality, in 1976 and 1977 the Christian Institute, from its Cape Office, ran numerous three-day workshops around the country and in Namibia on “Facing the Future with Hope”.

a compassion for persons. Second, it is in the act rather than the thought that the test of a public theology lies. Third, it draws its vitality from opening space for the voices and experiences of those who are, or who are likely to be, excluded by society, marginalised by the dominant powers of the state and, even more so, the market. Fourth, it moves between people who would normally not meet each other, addressing those who suffer with hope, and those who cause suffering with its face (Levinas). Fifth, it communicates in multiple forms what it knows and has to say. Sixth, it is comprehensive in its reach and complex in its response, and in this sense, sophisticated rather than naïve, capable of working out of and into many positions rather than locked into one.

2. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

In this light, the work of the CI appears more appropriate now than it did then. At that time, during its life, the critique and the challenge were absolutely essential. Everything that one could discern about the trajectory that our society was taking when the Christian Institute was formed suggested that separation rather than living well together was the dominant theme, and that just institutions would escape us in the domination of one group over another. The task was fairly transparent, and though the costs were equally visible soon enough, the ethical foundations for speaking and acting were not difficult to discern or explain.

I would think most of us find this a lot more difficult now. The focus of a coherent and comprehensive public theology appears a lot more diffuse, more difficult to locate concretely, and therefore, wrongly, more likely to be expressed in narrow moralistic terms. So let me turn to some challenges I think may reflect something of what the CI represents for our time, written in another key for another *kairos*.

The first challenge is the need to recover what Habermas (2001) calls “the political proper”, which in his view has been lost to our time. The “political proper” is the public sphere as such, in the classical sense of the space within which we encounter each other, stake our claims, give reasonable justification for them, and agree on how we shall live together. Nothing in our life together lies beyond this space as long as it is shared space.

The *polis*, from whose workings in classical Greece the church took its own self-description as the *ecclesia*, an assembly of citizens, has been thrown into question in our time. It has been deeply penetrated if not overwhelmed by two simultaneous systemic forces, those of state bureaucracies and those of market actors, each of which manifests an instrumental, technicist (and managerial) logic, of power and of money respectively. In both cases, the invasion of the *polis* with the logics of power or money has gone deeper than many anticipated, to the point where the lifeworlds of people – including their revered and most cherished traditions and

sacred spaces – are no longer free of those logics. So, for example, religion is big business; and in a real sense, big business is religion. There is much that requires a powerful prophetic current here, a penetrating and truly intelligent public theology capable of understanding what is happening and of responding effectively.

The second challenge, disturbingly reminiscent of the years under apartheid, concerns *the public lie* conveyed deliberately in the language of its opposite. Let me give an example particular to the USA. I am thinking here of two pieces of environmental legislation emerging from the Bush Administration, about which it is worth quoting at length from Robert F. Kennedy Jr., for twenty years an environmental advocate:

If you go to the Natural Resources Defense Council's web site you will see over 400 major environmental rollbacks that have been promoted by this administration over the last three and half years. It is a concerted, deliberate attempt to eviscerate thirty years of environmental law. It is a stealth attack, one that's been hidden from the public.

We found, in 2003, a memo from Frank Luntz, the president's pollster, to the president saying that if you go through with the evisceration of America's environmental law, you are going to alienate not just Democrats but the Republican rank and file. Eighty-one percent in both parties want clean air, they want stronger environmental laws and they want them strictly enforced. Luntz said that to the president, and he said, if we do this we have to do a stealth attack. He recommended using Orwellian rhetoric to mask this radical agenda: They want to destroy the forest, they call it the Healthy Forest Act, they want to destroy the air, they call it the Clear Skies Act (2005:36).⁵

This kind of public lie is deeply destructive to the discourse of the *polis*. And let me stress that is by no means the exclusive practice of the USA at all (note how many nations bought into the public lie about “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq despite widely available evidence at the time to support what is now taken for granted, i.e. that they were never there). It would perhaps be less insidious were we to have reliable instruments of public interrogation not bound to the same interests represented by monied corporations or state power. I am thinking particularly here of a “free press”, meaning one responsive to a free public rather

⁵ Recent reports indicate that the Senate Committee responsible for guiding the Clear Skies Act through Congress stalemated in their voting on it, which appears to sink this legislation for the moment.

than private enterprise or inaccessible state bureaucracies, and within this I include media generally. Arguably, the press is generally less free now than it was thirty years ago in this respect. Indeed, in a controversial essay on the first Gulf War under Bush Sr. and in his notion of the *simulacrum* (simulated virtual reality in place of the concretely real) in the contemporary global political economy, Jean Baudrillard (1995)⁶ suggests that the nature of media in our time is such as to make it impossible for ordinary citizens to know any longer what is true and what is not. What we know of that war, he says, is what CNN had us see of it, as filtered through military clearance; and a lot of what we saw was abstract, distant, pictures of pictures of explosions from military aerial cameras, and so on. How can we possibly know what really happened? In this work, Baudrillard argues that what we know is simulated, a media production through delayed illusion of battle, the war's amplification by information, its manipulation of data, and its artificial dramatisation.

The point is even more starkly evident in the second Gulf War, the invasion of Iraq by Bush Jr., when the notion of reporters "embedded" with the US troops was introduced and even more control over images and information maintained. All of this is not coincidental, but expressive of corporate media goals (around power and money, driven by an instrumental rather than public intention, we might say). What creates the lie and makes it so alluring, ironically, is precisely the unprecedented coverage of war (in this case) that is now possible, because it gives the impression that we have seen more of reality than ever before, though in fact reality is more truncated than ever before.

So the public lie has become increasingly "normal", and if it is contested, then a good response from those who propagate it is not to deny it but to state it even more strongly while overwhelming people with counter-information and swamping debate by multiplying the debates exponentially. To escape this, the populace is at the same time offered hundreds of alternatives of infotainment, credotainment and entertainment – including so-called "reality shows", a contradiction in terms if ever there was one (for the "reality" is always a deliberately and artificially induced one designed to meet the needs of cameras and profits).

The third challenge has to do with the framework that undergirds *the current global political economy*, and I think here especially of its ontology and anthropology. There are many ways of analysing globalisation (and either praising or damning it), but the one I pursue here has to do with shifts in the way in which the human being is being reconstructed. This is a complex issue, but let me try to illustrate.

⁶ A critical view on Baudrillard's claims may be found in Christopher Norris's *Uncritical theory: Postmodernism, intellectuals and the Gulf War*. 1992. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Whatever the limits and destructive dimensions of industrial capitalism, until fairly recently the productive process still largely required that human encounters determine how it unfolds. A factory boss or owner was more often than not a member of the larger community within which the enterprise was located, or, at the least, had to negotiate with members of that larger community, either through trade unions or local interest groups. The human face of market forces was generally present in direct interactions between those whose relations were constructed by these forces. Consequently, however uncomfortable it may have been for one party or the other, an ethical demand and responsibility rested in this interface. This was true in the relation between consumers and retailers as well.

Now, however, what a particular local community, or body of local workers, or collection of consumers thinks or feels, is irrelevant ethically (its only relevance now lies in numbers, in calculations of profitability, ratings, market share and so on). There is no face-to-face encounter that matters. A corporation may decide to lift a factory lock, stock and barrel out of a local community, with devastating consequences to that community and its employees there, but with virtually no responsibility for that devastation. It is not as if *nobody* matters; it is a shift in *who* matters. For now, such a decision is legitimated and justified on the basis of the interests of the shareholder. But who is this shareholder? In principle, the shareholder is an abstract human being, a piece of paper in a broker's hands or a voice at the end of the telephone line, with whom local communities, employees, have no relationship and upon whom they have no call. The ethical foundation of the market is broken in the shift from real human beings to virtual ones. The skilled manipulators of the market are the ones who benefit.

The same kind of critique can be played out in terms of consumers, who sit on the distributive side of the production process. It will also allow one to probe the astonishing legal shift common to most economies now that allows corporations to be defined as individual persons and hence claim to have "human" rights over and against real people. In every case, what we see manifested is an anthropological and ontological grounding for the market which is truly alien to humanity as such and in all likelihood destructive of being itself (including the earth).

Though I cannot sustain this argument here, I would go further to suggest that this kind of anthropology/ontology, linked to the military industrial complex, is the mark of "empire" under global conditions; and that it has acquired a *religious ideology* to defend itself.

As one example of the shifts that occur in this context, combining both secular and religious phenomena in a new synthesis, let me be provocative by pointing to one kind of global network that is likely to be reflected in the ideas and practices of religious phenomenon that will travel with its basic assumptions. This really *is* a network in the strictest sense, and not something like the "world wide web" of the

Internet; and it is one to which approximately 200 billion dollars has been committed over the next decade in US to funding the military's new proprietary internet system (Weiner, 2004). It is called the Global Information Grid (GIG) with the Army's part of it being \$120m for a Future Combat System that includes weapons, robots and vehicles linked to the grid. Aircraft, satellites and intelligence systems will all be interlinked to "weave weapons, intelligence and communications into a seamless web" covering the globe. Add to this programme the kind of premillennial religious vision that a large number of supporters of President Bush share, apparently with him, and mix in the equally grand secular version of this vision projected by the key Administration think tank known as the Project for a New American Century.

It is hard in this context not to wonder how transnational religion fits in, and it is rather more easy to see that the wave of neo-Pentecostalism now sweeping across parts of the world reflects many of the assumptions propagated by this vision, in particular, that brand of Christianity usually referred to as pre-millennial. We are in the territory of those influenced by the theories, deriving from a very serious religious institute, of the series of novels (and related films) known as *Left Behind*, which has already reached around 50 million sales in the USA and is now landing in volume on the shores of South Africa.

They may be seen as part of what some have begun to call the growing "spiritual warfare" movement. This refers to a "constellation of practices ... including the ministry of deliverance (or exorcism), spiritual mapping, and the identification of the territorial spirits deemed responsible for the failure of evangelism ..." (DeBernardi, 2001:66). This spiritual warfare operates widely at local level, involving casting out of demons, dealing with the occult, and confronting what are deemed to be territorial spirits who rule a particular place and thereby prevent people from recognising the Christian gospel.

In the case of pre-millennialists, the idea arises that the return of Christ in glory is imminent; that the times we live in are a precursor to this return and the subsequent thousand year reign of the Christ; that the turning point is the battle of Armageddon, now within sight; and that there is therefore no point in attempting to correct the wrongs and damages in the world, but rather every point in seeing them exacerbated precisely as signs of the end-time.

While this may seem a rather insane kind of Christianity (it is pathological in many respects), it has force. Among other things, it has penetrated many parts of the world and drawn many influential people to it. Not least among them is President George W. Bush, who in his own way represents this thinking;⁷ nor is it

⁷ Cf. G. Müller-Fahrenholz, "The President's Idol", *New South African Outlook*, 5:2, August 2003.

coincidental that many more people have been appointed to key positions in his administration who openly advocate a pre-millennialist Christianity. To offer one example, again from Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s recent public statement, this time on the kind of mentality that is seeping into key government theatres of activity in the environmental field:

They claim to embrace Christianity while violating the manifold mandates of Christianity: that we are stewards of the land, and that we are meant to care for nature. They have embraced this Christian heresy of dominion theology, which James Watt was the first to enunciate when he told the Senate, 'I don't think that there is any point in protecting the public lands because we don't how long the world is going to last before the Lord returns.' The woman he mentored for twenty years, Gale Norton, is running the Department of the Interior (2005:41).

In sum, I have pointed now to at least four points of reference for a contemporary public theology that would match what might be learned from the Christian Institute, now in a transnational rather than a national key: reinventing and reconstituting the political proper; confronting and exposing the public lie; challenging and constraining the current logic of the global political economy; and countering the rise of a related and pathogenic religious ideology that should be fought from within Christianity. Each focus demands what I have called a mature faith and an applied intelligence as much as any challenge that faced the CI ever did.

3. CONCLUSION

Close to the centre of the campus of the University of Chicago stands an imposing grey building. This is the Rockefeller Chapel. Here, in the mid-1970s, an unusual celebration took place. It was the occasion of the award of the prestigious Reinhold Niebuhr Peace Prize, and in this particular year there were to be two recipients: the famous dissident Soviet physicist, Andrei Sakharov, and Beyers Naudé.

As I happened to be studying there at the time, I was able to greet Beyers and hear his address. It spoke, par excellence, to the issue of Christian public theology, and to an audience that listed among its members some of the most prominent intellectuals of the time.

The biblical text that Beyers chose is paradigmatic, and it is one that you know well: Matthew 25 vs. 51 to 46, the judgment of the nations, in which the sheep are separated from the goats. Note its punch line: those who cared for justice and for people are the Blessed ones, not those whose eyes were upon Jesus and who did not see the people or the injustice around them.

Whether one in fact looks to Jesus or to Mammon or anyone else whose presence obscures, covers over, or denies hurt and injustice given to the other, the punch line remains. It applies to us all. And it is not too difficult to see how it applies to the central challenges we face in our world today. If we fail to see what this call may mean for our society, for our global political economy and for the earth itself, then we might expect to be damned – not necessarily by any particular being, but by life itself. If this call does grasp us and we respond through action as we anticipate the vision of a whole and healed world, then we might also be damned – by those whose privileges and hold on power over others will be threatened. Yet blessing is the promise.

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE IN A DEMOCRACY WITH GUARANTEED FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Pieter Coertzen¹

1. INTRODUCTION

The theme of this article is the relationship between church and state in a country where there exists a Bill of Rights that guarantees *inter alia* the freedom of all religions (Christian and non-Christian) within that country. Before 1994 South Africa was a country where the Christian religion was dominant in society. After 1994 and under the new Constitution of 1996 this has changed. South Africa has become an open, democratic society which seeks to promote and protect the fundamental values of freedom, equality and human dignity. The Bill of Rights *inter alia* prohibits any discrimination on grounds of gender, sexual orientation, religious conviction, etc. In article 15 of the South African Constitution freedom of religion is entrenched. The formulation of certain guidelines can be of great help to Reformed confessing churches in their search for an answer to the question as to what a sound relationship between church and state and church and society under such a dispensation should entail. In this article this question is addressed and an answer to it is suggested from a Reformed theological point of view. It is based on the conviction that Reformed theology has much to offer towards the clarification of this issue.

All over the world where Reformed churches are found, the issue of the relationship between church and state indeed is of great interest and importance. This is especially true of countries in which quite a number of Reformed denominations co-exist. This also is the case in South Africa, where these denominations all have to avail themselves with regard to their own position under the new constitution of the country, a country where religious affiliation is not limited to the Christian religion, but where a plurality of world religions, including African indigenous religions, has to be taken into account. This immediately poses the question of how churches would want the state to view them – in a merely secular, neutral way, or do other possible ways exist? Churches must also take into account that, besides themselves, there are many other forms of associations in society that all stand in relationships with the state; therefore, they

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have to avail themselves all the more of the specifics of their own relationship with the state. In this process churches should clarify for themselves how they see the state and its task. Inevitably this will also bring to the fore the fact that churches have to ask themselves whether the state is fulfilling its task in accordance with what the Bible teaches and, if not, what they stand to do about it. What follows here then are some suggested perspectives on, or guidelines for, churches' reflection on these related issues.

2. THE KINGDOM OF GOD

For Reformed Christians the Kingdom of God forms the primary context for the existence of both church and state – both form part of God's Kingdom. The Dutch theologian Herman Ridderbos (1978:1), calls the Kingdom of God the most theocentric concept that Scripture offers for our understanding of the creation, humanity, the world and current and future times. God's Kingdom and the Lord Jesus Christ's royal sovereignty comprise the whole of creation. Where Christ's Kingship is recognised, something of the Kingdom becomes visible; individuals are liberated and the entire pattern of their lives is transformed (Ridderbos, 1960:303). The state (i.e. any and all states) forms part of God's Kingdom and, although a specific state may not acknowledge God's sovereignty, it nevertheless remains a servant of God for the benefit of people (Rom 13:4-6) and as such is a significant part of his Kingdom.

With regard to our theme of the relationship between church and state, it is good for both the church and the state to remember that the Kingdom of God does not consist only of individuals, the church and the state. Within the ambit of the Kingdom of God there is a *plurality (a multiplicity, a diversity) of complementary, overlapping and mutually interdependent institutions and associations* which are all rooted in God's creation. They all form part of his Kingdom, are all called to live *coram Deo* and are all called to live under his rule and his call to obedience to him as Lord of the Kingdom. For Christians this is a fact, whether people acknowledge it or not. In the end all these institutions and associations will be held responsible by God for the way in which they discerned and fulfilled their task. Hiemstra (2005:21) writes in this regard of

[t]he principal of *complementary responsibilities* which suggests that faithful living in each area of society must be determined by discerning, in the light of the Bible and creation, the nature and calling of each social area. This breaks with the classic liberal idea that autonomous individuals determine how institutions should function in society, including the state. Classic liberals want to limit the state with *external* constraint of "consent", later understood as popular sovereignty functioning through the majority mechanism. The

principal of complementary responsibilities limits societal institutions and the state in two ways: by calling them to be faithful to their God-given calling and by asking them to respect and serve other societal institutions which each have their own calling.

The fact that the plurality of institutions and associations in society are mutually interdependent means that no institution or association is autonomous – a law unto itself – they all exist, or should exist, to enable humanity to achieve its true unifying purpose, namely to love God and neighbour (Hiemstra, 2005:22-23).

Apart from the *plurality of institutions and associations* in the Kingdom of God, a *plurality of directions* is also a reality that has to be reckoned with. “The full reality of institutional plurality in society can be unfolded in many religious and ideological directions” (Hiemstra, 2005:46). The fact that many of the ideological and religious directions of institutions and associations in society cannot be accepted by Christians does not mean that they should not be respected and tolerated. Disagreement does not make them less real or diminishes the calling of both church and state to deal with the plurality of directions in society – each, of course, in its own way. “The state must respect and tolerate the convictions and conscience of its neighbors in a plurality of institutions within society while vigilantly executing its limited task of public justice” (Hiemstra, 2005:47). The church must also respect the convictions of its neighbours in a society with a plurality of other directional individuals, institutions and associations. This does not mean that the church and Christians must approve of all the different directions in society, but it does mean that the church and Christians cannot deny their existence. The church must also never forget that it undeniably has the task of proclaiming, through word and deed, the Gospel of the Kingdom of God – calling all people, institutions and associations of whatever direction they may be to obedience to the Triune God. In the end all the directions will also be responsible before God for the way in which they discerned their task and did their work.

Hiemstra also identifies a third kind of diversity, namely that which he calls *contextual plurality*. This refers to the fact that diverse cultures around the world and throughout different historical eras have developed the cultural and social potential of creation in different ways. Hiemstra concedes that some of these developments may be due to the sinful nature of mankind, but more often these unique geographical and historical contextual developments are simply different legitimate responses to God’s creation (Hiemstra, 2005:23-24). These too must be recognised as belonging to the Kingdom of God and can help both the church and the state in their relationship with each other as well as with all other institutions, directions and contexts in society.

3. THE CHURCH

Within the Kingdom of God there are those who are gathered into a unity through the proclamation and acceptance of the gospel. They are gathered into a confessional, cultic, orderly and confessing community – the church (*cf.* Ridderbos, 1972:296-308). One could say that the church is a community of people who are, and must be, organised in respect of their confession, their worship, their teaching, discipline, pastorate, diaconate, mission, social calling, etc., etc. In all these respects the church is an image of God's Kingdom that simultaneously points to the Kingdom, and it also becomes a place where the Kingdom is revealed and displayed in this world (Heyns, 1977:23-26; Van Ruler, 1978:64).

For the church it is very important that Jesus Christ is its only Lord and head. He is the primary subject in his relation to the church, the latter then being the secondary subject. The church must always be about a Christological-ecclesiological relationship (Barth, *s.a.*:678-679). Various passages in Scripture teach this truth, *inter alia* Ephesians 1:20-23. Christ is the head of the entire creation and, after his resurrection he was given as the head of the church. This headship of Christ refers to his leadership and governance of the church (Du Plessis, 1962:71-72). That Ephesians 1:23 describes the church as “the fulness of him that fills everything in everybody” reveals a most important characteristic of Christ's headship over the church as well as the uniqueness of the church. “Fulness” namely refers to the area over which the headship of Christ is “fully” exercised (Berkhof, 1962:154). The church is the body of Christ and, as such, his “fulness”. This means that it is the area where there should be perfect obedience to Him, the Lord and head (Du Plessis, 1962:76).

Christ rules his church by means of the Word, the Holy Spirit and the ministries/offices that he has given it. This is also a unique characteristic of the church. The proclamation of the Word in a variety of forms, such as preaching, training, charitable deeds, prophetic witness, caring and comforting can also be viewed as the church's unique task, as well as that of the members and the offices in the church. In the Word the church hears the Lord's voice through the Holy Spirit's curiological work (Versteeg, 1971:211-213). The church hears the Lord's voice for the time in which it lives, and through the calling and work of the offices and the members of his body, Christ cares for his body. The offices must equip, feed, discipline, stimulate and co-ordinate the members of the body for their task within the church, but also within God's greater Kingdom. The offices must also join and lead the body to be able to function as the body of Christ in the world (Roberts, 1963:140). All of this will mean *inter alia* that the church must continuously assist its members to walk with God in righteousness – also with regard to the political challenges that they face. The church must help its members to distinguish between the plurality of religious and ideological directions that

confront them every day and what they have to do to remain loyal to Christ. It is also the task of the church to help its members to understand the societal context in which they live, be it that they are a majority or a minority religion; what the consequences are when a state that does not allow any religion in the public sphere, or when a state guarantees freedom of religion to all religions within its borders and what impact that has on churches. Furthermore, it is the task of the church as an institution but also through its individual members, whom it has to equip for this task, to witness to the Kingdom of God and the sovereign rule of Jesus Christ before the political powers of the day. This can be done through prayer, dialogue or the prophetic witness of the church, as well as through the examples of righteous living by the members of the church (Hiemstra, 2005:11-12).

The faith identity of a specific church denomination usually finds its expression in the confession(s) of faith and the resulting church order of that church. A confession(s) of faith is a very fundamental document for any church. It is a systemised expression of what the specific faith community understands as the main truths of the Bible. As such the confession(s) of faith is always subject to the teaching of the Bible. Until it is changed the confession of faith determines the faith identity of a church. The church order of a church contains the rules that govern that church's life at a given point in time. The primary sources for a church order are the Bible and the confession(s) of faith of the church. Secondary sources are the history of the church and the tradition in which it stands. Although the historical-traditional or contemporary context of a church can never be a normative source for its faith identity or the church order, it is something which a church must always take into account. In the end a church must always weigh up its faith identity against the Word of God and the needs of the time. It is usually in this area where church, state and society must have clarity on their different identities and functions. The church order usually states what the confession(s) of faith is to which the church adheres; what offices are allowed for in the church, what authority each office holds, how the office bearers are elected; and how the church assemblies are called and what authority they have. The church order also lays down the rules for the training of its office bearers; the requirements for eligibility for offices; the conditions of employment for ministers and other employees of the church. Furthermore, the church order contains the definitions of the functions of the church; the rules of discipline and conflict resolution in the church as well as the rules that govern the church's relationships with respect to the state and society and their institutions, as well as relationships with other churches and religions. Very important is the fact that a church order contains the rules that have to be adhered to during the assemblies of the church; this means that the church order will also contain rules regarding the entrenchment of the confession of faith of the church. The church order has authority within the church and this authority is also recognised by the civil courts of the country and, although the authority of a

church order can be amended, it can only be done according to prescribed means. It can be said that a church order is a contemporary expression of the identity of a church within the context in which it is called to function. As such it is a very important document in the relationship between church and state (see Coertzen, 2004:150ff.; 187-209).

All of the above do not necessarily mean that the state, in its relation to the church, views the church as the church sees itself (Barth *s.a.*:686). It often happens that the state does not take the existence of the church seriously; or it propagates an absolute separation between the state and the church, and the church is relegated to the so-called inner or private sphere of life. It can also happen that the state sees the church as a mere subject of itself that has to abide by its rules, denying the church its unique existence as part of the Kingdom of God. For the church the danger always exists that it can begin to view itself in the same way as the state often does, namely as a voluntary association of people, albeit a voluntary association with a special relationship to the Person whom they call Christ. It can happen that, while the state sees the church as a mere voluntary association of people that performs certain actions in the Name of Christ, the church can also begin to see itself as such and lose sight of its very special religious identity and calling. The church may never accept or be reconciled to such a view of itself. The law of the state – the *ius circa sacra* – may never, without responsible theological reflection by the church, become the law in the church – the *ius in sacra*. Given the freedom of religion in a democratic society, the church is obliged to do everything possible to convince the state to view and judge it as it expresses itself in its obedience to the Word of God and as this is expressed in its confession of faith and in its church order. This also places the church under the obligation to express itself in its church order in a way that is consistent with its confession(s) of faith and faith convictions. In other words, the church must use the space that constitutional freedom of religion allows it to define itself in a way consistent with its faith identity as a faith community and not wait for or allow the civil courts or the laws of the land to define it.

4. THE STATE

The church, apart from its involvement with individuals in society, is also involved with many other social entities – marital unions, families, corporations, social institutions, etc., etc. – what can be called the plurality of associations. However, it can be said that the state is the most all-encompassing entity in its own right (Van der Vyver, 2004:35ff.) which a church can encounter in its earthly existence. The state encompasses and co-ordinates – inter alia by its legislation and policies – all individuals, corporations, and institutions, which include churches and religions, within its sphere of authority.

Christians believe that the state is divinely instituted; in other words, it is an instrument of the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ. Or to put it in yet another way, the state is the great human representative of Christ's sovereignty over the whole of creation – even when a state itself does not always recognise itself as such. This is also why, with reference to Romans 13:6, churches confess that state authorities are God's servants who are executing their God-given command. This conviction brings to the fore a remarkable parallel between church and state in that the centre of the church's existence is simultaneously the final centre and authority of and over the state – Jesus Christ the Lord!

Apart from being divinely instituted, the state also is a historical institution, a human, cultural response to God's call to do justice in the public relations that exist in our lives. Through the course of history the state has taken on many different forms, such as kingdoms, principalities, empires, commonwealths, tribal arrangements, etc. Sometimes these arrangements were more just and at other times less so. Sometimes they even were straightforwardly unjust, but they were always ways of structuring political life in their time and context. In the same way contemporary states are our societies' better or worse answers to God's call to structure political life concretely. This implies that states may be reformed so that they can deal in a more just manner with society (Hiemstra, 2005:39-40).

The state, as embodiment a political community, can be defined by its specific concern: to ensure that people and institutions, directions and contexts are publicly integrated in just ways. The state that has this as its main task is always territorially bound and should function by way of legal rule with the intent to bring about public justice (Hiemstra, 2005:40-46). In other words, such a state will be obliged to recognise, integrate and protect the plurality of individuals, associations, directions and contexts which fall under its authority. For the church – as for all other institutions and associations – this will mean that the state must allow them the space and the freedom they need to fully respond to their God-given calling. However, should the actions of institutions and associations fail to achieve their essential tasks, or distort the lives of others or harm their members, the state must act to ensure that just public relations prevail between all and that the common good shared by all societal actors is achieved (*ibid.*).

One very important document that deals with the relationship between the state and churches/religions is the constitution of a country. Rautenbach and Malherbe (2004:22-23) write as follows about a constitution:

A constitution is a law that contains the most important rules of law in connection with the constitutional system of a country. These include the rules of law dealing with the state, the government bodies of the country, their powers and how they must exercise those powers. In other words, a constitution defines government authority, confers it

on particular government institutions, and regulates and limits its exercise. (The exercise of government authority includes the creation of legal rules on virtually every aspect of society.) A constitution guarantees and regulates the rights and freedoms of the individual and determines the relationships that exist between inhabitants of a state and their government bodies. A constitution thus provides a norm against which everybody's actions can be measured and which ensures public stability and security. A constitution is thus a key component of the legal system of a state. In addition, a constitution is regarded in democratic societies as an expression of the will of the people and a reflection of prevailing values, requiring the support of the citizens.

A constitution can also be described as the *lex fundamentalis* of a country, the basis of its whole legal order. As such it is also regarded as a special law with a higher status than other laws – in fact, all other laws of a country are subject to the constitution and are invalid if they contradict the constitution. A constitution is also accorded supremacy in that it is an entrenched document, i.e. it cannot be amended at will by the government and the government itself is subject to it. To change the constitution, certain definite procedures must be followed. Furthermore, the civil courts are assigned the function of enforcing the observance of the provisions of the constitution. In the case of South Africa, Section 2 of the Constitution itself stipulates that it is the supreme law of the land, that any law or conduct inconsistent with it is invalid and obligations imposed by it must be fulfilled. Apart from this, the South African Constitution is also entrenched and the courts are formally vested with the power to test the constitutional validity of any action by government and declare it invalid if it is in conflict with the Constitution:

All executive authority is also subject to the Constitution. The supremacy of the Constitution therefore obliges government bodies to act consistently with the Constitution, lest their actions be declared invalid by the courts (Rautenbach & Malherbe, 2004:25).

Article 36 of the Constitution of South Africa, the so-called "Limitation of rights" clause, enables both the state and any institution of civil society to limit certain rights included in the Bill of Rights on condition that this takes place in accordance with the stipulations of the Constitution and it prescribes certain procedures according to which rights can be limited in both the state and civil society.

The Constitution itself can limit rights internally by means of the constitutional article that entrenches it. It qualifies them (for example, article 17 rights may only be exercised peacefully and unarmed) or makes them subject to a further limiting stipulation (for example, in the light of article 126[2], the right to freedom of

expression guaranteed in article 16 does not allow for the use of so-called “hate speech”). The constitution also allows for the external limitation of rights by generally applicable legal rules besides specific stipulations contained in the constitution when it:

- (i) is reasonable and justifiable in an open democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom, and (ii) satisfies certain proportionality requirements (article 36[1]).

Institutions of civil society (such as, for example, churches) can, by means of the formulation of internal constitutional laws, statutes, church orders, stipulations and regulations, make use of the limitation possibilities that the Constitution offers to interpret or reinterpret each of the stipulations of the Bill of Rights within the context of their own internal constitutions. In the case of churches, this will entail an interpretation or reinterpretation in accordance with the faith identity of the church as it is found, inter alia, in the confession(s) of faith and church order of a church. Such a reinterpretation, especially where it pertains to a church’s limitation of the rights contained in the Bill of Rights in the light of article 36, must always be very well motivated in the light of the church’s faith identity and its resultant church order. Such limitation must furthermore be in compliance with the requirements of article 36 (*cf.* Du Plessis, 1999: 204-206).

5. CONSTANTINIAN (ERASTIAN), THEOCRATIC OR PRINCIPLED PLURALISM?

In the history of the relationship between church and state two big trends can be distinguished, a distinction which proves to be very valuable. On the one hand, there is the so-called *Constantinian model*, which can be called an Erastian model because of the thoughts of Thomas Erastus in this regard. Many well-known figures in the history of Christianity – such as Constantine, Eusebius, Augustine, Luther and Calvin – were partly or wholly sympathetic towards this model. On the other hand, there is the so-called *theocratic model*, which was advocated in stronger or weaker terms by the medieval church, Thomas Aquinas, many later Roman Catholic thinkers, as well as some historical currents in Protestantism (Hiemstra, 2005:29). Constantinian and theocratic models of the relationship between church and state are not unique to Christianity. These models can also be found in other religions and the way in which they see their relationship with the state and the rest of society.

Three other possible models of the relationship between church and state can also be distinguished. The *Christian separationist model* argues that the distinctive roles of church and state can (must) be fully separated from each other. Examples of this model are found in the view of Anabaptist communities during the time of the

Reformation and also in the thought of John Locke (Hiemstra, 2005:30). The *secular separationist model* propagates a complete separation of church and state, because religion is seen as irrelevant or dangerous in the public sphere and must remain confined to the private sphere of life. The *abolition of religion model* views the church and religion as negative forces that mislead people and damage society, and which must therefore be contained and eventually eliminated (Hiemstra, 2005:35).

Both the Constantinian and theocratic models are positive about the role that religion should play in society – according to Christian thinkers that support these models, society should serve the Triune God and Christianity should provide direction to society. The models differ on who should be the guide or the leader in the role that religion plays in society. According to the *Constantinian model*, political authorities are dominant and above church authorities. This means that they often assist, influence and sometimes fully control and use the church. It also means that the state has a role to play in the advancement and support of the “true religion”, even to the extent that it may use its coercive power towards that end. According to the *theocratic model*, church authorities determine the role of religion in society – the church (or religion) should dominate political authorities as well as the rest of society (Hiemstra, 2005:28-29).

From the literature on the subject it is clear that the two models – the Constantinian and the theocratic – are not always clearly distinguished and that a closer look at and clearer understanding of what is meant by each these models will certainly advance the relationship between church and state in a democratic society with guaranteed freedom of religion. According to Hiemstra, article 36 of the Belgic Confession of Faith contains elements of the Constantinian model in that it requires from the state the enforcement of true religion:

[T]he government’s task is not limited to caring for and watching over the public domain but extends also to upholding the sacred ministry, with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist; to promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ; and to furthering the preaching of the gospel everywhere; to the end that God may be honored and served by everyone as he requires in his Word (Hiemstra, 2005:33).

With reference to the view of John Calvin, who is seen as the theologian behind the Belgic Confession of Faith, Hiemstra writes:

Calvin’s understanding of the state also rejects the theocratic model. For Calvin, the church is part of God’s eschatological goal of bringing renewed order to creation with the return of Christ out of the chaos of sin. In his approach, the church is concerned about all of life, not just the so-called spiritual or supernatural elements. The church does so,

however, with a focus on its own calling to minister to the inner person as it relates to the whole of life. It may speak to and encourage the state, but not coercively dominate, control or direct it (Hiemstra, 2005:32).

C.F.C. Coetzee, concurring with theologians like Polman, Verboom and Van der Zwaag, is of the opinion that article 36 of the Belgic Confession must be understood as propagating a theocratic model of the relationship between church and state. Quoting Verboom, Coetzee (2006:148) states, “God regeert door de overheid ... Dat is het theocratisch uitgangspunt van De Bres” (God governs through the authorities ... That is the theocratic view of De Bres). He also agrees with Van der Zwaag when the latter writes, “Artikel 36 kunnen wij als een theocratische visie op de overheid beschouwen. Theocratie (letterlik: Godsregering; literally God’s government) vatten we op als een norm die Gods Woord stelt voor geheel het leven, inclusief de samenleving” (*ibid.*:149). (We can see article 36 as representing a theocratic view of society. Theocracy (literally God’s government) we understand as the norm that God’s Word sets for the whole of life, including society.) Coetzee summarises Van der Zwaag’s point of view as follows:

Artikel 36 verteenwoordig nadruklik ‘n teokratiese beginsel, naamlik Godsregering oor alle dinge, wat as die geldende norm vir die samelewing gestel word. Hierdie norm word in artikel 36 tot uitdrukking gebring ongeag die vraag of dit in die praktyk realiseerbaar is. Dit het alles te doen met die geloofskarakter van die belydenis” (*ibid.*:150). (Article 36 expressly represents a theocratic principle, namely the governance of God over all things, which it puts as the governing norm for the whole of society. This norm is expressed in article 36 no matter whether it can be realised in practice. It has everything to do with the faith character of the confession.)

It is very interesting that, regarding the use of coercive power to further the Kingdom of God, Van der Zwaag puts forward the argument that this applies only to the public domain – according to him coercive power with regard to faith and religion is not only prohibited but also meaningless.

Something more needs to be said about article 36 of the Belgic Confession of Faith. In its original form it read that it was the government’s duty to protect the sacred ministry, to remove and destroy all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist as well as to further the Kingdom of God. During the course of the twentieth century Reformed Churches realised that it was no longer possible to maintain this view of the task of government. The wording of article 36 was then changed, firstly, by deleting the words “to remove and destroy all idolatry and false worship” and, secondly, by making the confession read “furthering the Kingdom of God,

allowing the Word of God to be preached everywhere so that God can be honored and served everywhere as He commands in His Word". The new wording no longer made it part of the task of the state to further religion by coercive means but rather to provide for the conditions so that "the Word of God may have free course; the kingdom of Jesus Christ may make progress; and every anti-Christian power may be resisted (Hiemstra, 2005:35).

It is clear that here theocracy is understood in two different ways. On the one hand, there is the view of Hiemstra that understands it as the rule of the church over the state – the church dictates what the Christian norm for society is. On the other hand, there is the interpretation of Coetzee c.s., who apparently wants to accord a dominating role to the authorities for the promotion of the Kingdom of God. However, history has shown that neither of these models presents good answers regarding the role of Christianity in society and the relationship between church and state. Many problems, at least in South Africa, that have been experienced by Reformed churches regarding the role of Christianity in society and the relationship between church and state can be ascribed to the use of a (albeit sometimes only partially) dominant Constantinian model. Apart from their other failures (such as not clearly identifying the specific task of either the church (religion) or the state; both the church and the state usurping functions of the other; and not providing clear guidelines for solving jurisdictional disputes between church (religion) and state), neither the Constantinian nor theocratic model provides Christians with a just way to deal with the issue of the relationship between church and state, the influence of Christianity in society or with issues related to religious plurality in society (Hiemstra, 2005:28-29).

6. IN CONCLUSION

It is suggested that Reformed churches should move away from the Constantinian as well as the theocratic model when formulating their relationship with both society and the state. It is not suggested that churches and Christians abandon their calling to witness to Jesus Christ and his Kingdom in all spheres of life; rather, the contrary. This must, however, be done by way of what Hiemstra calls the principled recognition of the institutional plurality in society, including the institution we call the state. Furthermore there must be an acknowledgement of directional plurality in society – even if this often proves difficult for Christians. The state, in fulfilling its task of doing public justice in the society which it governs, must also reflect principled public pluralism. This does not mean that the state can only be either secular or neutral when fulfilling its task. The state is allowed to have religious and other convictions that take into account the context of its citizens – it is hardly possible for a state to have no convictions on a wide variety of matters, including religion. The state is, however, not allowed to coerce, especially

to force its religious convictions onto an associational and directional pluralistic society with guaranteed freedom of religion. As state it has the God-given task to administer public justice in a non-partisan way.

How does all of this relate to freedom of religion? It is in fact one of the greatest benefits of religious freedom that it affords churches the right to express their religious identity in a society characterised by a plurality of associations and directions. This right to self-identity is constitutionally guaranteed for churches in South Africa. It leaves churches room to express and realise the nature of their faith both vis à vis the state as well as in society. Furthermore, in a constitutional democracy such as South Africa, the constitution compels the state and its organs to protect, promote and realise all the rights included in its Bill of Rights, including the right to freedom of religion. This means that churches in their relation to the state can expect the state to exercise public justice towards them.

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WHAT DO CANADIAN POLITICIANS EXPECT OF THE CHURCHES?¹

David Pfrimmer²

1. INTRODUCTION

I have been asked to speak about “What do Canadian politicians expect of the (Canadian) churches?” The question may seem strange to some, since it is not politicians who should be determining the churches’ proclamation in the public arena. But as most good homiletics (preachers) know, a good sermon is not determined by how it is preached, but rather by how it is heard.

I have spent twenty years of my ministry in the Lutheran community in the area of public policy advocacy – what might be more accurately described as “the public witness of the church”. During much of that time, together with my ecumenical colleagues, Canadian churches have fought for an end to apartheid, for greater respect for human rights, churches have made policy proposals for greater economic justice, have worked for citizen participation in political decisions, particularly for marginalised peoples, as well as a host of other very noble and worthy causes. During that time churches were clear for themselves about the theological justification as to why working for peace, justice and the integrity of creation was an essential part of the ministry of our churches. We have become very adept at engaging governments, particularly the Canadian government. But, “How is our public witness being heard?” It occurred to me that this question might be instructive for the church as it formulates its public theology and engages in its public witness. I thought it might be useful to ask the politicians this question. Therefore, as part of my Doctor of Ministry programme, I undertook a study to ask elected representatives for their views. The results of the study were quite informative.

In this lecture, I will endeavour to do five things:

1. Describe some of the popular perceptions of the role of the churches.

¹ Lecture given at the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, University of Stellenbosch, on 20 September 2004.

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2. Describe briefly the historical context and contribution of the churches in Canada.
3. Based upon what we heard from politicians, I will share a typography of their various expectations.
4. Describe briefly what I believe is an emerging new paradigm for the role of the churches and governments. The new role for church and state.
5. Lastly, I will offer a method for public ministry, the constitutive elements of a public theology and then strategies for a public witness.

2. PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

There are many perceptions regarding the public role of the church – shared by those in and those outside the churches. One perception is that the church is *too* involved. All of us have heard church members say, “The church should stay out of politics!” The other is that religion in general, and the church in particular, is a source of division in the world. Many of us would suggest that these views are not entirely accurate. But, we would have to agree, they are in the public mind. It is to these distortions, I would argue, that our collective public theology must speak.

In June of 2004 Canada held an election. Prime Minister Paul Martin said it would be an election about “values”, the kind of country Canadians wanted. Well, the election results showed some diversity on the values question. Conservatives largely won the provinces in the west. Liberals dominated in Ontario and parts of the Maritime Provinces, Social Democrats in parts of northern Ontario and Western Canada. It is to a diverse patchwork set of values across Canada, I would also suggest, that our collective public theology must speak.

3. THE CANADIAN STORY

Let me turn to my second task. It is important for Canadians to remember their own historical evolution. Canada would not have become a country without the formal participation of the churches. There were at least three eras in Canada’s development. In each of these eras the churches played a unique role. Vestiges of this understanding continue through to the present.

3.1 The formative years (1535-1914)

This was the time since “European contact” (there were aboriginal nations already in Canada). Canada was primarily a rural resource agrarian society. The primary imperative during this time in Canada was the “*establishment of a national identity*” through the creation of political, social and educational institutions.

The churches provided socialisation, erected libraries, provided services and established institutions of learning (colleges and schools). A major struggle was

whether Canada would follow the “state church” or more “pluralistic model” for churches. It chose the latter and, in the process, saw its role as helping to build a national identity.

3.2 The second wave (1914-1970s)

During this time Canada was industrialising and becoming a more urban nation. There were successive waves of immigration from Europe – often after conflicts in Europe. Churches were responding to the social consequences of industrialisation: poverty, family breakdown, the need for medical services, and problems with alcohol and gambling. During this time the “social gospel movement” and other social reform movements arose to prominence. Some ministers became important political figures (e.g. J.W. Woodsworth and Tommy Douglas) During this period Canadian churches saw themselves as “custodians of the national identity”. In English-speaking Canada churches assisted in assimilating people into the mainstream of Canadian society. (This was not always viewed positively by recent immigrants, and as the experiences of Aboriginals educated in Residential Schools will attest). In French-speaking Canada the churches were the guardians of the French culture.

3.3 The third wave (1980s -)

This was a period of the “disestablishment” of the church. Churches no longer had a pre-eminent role in society. They no longer served as the “glue” of Canadian society. In effect, “Christendom” was dead in Canada.³ This period may have begun much earlier and may have been obscured by the events of the Great Depression, World War II, and the post-war period of prosperity. The church focused on internal changes (e.g. new forms of governance, worship, increasing the role of the laity). During this period the churches changed from defining and legitimating the norms and institutional life of Canadian society to playing a “prophetic role”. They saw themselves as the “conscience of the nation”.

If these historical contributions are generally accurate, they inform the way that the churches engage in a public witness or ministry and they also inform the expectations politicians might have.

4. POLITICAL EXPECTATIONS OF THE CHURCHES

So, let me turn to the third aspect of my presentation – the responses to the question, *What do politicians expect of the churches?* The study I conducted was through structured interviews with politicians from four of the five political parties

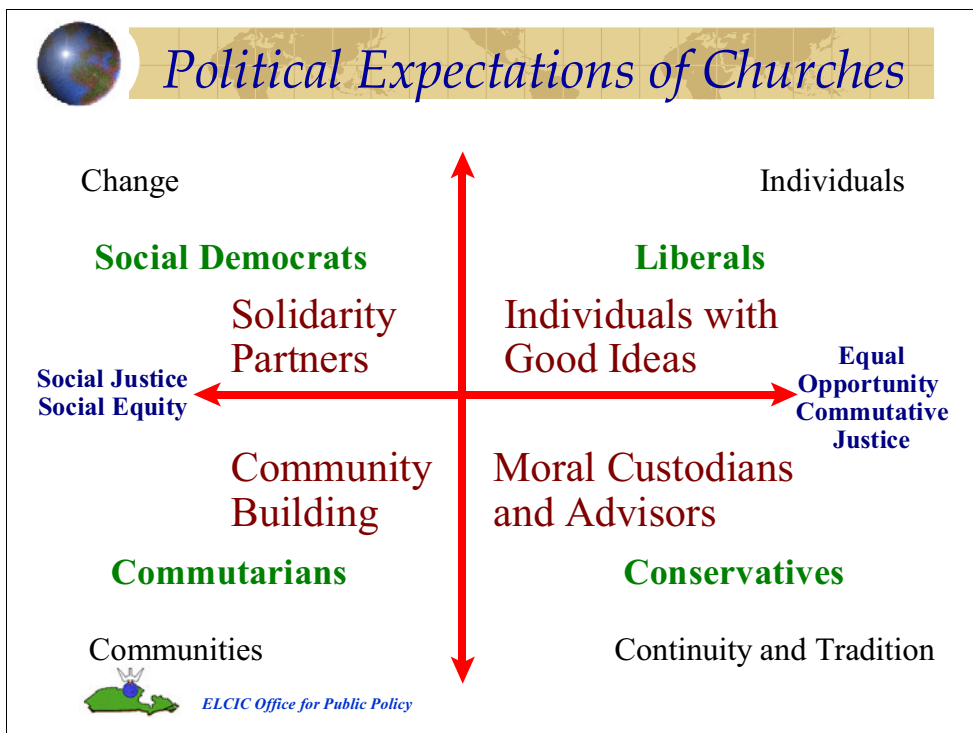
³ Cf. R. Booth, 1983. *The Winds of God*. Winfield, B.C.: Woodlake Books, pp. 90ff. and D.J. Hall, Douglas John. 1980. *The Canada Crisis*. Toronto, Ontario: The Anglican Book Centre.

on the federal and provincial levels. We did not conduct interviews with the Bloc Quebecois, since it is primarily a Francophone party and language was an issue. This was a qualitative not quantitative study, so the results must be taken to be somewhat anecdotal.

There were two interesting insights:

- All parties agreed that the churches had a definite role to play. Some would even say that if churches expected to enjoy freedom of religion, they had a responsibility to ensure the political system that made that freedom possible.
- Additionally, it became clear that many churches did not understand the adversarial system of politics where debate and controversy enable the best policies and approaches to emerge. Church politics are much more subtle, as unity is valued over genuine debate and animated engagement (e.g. politicians were disappointed by most of the preaching they heard).

The following typography offers four ways to interpret the responses from the group we questioned:⁴



⁴ I purposely include a grid rather than a continuum since “left” and “right” often are not helpful in the current climate.

4.1 The liberal mainline

- is a child of the “Enlightenment” with an inherent commitment to moral and material progress;
- was born out of the confrontation with industrialisation and its successor, globalisation;
- sees reason and rationality as its legitimising criteria;
- sees the utility of the churches’ witness as based upon its ability to make well-reasoned arguments and identify new ideas or approaches to pressing social issues or problems;
- views the church as a place of *good individuals with good ideas*.

4.2 The traditionalist perspective

- responds more to the conservative impulses of society;
- comprises of traditionalists who recognise the importance of “mediating institutions” (e.g. family, church, voluntary organisations);
- views society as an organic whole that must be held together through moral influences that strengthen “civil society”;
- views churches as *custodians of the moral narrative* of society and serve as “advisors” to government.

4.3 The social solidarity perspective

- places emphasis on introducing transformative change into the institutional structures that cause systemic injustice and oppression;
- holds the view that people need to take a greater role in decisions that affect them, therefore, popular participation and the distribution of wealth and power are driving imperatives;
- views the role of the church as being a “*solidarity partner*” accompanying those who are working for their own liberation.

4.4 The community preserving and building perspective

- emphasises the conservation of society or the building and sustaining of community;
- resembles the traditionalist view, but places a high degree of emphasis on the ecological and less on transformative change (e.g. the “Green Party” in the 2004 election had a former Conservative as leader);
- interestingly, this was a category in which none of the elected leaders fit; however, it seemed necessary to add it.

5. RECLAIMING AND SUSTAINING THE PUBLIC COMMONS

This brings me to the fourth area of my presentation, which is to ask: what does this imply – if it is somewhat accurate – for the relationship between church and state? Most of the Christian traditions seem to define the question this way. Luther, for example, used the framework of the “two kingdoms” – one the realm of the church, the other the state. I would suggest that, while this framework is instructive in some ways, it is inadequate today. We need a different conceptualisation if we are to understand the respective roles particularly in the current context of economic globalisation – economic actors and civil society are playing a much larger role in shaping our common life.



I have proposed that we need a framework that understands the importance of the “public commons” (or “public space”), that critical arena where the public interest is articulated and the common good pursued. The role for the churches is to help preserve the public space and to engage other actors – economic, governments, civil society – there. The problem is that when one of these dominates this public commons, the public interest and common good are not considered, or worse, are corrupted. For example, governments have largely been marginalised by the market or economic actors under the regime of economic globalisation. We need to help governments reclaim their vocation in the public commons.

Briefly, let me turn to my final task in this presentation: to suggest a possible pastoral method for public ministry and strategies. This is probably not new to you, since it is common to what many call a *critical contextual theology*. Such an approach deals with a number of questions:

- What is the problem? – The existential question.
- What is really happening in the world? – The social analysis question.
- What is God’s Word? – The theological-ethical question
- What does this mean for us? – The discipleship question.
- What will we do about it? – The public witness question.

It is important to realise that people enter this process at different points; however, the journey can be still in common.

5.1 A public truth to share

Most of the politicians would agree that the church brings at least four constitutive elements of a public theology to bear on policy decisions:

- Human dignity founded in God and human community;
- Vocation in service of neighbour and the common good;
- The sufficiency and sanctity of creation;
- Empowering people and communities.

While there would be some agreement with these broad elements, translating them into actual policies can be a source of real debate. Churches need to be prepared to be precise in addressing these challenges. We shall not be perfect and there will be disagreements, to say nothing of the unintended consequences of any policy choice. In seeking to do justice, we often sow the seeds of future injustice. But we must take the risk.

5.2 Strategies for a public ministry

Finally, whether as a source of good ideas, a traditionalist, a solidarity partner, or even as a community builder, there are various strategies churches can employ. The graph illustrates just one set of options. Depending on the actors (congregations, church leaders, church social service agencies, etc.), there will certainly be others.



Strategies for Public Ministry

	Proclamation	Service	Moral Formation	Advocacy
Low Profile	References in Sermons	Collecting food for Food Bank	Adult Education Session on Issue	Writing a letter on an issue (e.g. child poverty)
Medium Profile	Preaching a Sermon on Social Issue	Creating a Child Care Centre or Housing Project	Organizing a Discussion on Gay/Lesbian Issues	Meeting with a local MP/MPP/MLA
High Profile	A Vigil Service in support of strikers or human rights	Organizing an AIDS Hospice	All Candidates Meeting during an Election	Speaking against a Government Policy Publishing an Opinion Editorial



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The key here is to be pastorally sensitive to people’s gifts. Often we need to start somewhere and the circumstances may dictate certain strategies.

6. A FOURTH WAVE?

Canada is once again in the throes of major changes. Are we entering a possible fourth wave in our history? With the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, rising militarisation of international relationships, and the turbulent impact of economic globalisation, Canada is once again being re-engineered.

While some are economically confident, Canadians are more anxious about their future. Political parties are less and less able to generate a credible vision for the future of the country and Canada’s place in the world. We are faced with a more diverse set of values. Michael Adams, a Canadian pollster, estimates that there are at least twelve different “value tribes” (groups) of Canadians.⁵ The challenge Canadians face is to answer the question: “What kind of Canada do we want and what kind of Canada are we committed to build?”

No longer can we expect governments to do it for us. No longer can we assume one set of values to inform the national project or projects. No longer can we

⁵ M. Adams, 1998. *Sex in the Snow*. Toronto: Penguin Books.

assume the vitality of aging public and social institutions. For their part, churches are experiencing a “final disestablishment” as Canadians are generally more defiant and cynical about all authority.

I have pointed out some of the historic roles for the churches in Canada – promoter of the national identity, moral custodian of the national identity and conscience of the nation. These in turn have informed some of the expectations of the churches as preservers of the tradition, people with good ideas, solidarity partners, and as community builders. I have offered some of the constitutive elements of a public theology and a pastoral method and some strategies.

The challenge for Canadian churches – and I suspect for South African churches – is whether we can articulate a public theology that empowers us to be a public church, that empowers us to faithfully follow our Lord into the public commons, and that enables us to humbly but decisively offer a public witness to the public truth of the gospel.

Christina Landman¹

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The need for public theologians

1.1.1 A vision of building bridges

South Africa is in need of public theologians who build bridges. In South Africa bridges need to be built between

- *people who have rights in terms of the Constitution, and those whose rights are contested by their religion.* For this we need theologians who can define religious identity without prejudicing human dignity. Public theologians are needed to restore the human dignity of religious people who, for example, have undergone abortions, or are gay – rights that are afforded them by the Constitution but not necessarily by their religion.
- *people who are prejudiced by their religion, and those who are rendered voiceless by their religion.* For this we need theologians who can publicly assist in embodying a spirituality for the voiceless. In this regard we need a spirituality of the incarcerated, a gay spirituality, a prostitute spirituality, and many more.
- *people who accept religious dogma unconditionally, and those who are demonised for questioning aspects of religious belief.* For this we need theologians who can both criticise and contextualise religious dogma in public. In South Africa, dogmatic issues that need to be addressed publicly are the relationship between the historicity of the man Jesus and the faith of Christian believers, the truth claims of different religions, and the relationship between church and state.
- *people who accept a single form of traditional morality as binding and truthful, and people who internalise the best from a variety of moralities.* For this we need theologians who expose the public to a variety of moral options for behaviour. Issues in this regard for which the public seeks religious solutions are attitudes towards criminals, immigrants (especially Nigerians), juvenile delinquents, those seeking restorative justice, rapists, those infected with HIV, and people playing the Lotto.
- *people who see reality as sacred, and people who make a sharp distinction between the sacred and the profane.* Public theologians need to assist the public to explore the

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spaces between the godly and the worldly. There is a tendency among South Africans to fill secular forms of entertainment with religious content, such as writing new religious words for popular songs. On the other hand, there is a huge public outcry when religious symbols are secularised. This happened, for instance, in the case of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, and when the prophet Mohammed was depicted in cartoons.

- *people who are incapacitated by hurts of the pasts and people who are seeking a future of healing.* There is an urgent need for theologians to visualise, publicly, ways of healing the past and opening up avenues towards the future. Public theologians should negotiate with other caregivers the role of religion in providing community counselling, in combating poverty, and in restoring respect and fun in intimate relationships that are suffering because of gender inequalities.

1.1.2 The method of embodiment

South Africa, furthermore, is in need of public theologians who build bridges through embodiment. As a method, "embodiment" involves two-way traffic. To "embody" is, on the one hand, to "give body" to issues such as those mentioned above. Embodying issues means putting these issues to flesh in liturgies, practices of care, legislation and so forth. On the other hand, embodying also means to give body to issues *starting from our bodily experiences*.² For instance, to embody HIV infection in a liturgy or a newspaper article, one needs to sing, dance or write from the bodily experiences of those infected.

Since a majority of the suffering bodies in South Africa are female, this article argues for the radical involvement of women theologians in embodying public theology.

1.2 Women as public theologians

1.2.1 Profiling a woman public theologian

If Denise Ackermann, Yolande Dreyer and I are taken as examples of women who are embodying theology among the South African public, public women theologians in South Africa tend to be attached to a university, to be licensed by a church, and to show proficiency in counselling. However, this profile needs to be extended to more women of the cloth. We also bemoan the fact that few women in South Africa are ordained as ministers. Within this profile, too, the voices of women from the African Independent Churches are absent, with the honourable exception of Kenosi Mofokeng and Motlalepula Chabaku.

² See A. B. Gilson. 1996. In L.M. Russell & J.S. Clarkson (eds.). *Dictionary of feminist theologies*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, pp. 82-83.

1.2.2 Visualising the task of women public theologians

It will be assumed in this article that women public theologians are empowered to embody public theology in South Africa both through their own contextual (that is, bodily) insights, and through the work of women theologians worldwide. Here the “body theology” of Lisa Isherwood³ is of special relevance to the theory of embodying theology.

Within the bridge-building task of public theologians explained above, I would like to see women theologians setting themselves the following tasks in embodying public theology:

- negotiating religious identities within the faith communities, and within the definitions of human dignity set by the Constitution;
- exploring spiritualities of and with the voiceless;
- co-authoring theologies that rename the relationship between history and dogma, truth and context, church and state, man and woman;
- exploring the spaces between the sacred and the secular, and specifically pointing to the deification of patriarchal manhood in both sacred and secular spheres in society;
- developing moral communities of care with those frequently regarded as “immoral”, such as gays, immigrants and those infected with HIV;
- guiding pastoral care towards healing the past in a post-patriarchal society.

It is to the embodiment of these visions that the rest of the article will be dedicated.

2. EMBODYING PUBLIC THEOLOGY

2.1 Negotiating between religious identity and human dignity

In my view, the first and uppermost task of a woman theologian is to publicly negotiate religious identities within faith communities. In South Africa, with its history of human rights violations, religious identities need to be formed that are capable of both religious experience and human dignity.

This task may be astonishingly simple, since human dignity as religious experience was embodied by Jesus himself when he touched sinners, outcasts, women and children, healed them and gave them bread to eat.

³ See Isherwood, L. & Stuart, E. 1998. *Introducing Body Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, and Isherwood, L. 2004. “The embodiment of feminist liberation theology: The spiralling of incarnation”. In B. Clack (ed.). 2004. *Embodying feminist liberation theologies*, a special edition of *Feminist Theology* 12.2, January 2004, pp. 140-156.

In negotiating human rights as part of religious identity, women public theologians embody the experience of the women in Philippi, who found their human dignity in Paul's statement that they, too, were citizens of the kingdom of God – as research by Lilian Portefaix has pointed out.⁴

Looking from the other side, this would mean, in effect, that a gay identity has the capability of religious experience, as do female identities and the identities of those who suffered losses that are religiously suspect, such as loss as a result of abortion or divorce.

2.2 Embodying spiritualities of the voiceless

The public theologian is the voice of the voiceless. During and after the liberation struggle, many South Africans were empowered to voice their grievances and their rights. However, many more are daily experiencing themselves to be voiceless in the face of crime, violence in intimate relationships, soaring consumer prices and fundamentalist intolerance.

For ages, women's spirituality has been characterised as irrational, emotional and of a lesser quality,⁵ and so history itself impels women theologians to explore spiritualities of, and with, the voiceless. This could include a spirituality of the abused, a gay spirituality, a prostitute spirituality, a spirituality of the poor, and many more.

However, spiritualities need to be embodied, following the example of God who took the enormous risk of embodying Godself in the incarnated Jesus. It is, then, the special task of women public theologians to embody the spiritualities of the voiceless

- in public places of worship, such as in the liturgy and in preaching;
- in religious language. Spiritualities of the voiceless cannot be embodied in religious language that is sexist, racist, capitalist, patriarchal or hierarchical. And religious language will not change if women theologians do not change it publicly;
- in creating a safe social space in the religious community for the voiceless. This may lead to believers opening their houses to the abused and the desolate. At least once a day I get a call from somebody saying that (s)he has met with a woman who has been badly assaulted by her husband, asking where (s)he can take this woman so that she can be safe. Every time I have to give the same

⁴ Portefaix, L. 1988. *Sisters rejoice: Paul's letter to the Philippians and Luke-Acts as seen by first-century Philippian women*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.

⁵ See Landman, C. 1994. *The piety of Afrikaans women*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.

answer: we have laws against woman abuse, but the churches have not yet succeeded in embodying these insights into havens of safety.⁶

2.3 Co-authoring theologies

“Bodiliness” should be placed at the heart of public theology. It is with our bodies that we stand fragile in the face of crime, rape, assault, poverty and even global war.

It is an important insight of “body theology” that each of us is embodied in a number of bodies, as Lisa Isherwood explains in her introduction to *The good news of the body*. I shall here refer to four such bodies that I find relevant to the embodiment of theologies in South Africa:

- the *physical body* embodies our physical characteristics and engages in sex;
- the *symbolic body* embodies values, such as masculinity/femininity; richness/poverty; charismatic/orthodox, etc.;
- the *political body* embodies control over another person, as a man exercises control over a woman in a patriarchal relationship;
- the *spiritual body* embodies existence that transcends physicality and replaces the traditional distinction between body and soul.

In order to co-author theologies with people who are held captive in relationships of unequal power, it is the task of the woman theologian to redefine the bodies just mentioned. In South Africa the relationship between history and dogma, truth and context, church and state, man and woman (to mention but a few) are relationships of unequal power, amidst which we as bodies are held captive. It is the task of the woman theologian to re-talk these relationships through theologies in which equality is embodied.

I shall give one example amongst the many that are available. Marriage has become the most dangerous state for a woman. It is in marriage that she gets infected with HIV most easily, and that she is prone to be emotionally and physically assaulted most readily. A Theology of the Bedroom, then, must be re-talked in which the married body is re-embodied.

- The married female body as *physical body* needs to be embodied not as “weaker” or “more valuable when more pleasing” but as “equally entitled to respect and pleasure”.
- The married female body as *symbolic body* needs to be embodied according to symbols of personal preference, and not according to societal preferences for subordinate femininity.

⁶ Cf. Isherwood, L. 2000. *The good news of the body*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

- The married female body as *political body* needs to be restored as capable of exercising equal control over the sexuality of her husband.
- The married female *spiritual body* needs to be embodied within notions such as “fierce tenderness” and “a theology of touching” in her relationship with her husband as well as her extended human family.

In short, then, the public task of women theologians is to change the concept of “body” with respect to all four of these bodies. And the same applies to the bodies of the gay body, the HIV positive body, the immigrant body, the citizen body, the dogmatic body, the contextual body, the truthful body, and many more. For all these bodies we need embodying theologies that reinterpret tradition, reread the Bible, rename the Sacred, redefine the church, and re-examine the values and the practices of church and society.

2.4 Exploring the spaces between the sacred and the secular

In South Africa the boundaries between sacred and secular are blurred. When Christianity was introduced to South Africa in the seventeenth century, it was not the Reformed Orthodoxy of a Jan van Riebeeck that won the victory, but the Pietism of the German and Dutch missionaries. This piety, insisting that the religious identity of the believer should overshadow all aspects of his or her life, was transferred to black converts, and eventually became the major expression of Christian religious practice. Pietism even provided the language for the liberation struggle of the 1970s and 1980s, with expressions such as “prophetic vision” and “God’s will for the nation”. And although South Africa now has a secular constitution, Pietism remains the main director of public thought on moral and other issues.

Are there boundaries between the secular and the sacred? In my opinion, the spaces between secular and sacred need to be explored – in public, and by women theologians. The reason for feminist theological participation is the fact that popular pietist expressions in South Africa are often, if not always, of a sexist nature.

I shall deal with one example only. Recently, Afrikaans rugby songs, nationalist songs and songs of an explicitly sexual nature have been converted into religious songs by Afrikaans gospel singers. A rugby song, boasting that the Blue Bulls do not eat from the floor, now claims this proud distinction for Christians. In another song, the name of the Boer General De la Rey has been replaced by that of Jesus. It is the task of public theologians to save the public from naive levels of spirituality such as these, but it is the task of the woman public theologian in particular to point out the unacceptability of Jesus and Christians to be used interchangeably with the people’s male fertility symbols and macho idols.

2.5 Developing moral communities of care

The ultimate task of the woman public theologian is to embody the spiritualities and theologies discussed above in moral communities of care.

Here I shall briefly refer only to developing the church itself into a moral community of care.

The church as a moral community of care, in my view, would

- respect the sexual identity of the believer, including that of gay people;
- acknowledge the human dignity of all people, including those that have been demonised in the past and depicted as immoral, such as people infected with HIV, people who underwent an abortion, and criminals, even though they are seeking restorative justice.

It is as a moral community of care that the church becomes the place where religious experience and human dignity are successfully integrated.

2.6 Healing the past

Finally, it is the task of women public theologians to help heal the rainbow nation. Healing is needed from a past of political and patriarchal oppression, and a present of poverty and hopelessness.

Statistically, the South African church-going public has shown that it prefers churches that offer some kind of healing. Reformed, Anglican and Methodist churches that do not offer any kind of explicit healing ministry have lost more than 1,7 million members over the past five years. The Roman Catholic Church, which is reaching out to communities through food packages and Aids hospices, and even by incorporating traditional healing practices, has gained half a million members during the past five years. However, it is the charismatic churches – or, as they are called in the townships, the *bekeerkerke* or the born-again churches – that have gained more than 1,2 million members in the past five years. These are the churches that specialise in healing ministries. These are the churches that are growing rapidly in South Africa.

What sort of healing can women public theologians offer the South African public? This, of course, calls for an essay on its own. However, I can mention a few pointers here. Women public theologians can contribute to the healing of the people by

- distributing wisdom that will have a healing effect on society, such as the wisdom of equality, respect and human dignity, all of which are, in my view, biblical wisdoms;

- respecting the spiritual needs of believers without converting them from their preferred identities;
- promoting relationship counselling that redefines gender roles;
- guiding abused people to restore themselves;
- giving words to previously demonised people with which to redefine themselves within the grace of God.

3. IN CONCLUSION

Women public theologians in South Africa have a massive task ahead: to build bridges between patriarchal and post-patriarchal communities. Here I have mentioned only a few spaces in which post-patriarchy needs to be embodied, namely in the human dignity of religious identity, in the spiritualities of the voiceless, in non-dogmatic theologies, in moral communities of care and in the healing of the people.

More tasks than those mentioned here are awaiting women public theologians, such as building bridges between churches. Where churches that used to be segregated according to racial lines are still not united, women public theologians are needed to point to the gender and power issues that are keeping Christians of the same denominations apart.

It is time for new stories to be invited into faith communities, stories of human dignity, healing spiritualities, empowering theologies; stories that tell of caring as the new morality.

And who, traditionally, are the people's public storytellers? Women, of course.

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REREADING NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS: A PUBLIC-THEOLOGICAL RESOURCE FOR ADDRESSING GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF HIV/AIDS¹ IN SOUTH AFRICA

Miranda N. Pillay²

1. INTRODUCTION

Can there be a theological response to Aids? The answer, says David Yeoman (1997:27), depends to a certain extent on how we perceive theology. If theology is seen only as a metaphysical enquiry into the personhood of God or as an ontological enquiry into the nature of God's being, then one could argue that there cannot be a theology of Aids. But I concur with Yeoman that, if there cannot be a theology of Aids, there "cannot be a meaningful theology of anything" because if God cannot be perceived in human reality, we are left with an "abstracted view of God" that would be meaningless and irrelevant to most human beings. If theology is to connect with the reality of life, then theology has to be perceived as the discovery of God, not just in God's person or being, but also in God's relationship with the world. Aids is about relationships. It is about intimacy, sexuality, vulnerability, pain, suffering, death, prejudice and bigotry. And as Yeoman (*ibid.*) points out, if theology has nothing to say about these human conditions, it has nothing to say about anything.

The scientific, social, economic, legal, ethical, spiritual and theological challenges of HIV and Aids for individuals, families, faith communities and society, and the possible future threat that it holds for all of humanity, are dramatic challenges that need a collaborative, co-ordinated response from all levels of society. Working together, many Christian churches (amongst certain South African parliamentarians) proved to be agents of change during the struggle against

¹ The separation of the terms HIV and Aids emerged during a time when it was argued that HIV does not equal Aids. While this discourse had its merits in the light of stigma against HIV-positive individuals and groups, it also carries negative connotations which emerged during the debate that HIV does not cause Aids. It is with a critical awareness of this anomaly that both terms are used in this paper.

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apartheid and Christian churches continue to be an important factor in South African society.³ While the HIV/Aids pandemic challenges Christian churches (and other faith communities) to respond to the needs of those persons infected and affected, it is also an (urgent) opportunity for Christians to reflect anew on how they see themselves in relation to God and to others.

There has been an awakening to the realities of the Aids pandemic among certain churches, many of which have projects and programmes in place. However, Aids presents some “uncomfortable” challenges to Christian theology. It sometimes calls for thinking and speaking theologically about the sexed body – about taboos such as sex and sexuality, gender-based violence, etc. But even more than this, Christian theology is challenged to re-examine the views, beliefs and practices that render people vulnerable to the HI virus. The present reality of poverty, sexism, gender power relations, death, exclusion, stigmatisation, scapegoating, etc. intensifies the complexity of the challenges presented by the Aids pandemic. It also challenges the church to respond as a community of faith – drawing on its unique resources.

The focus of this paper is on a theology of gender equality and the plausibility of New Testament texts as a basis for gender equality. Appropriating texts written in 1st century Palestine in the context/s of the 21st century calls for serious hermeneutical considerations. The first three sections of this paper, 1) *Sexism in the church: A brief overview*, 2) *A gendered God?* and 3) *Women, church, poverty and Aids*, serve the purpose of contextualising the need for re-reading biblical texts. This is followed by exploring the usefulness of the Bible in arguing for gender equality and problematising the scramble for methodology in biblical interpretation. A final section, *Socio-rhetorical interpretation: an integrated approach?*, suggests that, using the insights gained from the various methodological paradigms in an integrated way may be a possible response to what is considered to be a methodological malaise. Generally, this exploration seeks to illuminate how the social, cultural and individual locations and the perspectives of readers influence their understanding of a text, which is then also reflected in how – and what – people speak about, reason about, and write about.⁴ But first, a brief exploration of how sexism in the church has contributed to gender inequality.

1. SEXISM IN THE CHURCH: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Sexism, says South African feminist theologian Denise Ackermann (1988:22), is the exclusive ordering of life through gender power relations. North American feminist theologian, Rosemary Ruether (1993:178), explains that sexism,

³ 80% of South Africans claimed to be Christian, according to the population census of 1996 (www.gov.za/yearbook/rainbow.htm).

⁴ Robbins, 1996(b):95.

understood to be both violence and violation to women's bodily integrity, humanity and capacity for full selfhood and as such, is also the distortion of male humanity. Traditional gender roles and power relations in churches have contributed to sexist social constructs within which the subordination of women flourishes in the family, the church and society.

The origins of sexism in the Christian tradition are related to the platonic-apocalyptic dualistic worldview, which identifies God with the positive (that which is perfect) and "the world" with the negative (that which is imperfect). In this scenario human beings stand between God and the world, spirit and nature. With this, Ackermann states:

The stage is set for models of domination and superiority, for the oppression of women by identifying them with nature, earth and the body in its despised and rejected form (*ibid*).

Within this dualistic worldview, then, man is seen as representing the rational and spiritual part of the self, while woman is seen as having a "greater aptness for sin" and also being less spiritual. Thus, observes Ruether:

Within history, woman's subjugation is both the reflection of her inferior nature and the punishment for her responsibility for sin (*ibid*.:94-95).

It is generally agreed, specifically among women theologians, that this particular view within the Christian tradition has contributed towards the subjugation of women in all spheres of life.

Ruether, referring to the theologies of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Barth, further argues that the "pattern of patriarchal anthropology can be illustrated in the entire line of classical Christian theology from ancient to modern times" (*ibid*.).

In criticism of Nietzsche's views on gender construction the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf (1996:189), quotes Nietzsche as saying that, "only he who is sufficiently man will redeem the woman in woman; for the woman, the world is perfect only when she obeys with all her love". Nietzsche thus contends that man is creator, he is redeemer and he is commander, while woman is the chaos that cries for the imposition of order. This argument reiterates the notion that woman is sinful and awaits redemption; that she is irrationality that must receive command. Volf argues that such a construction of gender goes in one direction – from the positive of man's fullness towards the negativity of woman's lack. He suggests that the doctrine of the trinity offers an alternative for Nietzsche-like misogyny (*ibid*.:190).

2. A GENDERED GOD?

Some theologians have made the point that the “gender of God” language questions gender equality. Fulkerson (1994:42) argues that male gender constructions dominate the Christian faith and, where there are female gender constructions, they include many notions of female subordination. Elizabeth Johnson (1994:42-55) criticises Ruether’s use of the word “God/ess” because it proves unpronounceable and thus not usable for worship. Johnson agrees that speaking of God in the image of male and female has the advantage of making clear that women do enjoy the dignity of “being made in the image of God”.

Volf (*ibid.*:170-172) observes that it is generally agreed that God is beyond sexual distinction. He further states that because God is “personal”, we speak of God using masculine or/and feminine metaphors, since there is no other way to speak of persons except in a gendered way. Volf continues his arguments, stating that notions about God regarding masculinity or femininity are there because we, who are gendered, have placed them there. He maintains that “[g]ender distinctions are unrelated to the image of God” and is convinced that whether we use masculine or feminine metaphors for God, God models our common humanity, not our gender specificity. For Volf, to be adamant about a gender-specific deity in order to make male or female gods the horizons for development of specific gender identities is unacceptable, if one is committed to the one God of the Christian tradition.

I agree with much of Volf’s argument, but then how is one to ignore the fact that God incarnate, in Jesus of Nazareth, was male? By presenting the Trinity as a non-hierarchical relationship between separate persons, Volf introduces the notion of mutual giving of the self, while not losing the self, as the pivotal point to be considered in gender power relations.⁵ While I consider this to be a powerful illustration and inspiration to transform domination within relationships, this image does not erase the reality of the maleness of the one God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – operative within the Trinitarian relationship. Thus, while I agree with Volf that referring to God in gender-specific language is a human construct, I question my own conviction in this regard because Jesus, who is God incarnate (to me and other Christians), is also male.

Referring to the Trinity in order to illustrate gender equality may not be quite appropriate, but I concur with Volf that its effectiveness in illustrating mutuality and reciprocity is very useful. The continuous putting forward of these concepts is essential if relationships are to be life enhancing and not oppressive. I add my voice to those who believe that it is not important to find the maleness or femaleness of God so that we (Christians), who are either female or male, can align ourselves with God and thereby affirm our superior nature, but that we find our

⁵ Cf. Volf, *ibid.*:175-180.

common humanity, our equal human dignity, in God incarnate through the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. At the time when these events occurred, God-Immanuel had to be incarnated as a male, because the world back then would only have paid attention if the prophet, rabbi, teacher or leader were a man. Since then structures in civil society have changed to give women a voice in the public (particularly political) sphere.⁶ If this had been the case when (the Christian) God had decided to take on human form, it is my opinion that God might have done so in a female gendered body.

I do not agree with the often quoted view that women in the Bible can only be used today as “negative sources to demonstrate the lack of human dignity and visibility”, or with Christina Landman’s argument (2001:83) that women in the Bible “are an embarrassment to their modern sisters”. I would rather argue that, while the details of some of the gospel stories may be questionable, they do reflect the prominent historical roles of women within a specific socio-cultural situatedness of first century Christianity. And, instead of accepting views, traditions and practices interpreted through androcentric filters, serious questions have to be raised in order to discern what it means to be “children in the household of God” (Eph. 3:19). As Christians who today share the history of God’s salvific love with those who first followed Jesus, it is our duty to read and reread Scripture.

I am in agreement with those women (feminist, African women theologians, womanist and others) whose arguments for interpretation are based on the premise of the liberative potential of the Christian Scriptures.⁷ Also, because this is a matter of urgency, given the challenges posed by the Aids pandemic.

3. WOMEN, CHURCH, POVERTY AND AIDS

The Aids pandemic presents challenges that are varied and complex, and thus it requires exploring unique and creative responses by all sectors of society, including the church. Skewed gender power relations, and particularly the marginalisation of women are understood (among the many exacerbating factors) to be contributing to the spread of the HI virus. The perceived inferior nature of women has made them socially, economically and sexually more vulnerable to contracting the HI virus. Women-unfriendly readings of the Bible have contributed to attitudes and practices in church and society which affirmed patriarchy and the

⁶ In South Africa today many women hold leadership positions in politics and in some churches.

⁷ Including extra-canonical texts.

subjugation of women as “the natural order of things”.⁸ The “women-unfriendly” interpretations of the Bible often cement the inferior position of the wife in marriage.⁹ Traditional gender roles and power relations in churches have contributed to social constructs within which the marginalisation of women continues to flourish. African woman theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1995:182) challenges these views and practices:

Whatever is keeping subordination of women alive in the church cannot be the Spirit of God. The church is intended to be the ecclesia of all people, women and men across all social barriers. In the church we expect to experience the reciprocity, mutual respect, support and protection of each person’s freedom in continuum with our freedom as the children of promise.

Women, and particularly South African women, who are still suffering the discriminatory effects of apartheid and who are continuously struggling against gender power relations, are experiencing a triple jeopardy in their vulnerability to HIV/Aids, namely racism, classism and sexism. Ageism is also a factor to be considered, particularly since elderly women with limited resources now have to take care of grandchildren as their parents become ill and die of Aids-related diseases. Musimbi Kanyoro (2001:161) rightfully observes that justice for women is often trivialised in favour of “larger issues such as national liberation, famine, disease, war and poverty”. However, because of the realities of HIV and Aids, these “larger issues” are intensified by the impact of HIV/Aids, and vice versa.

While poverty does not cause HIV, the poor and destitute, who in most instances are also women, are more prone to contracting the disease and developing Aids. In that sense poverty exacerbates the pandemic. Often the need to still one’s hunger pangs, or to provide food for those who depend on one, is more urgent, real and sometimes life-threatening than the knowledge of possible dangers of a sexually transmitted disease. Poverty impacts on nutrition. The extremely poor often find it difficult to meet basic caloric requirements, let alone the particular mix of proteins and calories necessary to benefit optimally from anti-retroviral therapy – that is if they have access to these drugs.¹⁰ As access to treatment is further restricted by

⁸ Read: beliefs and practices that support and sustain the status quo of hierarchical power structures.

⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, 1995:270.

¹⁰ Since 1996 people who are HIV positive have been treated with a combination of anti-retroviral drugs, known as Highly Active Anti-retroviral Therapy (HAART). This treatment stops HIV from multiplying and reduces the volume of HIV in the blood, slowing down the process that leads to Aids. This, together with proper treatment for opportunistic infections such as oral thrush, shingles and TB, allows HIV-positive people to lead normal, productive lives for up to 10 years (Aids Law Project, 2001:25).

availability of adequate health care infrastructure, rural and urban poor populations suffer disproportionately. Their lack of advantage makes their lives no less valuable and no less deserving of protection. Denial of treatment means suffering and death. This view is also echoed by Tallis (2000:59), who asserts that gender inequality could be regarded as the main problem area hindering HIV and Aids prevention.

Many clerics do not regard addressing issues around HIV and Aids as part of their pastoral duties, but rather invite people from Aids organisations to address their congregations. Is doing this not questioning the theological basis for responding to HIV and Aids?¹¹ But how does one speak (and preach) about human sexuality, life, death, power, stigma, community, care, respect, love, etc. in the context of HIV and Aids? How can individual Christians and Christian communities be moved from fear and despair to hope and joyful living? How can Scripture, as a focal point in liturgy, be used to transform hearts and minds?

4. THE BIBLE: A BASIS FOR (GENDER) EQUALITY?

It goes without saying that, as a woman of colour in post-apartheid South Africa, I will have to account for the usefulness of the Bible in addressing gender oppression in the 21st century. It is widely acknowledged and documented that the Bible has been used to legitimise slavery, racism, sexism and other discriminatory and exploitative perceptions and practices. A concrete example of this is the theological justification of apartheid by the Dutch Reformed Church (and other churches) in South Africa.¹² In the process many people, and Christian women in particular, have become deeply suspicious of the often repressive readings of the Bible which are imposed on them (albeit unwittingly), and which cause them to feel like second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God. Very often women (and other marginalised groups) feel disillusioned and deceived by the many “successful” ways in which Scripture is used to justify and solidify gender apartheid and other forms of exclusion. South African New Testament scholar Elna Mouton (1995:16) explains:

Through a lack of credibility on the side of preachers and theological institutions, mainly because of repressive ways in which the Bible has been used in the past, many people seem to have lost their trust and confidence in the liberating power of the Word of God. For such people to be surprised (again) by Scripture’s transformative and liberative power, and to be persuaded by virtues such as truthfulness,

¹¹ In response to my views in this regard, a cleric once remarked: “Aids is a scientific problem with social ramifications; do you intend giving it a theological twist?”

¹² Cf. Mouton, 1995:16.

authenticity and integrity (while lacking appropriate role-models), have indeed become an enormous theological challenge to Christian theology.

Scripture, however, continues to function in Christian discourse as a source of insight and hope, and thus has the potential to influence the ethos of Christian communities in South Africa. This, says Smit (1991:57-59), is because once texts “penetrate deeply into the psyche, especially the collective psyche, they cease to be primarily objects of study and rather come to supply the conceptual and imaginative vocabularies, as well as the grammar and syntax with which we construe and construct reality”. The Bible influences the imagination and language of society; it influences the way people “see” things; it influences their vision, their grasp of reality and history (*ibid.*).

Thus the Bible influences the moral world, because it shapes the way people see their world and how they speak about their world. The “world” of apartheid in South Africa was primarily shaped, influenced and sustained by the interpretation of biblical texts. But the same Bible was also referred to by those who opposed apartheid and its oppressive practices. So too women-unfriendly biblical interpretations which sustain the subjugation of women are to be challenged, and modes of interpretation that affirm the equality of women must be explored. Instead of androcentric interpretations that illuminate (albeit unintentionally) the supposed “sinful, inferior nature of women”, the challenge should be to address and transform oppressive interpretations, traditions and doctrines.

The above argument shows that the multi-dimensional nature of biblical texts often results in multiple and ambiguous interpretations. This is why Mouton (*ibid.*:21) aptly reminds us that the Bible does not supply direct, simple answers to moral questions raised in contemporary society. While the present challenges of the Aids pandemic are not directly addressed in New Testament texts written centuries ago, views, rituals and practices (about God and others) that alienate, discriminate, stigmatise and subjugate are challenged by the Jesus movement. I thus concur with Mouton (*ibid.*:188), who asserts that, “we [Christians] have the obligation (and responsibility) to involve ourselves in the creative tension of the liminal space between the dynamics of the biblical texts and the needs of contemporary society” [my parenthesis].

Christian Scripture, and particularly New Testament texts, is the primary source from which Jesus’ vision of “freedom for all” can be gauged. But how do we read and interpret these ancient documents? This is a complex question with histories of tradition(s) and methodological paradigms to consider. Up until the last four decades, biblical interpretation, dominated by white male scholars, evolved around the historical-critical method. Feminist North American biblical scholar

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out that, despite her endeavours over the past twenty-odd years to contribute feminist theoretical insights to biblical studies, it is clearly noticeable that feminist critical models for literary-historical and political-rhetorical inquiry have yet to be taken seriously (1996:36).

Influenced by feminist hermeneutics,¹³ the efforts of African women theologians challenge the traditional male, individualistic, hierarchical and often competitive approach to biblical interpretation. The interpretive efforts of African women theologians have the distinctive characteristic of inclusiveness. This inclusivity emphasises solidarity among sister theologians while it also acknowledges that both men and women must re-read and discover the liberative potential of biblical texts for all people. Teresa Okure (1997:77) states that African women's approach to biblical interpretation "describes the efforts of women and men to interpret the scriptures as they relate to women, in a common search for new inclusive meanings". This is an important angle from which to explore Scripture, because for many people in Africa and South Africa gender inequality is sustained by hierarchies of economic, political and religious exploitation and this inequality is exacerbated by poverty and disease which affect many women, men and children.

The realities of HIV and Aids are experienced by many people, whether infected or affected, irrespective of race, class, religion or social standing. Thus, to respond theologically to the challenges of HIV and Aids means to respond to the realities of how people view themselves and others in the light of these challenges. Therefore, I want to argue that the way Scripture is used on the pulpit is a key to its liberative potential, because this is where people are "moved" to see differently; this is where most Christians hear Scripture being read and interpreted.

5. METHODOLOGICAL MALAISE

While the challenges posed by HIV and Aids to Christian theologies have sharpened the focus on women as a marginalised group and their vulnerability to the HI virus, the Christian Bible does not "speak" about HIV or Aids. However, it does "speak" about stigmatisation, alienation, discrimination and ostracisation of women, the poor, the ill and the outcast. Nevertheless, the contextual appropriation of texts reflects the varied contexts in which they were written centuries ago and demands responsible hermeneutical engagement. Discussions on biblical hermeneutics and its conflicting histories of tradition(s) have dominated South African New Testament scholarship for several decades. Arguments in

¹³ While some members of *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* argue that their way of doing "African women's theology" has not been influenced by feminist biblical scholarship, my views, as a woman doing theology in Africa, have been shaped by feminist and womanist theologies.

favour of “new” ways of reading Scripture are often made by criticising the failures, shortcomings and inadequacies of other methods. In an article entitled “My kingdom for a method” South Africa New Testament scholar, Jeremy Punt (1998:150-154) argues that the pre-occupation with methodology among New Testament scholars has resulted in the neglect of the theological nature and content of the text. Punt suggests that one way to break out of this methodological malaise is to opt for a multi-dimensional or integrated approach.

6. SOCIO - RHETORICAL INTERPRETATION: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH?

Vernon Robbins, the proponent of socio-rhetorical interpretation (SRI), claims that it is not a new “method”, but an interpretative programme which lends itself to tapping in on and integrating ground gained from the various competing methodologies.¹⁴ In a paper entitled “Beginnings and Developments in Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation”, Robbins traces the roots of socio-rhetorical interpretation to 1984, when an integration of rhetorical, anthropological and social-psychological insights were used in the study of the Gospel of Mark.¹⁵ Publications by Jerome H. Neyrey in 1991 reflected an integration of social-scientific exegesis using rhetorical analysis and interpretation, with some of his strategies being explicitly socio-rhetorical.

SRI engages in multifaceted dialogue with the text, “revealing” the textures in the different types of early Christian discourse. In his *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, Robbins explains that:

When we look at a thick tapestry from different angles, we see different configurations, patterns and images. Likewise, when we explore a text from different angles, we see multiple textures of meanings, convictions, beliefs, values, emotions and actions (1996a:18).

In another 1996 publication, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, Robbins claims that SRI brings together the ever-growing insights gained (over a period of fifty years) from social-scientific approaches that focus on the study of social class, social systems, personal and community status, people on the margins and people in positions of power. The hyphenated prefix “socio-”, refers to the rich resources of modern

¹⁴ In a *festschrift* in honor of Robbins, *Fabrics of Discourse. Essays in Honor of Vernon K. Robbins* (2003), Gowler agrees that Robbins’s SRI is a comprehensive attempt to provide a programmatic model in order to establish and facilitate an arena where the “myriad of approaches currently found in New Testament studies can be in dialogue with each other” (online: www.services.emory.edu/~dgowler/RobbinsFS.htm).

¹⁵ Cf. Robbins 2002d, online.

anthropology and sociology that socio-rhetorical criticism brings to the interpretation of texts. Mary Ann Tolbert (1993:270) states that social, sociological and anthropological investigations of early Christian history pose new questions and often open unexplored avenues of research. The term “rhetorical”, says Robbins, refers to the way language in the text is a means of communication among people. Rhetorical analysis and interpretation give special attention to the subjects and topics used in a text to present thought, speech, stories and arguments. Robbins further asserts that language is used by people to “establish friendships, to set certain people off as enemies, to negotiate with the kins-people among whom they live, to pursue their self-interest, and to create a view of the world that offers a sense of security and a vision of greater things to be achieved both in this life and after it” (1996b:1). Interpretation is thus guided by the insight that language is a means of negotiating meanings in and among the worlds in which people live. This is a reminder for interpreters to become aware of their own social location and personal interests as they attempt to approach the social location and interests which a particular text embodies.¹⁶

Robbins claims that, because SRI brings together literary criticism, social-scientific criticism, rhetorical criticism, post-modern criticism and theological criticism, it creates the opportunity for an integrated approach. Asserting that each of these methods becomes more credible when they are used interactively, Robbins explains that a rich and responsible approach becomes available for dealing with belief, action and life in the world today. A major challenge for biblical scholars is to bring together various approaches to the interpretation of texts. Robbins suggests five different angles to explore the multiple textures of texts – inner texture, inter-texture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture and sacred texture.¹⁷ Each angle illuminates different patterns and images in the text, which Robbins likens to a “thickly woven tapestry”.¹⁸ David Gowler notes that these textures are continually in dialogue and, “like the warp and woof of a tapestry, these textures are mutually dependent and inherently interwoven; they reinforce and build upon each other”.¹⁹ It appears that Robbins is not calling for a new method of interpretation over any other, but rather that the goal of SRI is to provide an interpretative programme which invites “investigations that enact integrated interdisciplinary analysis and interpretation” (1996a:14). Biblical

¹⁶ Bernard Combrink (1998:20) explains how knowledge of these specific social topics may offer an analytical framework for understanding the different social locations and theological responses of the various South African church denominations in their responses to socio-political transformation.

¹⁷ Robbins deals with the first four “textures” in *The Tapestry of early Christian Discourse*. Sacred texture was included in the later publication, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*.

¹⁸ Cf. Robbins, 1996a:18; 1996b:2

¹⁹ Cf. Gowler, 2003. Online: www.services.emory.edu/~dgowler/RobbinsFS.htm

studies, continues Robbins, does not need a method or theory “in the usual sense, but rather an interpretive analytics” (*ibid.*). To this end, SRI invites co-operation in the analyses and interpretations of texts even among those scholars who disagree.

South African New Testament scholar Bernard Combrink has written a number of articles using insights from socio-rhetorical interpretation.²⁰ His work in this regard also challenges the present climate of New Testament interpretation in a post-apartheid South Africa, while probing the value of using a socio-rhetorical hermeneutic, rather than an alternative hermeneutic. Socio-rhetorical interpretation, and particularly the work of Robbins, has also been cited by other South African New Testament scholars.²¹

From the above observations it should be evident that there has emerged considerable support for employing SRI as a strategy for reading biblical texts. The strength of this approach hinges on the fact that it is not yet another competing method of interpretation, but that it aims to draw on the valuable contributions of various approaches to biblical interpretation – including feminist biblical hermeneutics. However, even if I will not offer a full assessment of SRI in this paper, the critique by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1996) should be noted. Schüssler Fiorenza’s criticism of those who advocate rhetoric in biblical interpretation as being “stuck in a rhetorical half-turn” is based (among others) on two main arguments. As was mentioned earlier (see par. 4 above) she firstly observes that despite her endeavour over the past twenty-odd years to contribute feminist theoretical insights to biblical studies, it is clearly noticeable that feminist critical models for literary-historical and political-rhetorical inquiry have yet to be taken seriously. In fact, she argues vehemently that:

[t]he stories of the regeneration and revival of rhetorical criticism in biblical studies which recount the work of seminal figures in the field seem not even to be aware of the contributions which feminist political rhetoric brings to the table (1996:37).

Schüssler Fiorenza points out that, while reference has been made to some works published by women theologians, those publications which have the word “feminist” in the title have been ignored. The reason for this exclusion of feminist and liberationist scholarship is because interpreters “remain in the captivity to empiricist-positivist science”, asserts Schüssler Fiorenza. Her second major criticism against SRI is that, according to her understanding, Robbins posits ideological criticism “as one method” among (five?) others rather than understanding it as “a dimension of all interpretative methods and strategies”

²⁰ Combrink 1992b.; 1999; 2002; 2003.

²¹ See, for example, Botha, 1994; Punt, 1998; Mouton, 2004.

(*ibid.*). However, the latter concern has adequately been addressed by Robbins in *The Tapestry of early Christian Discourse* and *Exploring the Textures of Texts*, which explicitly claims that SRI is not “the method” but rather an “interpretive programme”.²² Robbins explains:

At present, interpreters are practicing many multiple approaches, but they are often practicing them either without knowledge of one another or in contexts where animosity is articulated with an absence of profound interrelation between the respective projects and their results (1996a:13).

In response to Schüssler Fiorenza’s criticism, Robbins argues that while “ideological texture” features as a fourth texture in the sequence of analysis, it does not mean that the other “textures” are free from an ideological orientation. He reiterates that his position is not scientific or scientistic, but rather interactionist. Robbins also purports to set “scientific and humanist procedures of analysis and interpretation into energetic, interactive dialogue on an equal playing field” (2002a:49).

While Robbins addresses Schüssler Fiorenza’s concerns adequately, it is my opinion that a hermeneutic of suspicion has to be maintained to ensure what Robbins refers to as “interactive dialogue on an equal playing field” (Robbins 2002a:49). He is adamant that the hermeneutic spiral must continue to revolve to include “disenfranchised voices, marginalised voices, recently liberated voices, and powerfully-located voices”, in addition to the voices of women and marginalised people (1999:58). As a feminist/womanist biblical scholar and an African woman theologian, I accept Robbins’s invitation to enter into dialogue, while also heeding Schüssler Fiorenza’s warning against possible co-option in the interest of patriarchal or kyriarchal interests.²³

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The task of Christian theology in dealing with HIV and Aids is to reflect critically on ecclesial praxis in response to the pandemic. Elsewhere I have written about responding responsibly to the Aids pandemic, which entails responding in both reactive and proactive ways.²⁴ In this paper I suggest that, by addressing gender

²² Robbins (2002a:58) points out that these publications were not available at the time of Schüssler Fiorenza writing her critique.

²³ Mary Ann Tolbert (1993:270) also warns that feminists must always be aware of presuppositions that promote the invisibility of women, and advises that feminists (and other woman theologians) insist that no study be considered adequate without an analysis of gender.

²⁴ See Pillay, 2003:118.

power relations, the church could strengthen its proactive response to HIV/Aids. For the Christian church it is primarily a theological question, rooted in the rhetoric of moving from theology of hierarchy, of male headship, of power and dominion based on separateness, to a theology of community, mutuality and relationality. Therefore, responsible re-reading/s of Scripture with the view of retrieving its liberative and transformative potential is a challenge to the present-day church.

Feminist hermeneutics and the approach of African women theologians offer ways of reading Scripture that would reflect positively on women by challenging readings which perpetuate the subjugation and subordination of women. This is a necessary and vital angle from which to approach biblical texts. However, instead of competing with other methods of interpretation, it is my opinion that it should be used in an integrated way with other methods of interpretation – guarding, of course, against co-option and assimilation. Socio-rhetorical interpretation appears to offer such an interpretive framework, as it purports to bring together various methods of interpretation.

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CHRISTIANITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN (SOUTH) AFRICA: FOUR DOMINANT APPROACHES

Ernst M. Conradie¹

1. INTRODUCTION

At its General Assembly in Nairobi in 1975 the World Council of Churches coined the phrase “Towards a Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society”. This was supplemented by the so-called “Conciliar process” towards “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation” after the Vancouver General Assembly in 1983.² In this way ecumenical Christianity recognised environmental degradation alongside economic injustice and various forms of violent conflict (violence against women and children, civil war, inter-religious conflict, nuclear deterrence), as three crucial concerns on the social agenda of the church. It also recognised the multiple ways in which these three concerns are related to one another. While some may wish to question the roots of the terminology employed,³ add other items to this agenda (e.g. health) and debate the relative priority of these three concerns, it is remarkable that the Nairobi formulation has remained influential for more than three decades.

There can be little doubt that environmental concerns will remain a crucial issue for public theology in the (South) African context in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, this recognition cannot be taken for granted. In the discussion below I will briefly identify a number of factors which have to be taken into account in this regard. I will then analyse four dominant approaches within public theology⁴ in (South) Africa in response to environmental challenges.

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² For (South) African reflections on “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation”, see Asogwa 1992, Hulley 1991, Kandusi 1991, Mugambi 1987, Niwagila 1997, Olivier 1991, Richardson 1992, Sarpong 1998 and Wilson 1997.

³ See Mugambi 1987.

⁴ The focus here will therefore be on contributions to theological discourse in Southern Africa in the fields of ethics, practical theology and missiology. This excludes a corpus of material on the Bible and biblical interpretation, on an ecological reinterpretation of Christian doctrine and a few contributions on the history of Christianity.

2. THE ENVIRONMENT ON THE AGENDA OF PUBLIC THEOLOGY

2.1 The recognition of environmental concerns at the Nairobi assembly of the World Council of Churches has to be understood as an ecumenical response to the famous MIT report on *Limits to Growth* presented to the Club of Rome in 1972.⁵ Although this report was heavily debated and sometimes denounced, its basic thesis, namely that infinite economic growth is impossible on a planet with finite resources, remains both valid and deeply disturbing. There is widespread recognition that environmental degradation is a function of population (growth), increasing levels of consumption and technological impact.⁶ Nevertheless, economists and politicians (also in South Africa) all too often assume that the problem of scarcity may be resolved by ever increasing the size of the proverbial economic cake. By contrast ecumenical Christianity, in linking environmental degradation with poverty, economic injustice and inequality, has prophetically recognised the need for a just distribution of the earth's resources.

2.2 Discourse on public theology (in South Africa) necessarily has to attend to questions around the meaning of the word "public", the "publics" which it addresses and on the possibility, legitimacy, viability, nature and tasks of engaging in public theology. In the case of the inclusion of environmental concerns on the social agenda of the church, such discourse has to depart from the recognition that Christianity itself stands publicly accused as one of the root causes of the environmental crisis. This results from the impact of a famous essay by the American historian (and layperson) Lynn White on "The historical roots of our ecologic crisis" (1967). In this essay White argued that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" and that it "bears a huge burden of guilt" for environmental degradation.⁷ This critique has often been reiterated in secular discourse. There are many who accept the validity of the argument intuitively, especially since those Western countries where Christianity has traditionally been dominant are also countries typically accused of causing environmental degradation. It is not necessary to debate the validity of this thesis

⁵ See Meadows *et al.* (1972). In a subsequent report entitled *Beyond limits to growth*, Meadows and others (1992) maintain that sustained economic growth cannot but have disastrous environmental consequences in the longer term.

⁶ This is expressed in the following formula: $E = P$ (population) \times A (Affluence) \times T (Technological impact). See Martin-Schramm (1997) for an excellent discussion in this regard. The implication of this formula is that the global population of 6.4 billion (2006) simply cannot aspire to the present standards of affluence enjoyed by many middle-class citizens in the North and by the elite in countries of the South. This is due to the basic scarcity of resources and the fact that Western affluence was built on resources and labour from its colonies and the availability of relatively cheap forms of energy, especially from fossil fuels.

⁷ See White (1967:1205, 1207).

here.⁸ It is at least important to note that the vibrant Christian discourse on ecological theology of the last three decades has to a significant extent been sparked off by the felt need for a response to such criticisms.

2.3 It probably is an understatement to observe that the environment is not a dominant concern in either the public imagination or on the agenda of churches in South Africa – nor in the wider African context.⁹ In 1991 the South African sociologist Jacklyn Cock published a report entitled *Towards the greening of the church in South Africa*. In this report she investigated the environmental awareness amongst church leaders and in official church publications and resolutions on the environment. She concluded that there is a “blind spot” and a “deep silence” within the Christian church in South Africa on environmental issues. By contrast, Cock’s interviews with environmental activists reveal a striking absence of any religious affiliation!¹⁰ While there have been several significant developments since 1991 in terms of Christian earthkeeping projects, consultations and conferences, and contributions to a Christian ecological theology, environmental concerns are typically overshadowed by concerns over issues such as unemployment, poverty, food security, rape and domestic violence, crime and corruption, gangsterism and drugs, and, especially, HIV/AIDS. Nevertheless, the recognition that these agendas are deeply intertwined with one another (as indicated in the motto of “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation”) is slowly emerging in both the popular imagination and in ecclesial discourse.

2.4 In order to raise a public awareness around environmental concerns in countries such as South Africa,¹¹ it is crucial to grasp that the victims of socio-

⁸ There is a discussion of Lynn White’s thesis in almost every major work in ecological theology. See Chapter 6 of my guide to further research in ecological theology (Conradie, 2006).

⁹ See, for example, Gitau’s survey of Christian attitudes towards environmental concerns in Central Kenya (Gitau, 2000:79-91) and Chapter 5 of Golo’s study on Ghana (2006).

¹⁰ In a subsequent contribution Cock (1994) argued that the church in South Africa can play a crucial role in raising an environmental awareness. She mentions the following reasons in this regard: a) The church in South Africa has an organised space at the grassroots level to promote mass environmental awareness, b) it has the necessary leadership for moral transformation, and c) a holistic, ecological vision has deep roots in the Christian tradition. The church also has important resources in terms of staff, institutions, agencies, networks, buildings, infrastructure, etc. to address environmental challenges effectively. On this basis Cock has called for a “rainbow alliance” in which nature conservationists (green), environmental organisations focusing on justice issues (the so-called “brown” agenda), labour movements (red), and religious groups (purple) should work together to ensure that life can flourish on this blue planet.

¹¹ See my essay on “How can we help to raise an environmental awareness in the South African context?” (Conradie, 2003). Obeng (1999) calls for churches (in Nigeria) to become “creation awareness centres”.

economic injustices are typically also victims of environmental degradation. These include various groups of marginalised people on the economic periphery:¹² indigenous peoples (who often become environmental refugees), women, children, the poor, mine workers, factory workers, farm workers and people of colour. The poor and marginalised are driven to live in physical conditions which are of a bad environmental quality (and which are therefore “open” for occupation). The poorest often live (and work!) on urban waste dumps. Others accept employment in dreadful environmental conditions with grave risks to their health, for example through exposure to toxic gases and pesticides. The sad irony is that most of the problems which the poor experience on a daily basis are indeed environmental problems which are caused elsewhere, are seldom recognised as such and are subsequently not prioritised.¹³ Environmental injustices and economic injustices reinforce one another and are aggravated by practices such as exploitative economic policies, racial, ethnic and religious polarisation, gender discrimination and class inequalities.

3. FOUR DOMINANT APPROACHES TO ADDRESS ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS IN (SOUTH) AFRICA

Since 1991 there has been a steady stream of Christian contributions to ecological theology emerging from within the Southern African context. These contributions have typically reflected on Christian earthkeeping projects or have provided some stimulus to such projects. It is not possible to provide a full review of such contributions here.¹⁴ Instead, I suggest that one may identify especially four approaches that are typically followed by Christians engaged in theological reflection on earthkeeping in Southern Africa. These approaches should be regarded as “models” or “ideal types” which help to identify some core characteristics, but which may offer a distorted description of particular contributions. There may therefore be contributions to theological reflection on Christian earthkeeping which portray features of more than one of these approaches. There are also other, less dominant approaches which may be

¹² For the distinction between the economic centre and the economic periphery, with explicit reference to the impact of both centre and periphery on the environment, see Nürnberg (1987, 1999).

¹³ See the apt title of the essay by Ott (2002), “I am too poor to care for nature” written from within the context of Christianity in Malawi.

¹⁴ See the annotated bibliography compiled by Conradie and Warmback (2002). See especially the thorough overview of ecclesial responses to environmental concerns in South Africa in Warmback (2006:54f.). Warmback discusses the role of the South African Council of Churches, denominational statements and pastoral letters, various important conferences, the role of earthkeeping organisations, ecumenical networks and inter-faith initiatives.

identified.¹⁵ Since I will also draw examples from other African countries and, although the distinctness of the South African context should be recognised, the analysis may well apply to such countries as well. In fact, the analysis may also be relevant in a number of other geographical contexts. It may also be applicable to religious traditions other than Christianity but, given the rather scant evidence in terms of published material, this would be difficult to establish.

3.1 Nature conservation: the stewardship of resources

Some Christian contributions towards earthkeeping focus on the need for nature conservation and wilderness preservation. They seek to protect selected areas of land against further urban, industrial and agricultural “development”. They typically focus on issues such as wildlife, endangered species, biodiversity, ecotourism, and the psychological and spiritual value of spending time in nature “out there”. They seek to foster amongst Christians a love for (unspoilt) nature. According to this approach the underlying cause of environmental degradation is population growth that leads to urban sprawl, commercial agriculture, developments, species loss, desertification, soil erosion, over-fishing and so forth.

In South Africa this approach builds on the country’s sustained track record of nature conservation, particularly in terms of the management of game parks, wilderness areas and pristine beaches, especially for relatively affluent tourists.¹⁶ Until 1994 this approach underplayed the impact of the establishment of such game reserves on the livelihood of the local population. The environmental legacy of apartheid, especially in rural areas (leading to local forms of over-population in bantustans, deforestation and soil erosion) should especially be confronted in this

¹⁵ A few comments are necessary in this regard: 1) There are several strands of ecofeminism present in the Southern African context. Some of these are influenced by Western forms of feminism, while others draw inspiration from African women’s theology. In this analysis I have grouped such contributions under the quest for environmental justice. 2) The form of creation spirituality which is inspired by Roman Catholic authors such as Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry and (formerly) Matthew Fox is also evident in South Africa (see Edwards, 1994; Nolan, 1992; and various unpublished sources). This movement may well grow in South Africa in years to come. 3) Leonardo Boff’s ecological version of Latin American liberation theology has influenced the work of some (South) African authors. 4) The impact of diverse Protestant traditions (including Moltmann’s theology) may be identified in numerous academic contributions in the South African context. Some of these resonate with calls for responsible stewardship. 5) Given the functioning of information networks, it is to be expected that (South) African contributions will draw insights from the full range of contemporary ecological theologies emerging from elsewhere in the world.

¹⁶ See the contribution by Field (1999) on the many pitfalls around ecotourism.

regard.¹⁷ Moreover, the management of urban land and farm land, which is typically emphasised in this approach, has been ambiguous – while some areas have been managed in a sustainable way, others have become severely degraded. This approach has resulted in negative perceptions about environmental concerns, especially amongst urban blacks. Accordingly, the environment is seen as a concern for a leisured middle class who would like to preserve the environment for purely aesthetic reasons and who seem more concerned about wildlife than about the welfare of other human beings.¹⁸ This does not address the needs of the urban poor who live in squalid conditions with little hope of visiting “nature out there” on a regular basis.

This approach is typically supported in Christian discourse through a strong emphasis on the responsible stewardship of natural resources. The image of the steward has been especially attractive amongst Reformed and evangelical Christians, while notions of priestly service may also be found amongst Catholics and Anglicans. As is the case elsewhere, this is probably the dominant approach towards earthkeeping within a Christian context in Southern Africa.¹⁹ Human beings are portrayed as occupying a unique position within ecosystems. Humans alone are created in the image of God; they are powerful but sometimes abusive managers of the land and are called to exercise their responsibility with wisdom and restraint. This call is supported through an exegesis of texts such as Genesis 1:27-28, Genesis 2:15 and Psalm 8. The ecological wisdom embedded in the Bible and the Christian faith is thus emphasised. The problem is not the nature of the

¹⁷ On the environmental legacy of apartheid, see Cock & Koch (1991), Durning (1990), and Ramphele & McDowell (1991).

¹⁸ In 1991 Frank Chikane, the former general secretary of the South African Council of Churches, expressed a similar scepticism regarding the priority of the environment on the social agenda of the church:

To most of us who come from countries which are ravaged by senseless wars, characterized by gross violations of human rights and by massive poverty and unemployment, the introduction of the item of the integrity of creation on our agenda seemed like a conspiracy by those who benefit out of our poverty and oppression, to divert and diversify our struggle for justice in our situations. It seemed like some people wanted to keep us busy with seemingly abstract concerns about the misuse of biotechnology rather than the real issues of land dispossession and racism, sexism, economic exploitation (classism), political oppression, and denial of the right of religious freedom and the use of religion as an instrument of oppression (in Niles, 1992:36).

¹⁹ Most of the contributions in Reformed literature in South Africa focus on a theology of stewardship. See, for example, Du Plessis (1988), Engelbrecht (1988) and Robinson (1991, 1993). For contributions from elsewhere in Africa which adopt the imagery of stewardship, see Akhong'o (1994), Chakanza (2002), Gecaga (1999) and Gitau (2000:104-106, 143f.).

divine command, but a lack of human obedience to it. The environmental critique of the Bible and the Christian faith (in addition to its interpretation) is therefore misplaced.

This approach to earthkeeping has considerable strengths.²⁰ One of the core elements of the metaphor of stewardship is its emphasis on human responsibility. Another one of the strengths is related to the recognition that God acts in the world in and through human (and other forms of) agency. Nevertheless, in Christian ecological theology the metaphor of stewardship has been the subject of an ongoing controversy. There is no need to discuss the many criticisms which have been raised against the notion of stewardship here.²¹ It should be noted that this approach assumes a strong form of anthropocentrism, that its ethos is literally conservative (protecting ecosystems) and that its rhetoric is aimed at those in positions of relative power and authority. In Southern Africa it is difficult to escape from the impression that this approach continues to operate within a colonial paradigm where the emphasis is on proper management on the basis of prior subjugation.

3.2 Restoring the ancestral land

There are a number of other contributions which focus on the living conditions of impoverished rural communities in Africa. Here problems around deforestation, overgrazing, soil erosion, desertification and the depletion of water resources are addressed. The emphasis is on water harvesting, sustainable agriculture and tree-planting projects – for firewood, building and fencing material, fruit supplies, animal fodder, medicinal purposes, restoring the water table and the symbolic

²⁰ In an article entitled “Stewards of shalom”, South African theologian David Field (2002:383-384) identifies the following strengths of the notion of stewardship: 1) It emphasises that the earth belongs to God and not to human beings and thus human beings do not have the right to use and abuse the earth as they please. 2) It emphasises that human beings are responsible for the way in which they use the earth and its inhabitants. 3) It emphasises that humanity is commissioned to protect, care for and promote the flourishing of the non-human creation. (4) It emphasises the dignity and value of human persons as representatives of God in creation. The symbol has thus been particularly attractive to those who are disempowered and oppressed by the dominant political and economic order. 5) The model for the steward is the self-sacrificial life and death of Christ and hence stewardship involves a lifestyle of sacrifice on behalf of both fellow human beings and the non-human creation.

²¹ See my review of the debate in Conradie (2000, 2005:202-217, 2006). See also the essays by Chingota (2002), who contrasts the images of steward, partner and priest, and calls for a theology of partnership with nature, and by Getui (1996), who explores the exclusion of women from priesthood and the impact of that on Christian earthkeeping.

value of planting hardwood species for coming generations.²² This is done through a wide range of community development projects under local leadership, sometimes supported financially from external sources.

The pathos of this approach is expressed through a sometimes romanticised longing for pre-colonial times, for rural communities in Africa which are unspoilt by the forces of Westernisation, urbanisation, industrialisation and consumerist greed.²³ The degradation of ancestral land is regarded as the result of colonial conquest, while the impact of sustained population growth tends to be underplayed.²⁴

²² See Gitau (2000:98-99) for a similar list of purposes of tree-planting projects.

²³ See the following extract from Daneel (1994:442):

The speeches of spirit mediums, chiefs, councillors and district administrators during our tree planting campaigns reflect a growing awareness of the urgency of responsible earthkeeping. The general assumption of Shona philosophy that religion and ecology are integrally related features prominently throughout. It is emphasized that the relationship between the living and the dead (the ancestors), between this world and God, between man, nature and the Unseen, has a direct bearing on the state of our environment and on climatic and agricultural conditions.

Particularly in the speeches of the chiefs the theme of the barren earth keeps recurring, reflecting a growing awareness of the seriousness of environmental degradation. During the planting ceremonies in the Gutu district in 1988 Chief Gutu expressed concern about the absence of many species of wild life formerly found on his lands. He complained about the chopping down of the densely wooded holy groves of the ancestors. As a result, he insisted, one could no longer hear the drumbeat of the spirit of Mount Jerimanda at the onset of the rains - formerly a sign of the country's well-being.

In such comments one detects a note of desperation, almost of fatalism in the face of a situation virtually beyond repair. Lament finds comfort in a nostalgic return to the past of abundance. There is a yearning for the thickly wooded forests where the ancestral drums heralded the onset of the good rains; the time when Mwari, the Shona creator god, was apparently satisfied with his people and showed his approval of their observance of ancient custom by sending them plentiful rains.

²⁴ For exceptions, see the essay by Chakanza (2002) on Malawi (where population growth is indeed a serious concern) and Mwikamba 2000:33-36. Concerns over population issues, following the "Limits to growth" debate in the 1970s, have been highly controversial in the African context (see Kinoti, 2002 and Mugambi, 2001:49). This responds to the explicit or implicit instruction from affluent countries that the impoverished countries of the "Third World" carry a special responsibility to curb their ruinous birth rates. In response, it has often been argued that the most serious environmental problems are caused by the gluttonous consumption of those in the affluent economic centres. Moreover, while European countries have "exported" their "excess" population to their former colonies, there are case studies which indicate that population growth in African countries coincided with the improved management of land. In South Africa the launching of birth control programmes primarily aimed at

Such an approach is typically supported through a retrieval of the ecological wisdom in traditional African culture and religion.²⁵ In virtually all such contributions the harmonious relationship of humanity and nature in pre-industrial cultures is praised and celebrated in songs and legends. There is a sense of wonder at the fecundity of life, for the land and all the creatures that live from it, for the cycles of the seasons. There is an almost overwhelming emphasis on notions of interrelatedness, mutual dependence, reciprocity, ecological balance, wholeness, the integrated web of life and, especially, community. The world exists as an intricate balance of parts. Human beings must recognise and strive to maintain this cosmic balance. Everything, from hunting to healing, is a recognition and affirmation of the sacredness of life. Where the ecological balance and the ancestral world are disturbed, it leads to suffering for human communities and other creatures. In this vein Harvey Sindima (Malawi) speaks of the bondedness, sacredness and fecundity of the “community of life”,²⁶ Emanuel Asante (Ghana) suggests the ecological category of pan-vitalism,²⁷ Eugene Wangiri (Kenya) calls for an *urumwe* spirituality which sees God’s presence in creation,²⁸ while Gabriel Setiloane (South Africa) celebrates an African biocentric theology and ethos.²⁹

underprivileged women has left a legacy of deep suspicion among the African population. This suspicion builds on the established patriarchal system that values large families. See Ackermann & Joyner (1996:122).

²⁵ See especially the work by Samson Gitau 2000, drawing on the indigenous ecological wisdom of the Kikuyu and Maasai, but also reflecting on the challenges for African Christianity. See also the many contributions by Daneel (especially 1999) for a detailed engagement with theological questions emerging from earthkeeping praxis. For other contributions drawing on the ecological wisdom of African traditional culture and religion, see Asante (1985) on Ghana; Berhane-Selassie (1994) on Ethiopia; Kalugila (2001) on the Kagera region in Kenya; Kyomo (2001); Magesa (1997); Nyajeka (1996) on Zimbabwe; Ongong’ a (1999); Setiloane (1995) on South Africa; Sindima (1990) on Malawi; Wangiri (1999) on Kenya; and Zvanaka (1994) on Zimbabwe.

²⁶ Sindima (1989:537f.) says, “The African idea of community refers to bondedness; the act of sharing and living in the one common symbol – life – which enables people to live in communion and communication with each other and nature. Living in communication allows stories or life experiences of others to become one’s own”.

²⁷ Asante (1985:290) says, “Reality is inseparable. The African is kin to all creatures – gods, spirits and nature ... The whole of nature must be understood as sacred because it derives its being from the Supreme Being who is the Creator-Animator of the universe”.

²⁸ The concept of *urumwe* is based on notions of harmony and oneness. Wangiri (1999:72) says, “Harmony is therefore life. Oneness and harmony thus make up *urumwe* which is a harmonious existence of entities whose being is being-together-with-others”. An *urumwe* spirituality resists a deist separation between God and the world. According to Wangiri (1999:88): “In living *urumwe*, we will experience God everywhere. We will listen to God’s music in the birds, a brook and the clatter of leaves. We will experience God’s love as the wind caresses us and in the loving touch of other human beings. We

This approach is epitomised by a number of significant earthkeeping projects. Here theological reflection typically follows from an involvement in (Christian) earthkeeping.³⁰ The literature on such projects reveals a warm appreciation for the work which is done in such projects – albeit with the acknowledgement of problems surrounding project management and financial sustainability. Since such projects typically are rural projects, it raises the question why these projects have seldom been replicated in urban contexts in Africa.³¹ How can such projects come to terms with the pervasive influence of the forces of globalisation, urbanisation and consumerism within urban Africa? How can one resist new forms of colonialism without romanticising and longing back for pre-colonial times?

The strength of this approach is clearly its ability to draw on traditional ecological wisdom from within the African context. From a Christian theological perspective one also has to address questions about the continuity and discontinuity between African traditional religion and culture and the message of Christianity.³² There is a tendency in some of the literature to deal with traditional ecological wisdom extensively and to add a final section on Christianity without much attempt to explore the differences in this regard. Nevertheless, there are interesting examples of African reflections on forms of worship, the liturgy and the sacraments that have emerged from within this approach.³³

will smell God in the scent of flowers. All this will bring the realization that God loves us and provides for us. It will give us consolation and reduce the loneliness which many of us are subject to”.

²⁹ Setiloane (1995:52f.) says, “We Africans sincerely believe that by taking into its fabric these African interpretations and views about the universe, creation and nature, the Christian understanding is enriched rather than impoverished and the image of God becomes more worthy, inspiring greater wonder, love and praise”.

³⁰ See especially the contributions by Mukusya (2001) on the Utooni community projects in Kenya and the many contributions by Daneel (especially, 1999) on the work of ZIRRCO in Zimbabwe. See also the contributions of Clobus (1991) on Ghana; Conradie *et al.* (2001) on various South African earthkeeping projects; Gitau (2000) on various case studies from Kenya; Mpanya (1991) on the Congo; and Olivier (1998, 2002) on the Goldfields Faith and Earthkeeping project in South Africa, as well as the essays by Kabugumila on Tanzania, Mukushe on Kenya and Toh on Cameroon in Mugambi & Vähäkangas (2001).

³¹ See my review of Daneel’s work (Conradie, 2002). For an explicit focus on environmental challenges in African cities, see Samita (2002). For a few urban case studies from Kenya, see Gitau (2000:91-99).

³² Gitau’s study is a welcome exception. He carefully compares traditional Kikuyu and Masai conceptions with Christian teachings on God, creation, providence, humanity and nature (see Gitau, 2000:110-138).

³³ For literature in this regard, see especially the contributions by Daneel (1991, 1994, 1999, 2000).

3.3 Sustainable development: in search of a rich blessing

Discourse on sustainable development is nowadays typically found in secular literature. It is the dominant language adopted by entrepreneurs, industry leaders and politicians who are concerned about environmental degradation. In South Africa it is epitomised through government initiatives around the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and especially by the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg in 2002. According to this approach, given the increase in human population, higher consumption patterns and the prevalence of poverty in Africa, the only way forward is through economic growth, job creation and development. The issue of economic scarcity can only be addressed through the more efficient extraction of sufficient resources. However, the environmental impact of economic activities has to be acknowledged. Development needs to become more sustainable. Environmental degradation can best be overcome through better education and training, technological sophistication, the availability of capital and more efficient management systems.

This approach builds on a long legacy of development discourse in the aftermath of World War II. To put the debate in proverbial terms: development discourse is based on the assumption that it is better to teach a person how to fish than to give him (or her) a fish to eat. The problem is that indigenous knowledge has been lost and must be retrieved through education and training in innovative ways. This requires financial resources in order to obtain a fishing rod and other gear. Once this is in place, one needs to ensure access to the fishing waters (in the river or lake) and fishing permits amidst other powerful role players and international regulations.³⁴ Then, once all of this has been seen to, one may be confronted with the problem of overfishing: the fish that are caught have become smaller and smaller.

It is this recognition of environmental caveats to development that has prompted calls for sustainable development. The United Nations' Commission of Environment and Development (chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland), in its report *Our Common Future* (1987), adopted the following widely used definition of sustainable development:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

³⁴ There is, for example, a vibrant discussion in Christian theology on the environmental impact of Structural Adjustment Programmes in Africa. See especially Balleis (1992), MacGarry (1993, 1995), Owens (on Malawi) (1997) and Sowunmi (1994).

1. The concept of “needs”, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
2. The idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.³⁵

The value of the notion of sustainable development is that it serves as an important corrective against expansionist notions of economic growth. The notion of sustainable development is often criticised in theological literature³⁶ as an attempt at the greening of global capitalism, as a euphemism used by entrepreneurs for “business as usual”, namely an emphasis on economic growth, qualified by a few environmental cautions. When faced with a choice between development and a sustainable environment, the interests of developers and entrepreneurs (who can often provide short-term economic gain in terms of employment) regularly seem to be given priority. Others regard sustainable development as an oxymoron which can only lead to confusion:³⁷ Since development typically assumes economic growth (relying on an increasing use of natural resources) and since infinite economic growth is impossible on a finite planet, sustainable development has to be seen as a contradiction in terms. Moreover, several Christian critics have argued that such “development” has failed to bridge the gap between the affluent in the centres of economic power and the impoverished on the economic periphery. In response to such criticisms, it may be possible to redefine the notion of sustainable development.³⁸ However, such redescriptions cannot escape from the legacy of discourse on the notion of “development”. As long as there remains confusion on the aims and methods of development, it would not be sufficient to add the adjective “sustainability” in this regard.

It is interesting to note that there is very little overt support for sustainable development in academic literature in the field of Christian theology. Nevertheless,

³⁵ In the National Environmental Management Act (107 of 1998), the South African government adopted a similar definition of sustainable development, i.e. “development that meets the needs of the present while not compromising the needs of future generations”.

³⁶ For a discussion of the notion of sustainable development in Christian literature in Africa, see Antonio (1994), Arigbebe (1997), Conradie (2002), De Gruchy (2002), Esteva (1997), Field (1998), Kamaara (2002), Kritzinger (1991, 1994) and Mtetwa (2002).

³⁷ See Boff (1997:67).

³⁸ The revised World Conservation Strategy, for example, described sustainable development as “improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems”. See its report, *Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living* (Gland, Switzerland: International Union for the Conservation of Nature, 1991).

the “upward social mobility” of consumer culture is conveyed in religious terms through the gospel of prosperity, found especially in Pentecostal circles, but also amongst African Indigenous Churches. The message is that church affiliation and discipline will bring with it material blessings, here and now. This provides religious legitimisation for the lifestyles of the affluent and the hope for survival³⁹ and some prosperity for the poor. It should be noted that there is a structural similarity between the call for development to be sustainable and the ecclesial conditions for material blessing. For the (urban) poor some form of frugality (avoiding alcohol, gambling, cash loans and luxuries), together with the psychological and social stability provided by a religious sense of belonging may indeed yield relative prosperity.⁴⁰

3.4 The quest for environmental justice

Calls for environmental justice respond to the impact that environmental degradation has on people. There is concern over the working conditions of people in factories, mines, on farms and in offices. The living conditions of the urban poor are examined in terms of the health hazards created by air pollution (from nearby industries, vehicles or the burning of coal); the impact of toxic waste (generated by nearby industries); unsafe drinking water; noise pollution (from airports and highways); overcrowding (a localised form of over-population); a lack of basic infrastructure, sanitation and hygiene; a high incidence of contagious diseases; inadequate waste disposal; the visual ugliness of smelling and rotting garbage in many poor neighbourhoods; regular floodings or landslides; deforestation following the cutting down of trees in neighbourhoods for firewood and the struggle for political control over increasingly scarce resources.⁴¹ The focus is therefore on the victims of environmental degradation: the poor, women,⁴²

³⁹ “Survival” is an important motif in many earlier contributions to an ecological theology. While these contributions speculated on the question whether (human) life on earth will survive, a new emphasis on survival is beginning to emerge, that is, how to survive in a life-threatening (economic) system (see e.g. Antonio (1994), Getui (1993)). An emphasis on “survival” may challenge an altruistic environmental ethos (while the rich may see beauty and grace in the movement of an animal, the poor may regard it as a source of food). The lives of many people in South Africa are indeed accurately depicted as a basic struggle for survival. Strangely, even the affluent often slip into a mode of “survival” by trying to protect what they have at all costs – amidst the real threats to life, property and employment security.

⁴⁰ See the excellent South African contribution on personal lifestyle and finances, “Making ends meet”, by Nürnberger (1995). Nürnberger’s analysis addresses the different income groups and takes environmental considerations into account explicitly.

⁴¹ See the essays by Lawson (1991) on South African cities and by Samita (2002) on Nairobi.

⁴² The impact of environmental degradation on the plight of women in Africa has been well documented in a number of essays. See Ackermann on South Africa (1997),

children, the elderly, people of colour and refugees. The concern over the victims of environmental injustices at a micro level is often coupled with a critique of the macro-economic roots of environmental degradation.⁴³ The root cause of environmental degradation is related to neo-liberal capitalism, to the exploitative and wasteful consumption of natural resources and to the excesses of consumer culture.

In general, the struggle for environmental justice seeks to challenge the abuse of power that results in a situation where poor people have to suffer the effects of environmental damage caused by the greed of others.⁴⁴ "Environmental racism" refers to ways in which people of colour typically suffer more because of environmental degradation than others.⁴⁵ The term "ecofeminism" suggests that the logic of patriarchal oppression is similar and structurally related to the abuse of ecosystems for human interests.⁴⁶ Environmental degradation is therefore not a separate concern from poverty, deprivation and economic exploitation, but often a manifestation of it. This calls for an understanding of the interconnectedness of the different manifestations of violence (whether political, military, industrial, domestic, gendered, racial, ethnic, or structural). The rhetoric that is used here would clearly be attractive within the context of contemporary post-colonial discourse.

Environmental justice or "ecojustice"⁴⁷ has become a dominant theme in ecumenical discourse on the environment. Such discourse has been adopted in a substantial corpus of South African contributions to ecological theology. This is perhaps best expressed in the discussion document, "The land is crying for justice", produced by the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa in preparation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002.⁴⁸ It explains the notion of environmental justice in the following words:

Ackermann and Joyner (1996), Getui (2000), Hinga on the Agikuyu in Kenya (1996), Kabugumila on Tanzania (2001), Moyo on Lake Chilwa in Malawi (2002), Mvududu on Zimbabwe (1996) and Phiri on the Chisumphi cult in Malawi (1996).

⁴³ For such a critique in Christian literature with a specific environmental focus, see especially the contributions by De Gruchy (2002), Mugambi (2001, 2002) and Nürnberger (1987, 1999). See also the document "The Oikos journey", produced by the Diakonia Council of Churches.

⁴⁴ Derived from the information brochure of the Environmental Justice Networking Forum.

⁴⁵ See, especially, Nolan (2002).

⁴⁶ For a systematic exposition from the perspective of African women's theology, see Getui (1996), Hinga (1996), Ndyabahika (1996) and Nyajeka (1996).

⁴⁷ This term was coined by William Gibson (1985, 1996) and popularised by Dieter Hessel (1992, 1996).

⁴⁸ See Conradie, Mtetwa & Warmback, 2002. For other references to ecojustice, see also Conradie & Field (2000), Field (1997), Golo (2006) and Warmback (1999).

Concerned citizens all over the world have come to the conclusion that the current economic dispensation is exploiting people and the biophysical environment alike. It is indeed crucial to comprehend the link between economic injustice and environmental destruction. The struggle for environmental justice seeks to challenge the abuse of power that results in the situation that marginalised people have to suffer the effects of environmental damage caused by the greed of others, especially the powerful. It seems clear to us that the present economic order perpetuates the unequal access to natural resources and contributes towards environmental destruction.

Although calls for environmental justice typically draw on core Christian themes, the rhetoric is predominantly one that seeks to express Christian convictions within the public sphere. Soteriological concepts such as liberation, healing, reconciliation and reconstruction may be used and applied to human communities and the larger community of life,⁴⁹ but the dominant themes are economic and restorative justice, human rights, including environmental rights (for humans) and the formation of a human rights culture. The values which are promoted include ecological wholeness and inter-relatedness, justice and reciprocity. While this public mode of discourse is entirely appropriate, there may be a tendency in calls for environmental justice towards an ethical reductionism, where Christianity is reduced to its moral vision. It is also important to note that calls for environmental justice typically have an anthropocentric logic in that they are interested in the impact of environmental degradation on human communities.⁵⁰ Calls for ecojustice may, but do not necessarily, include a concern for the non-human (natural) environment.

4. CONCLUSION: CURRENT FERMENTATION

The conflicting variety of approaches to theological reflection on Christian earthkeeping has created a climate of fermentation. In the context of community-based organisations, non-governmental organisations and faith-based organisations there is an ongoing quest for a new vision of a sustainable society within which the older contrast between a capitalist and a socialist economic order (which are both based on industrial growth) can be transcended. The slogan which is often heard in the context of civil society (e.g. at the World Social Forum) is “Another

⁴⁹ For literature in this regard, see the following: on liberation, Daneel (1991, 1995); on healing, Ackermann (1997), Daneel (1992) and Obeng (1999), and on reconstruction, Mugambi (1995) and Niwagila (1997).

⁵⁰ Nash (1996:10) warns that this term may be narrowed to an anthropocentric concept which expresses concern only for the environmental dimensions of intra-human justice.

world is possible". Within this context there are numerous local projects in which one may find experimentation with more sustainable practices in a wide variety of areas. There is a wide range of such projects. In relatively affluent contexts there are projects on recycling, greening church gardens and graveyards, beautifying streets and degraded local spots, developing Christian eco-villages⁵¹ (with lower environmental impact in terms of energy usage), environmental audits, animal protection, wildlife conservation, family and group excursions to nature conservation areas, activist and resistance movements responding to emerging environmental threats and so forth. In impoverished contexts, such projects are often closely related to community upliftment, (sustainable) development, food security, food sovereignty, sustainable agriculture, permaculture, water harvesting, clean-ups, job creation projects, developing forms of appropriate technology,⁵² and, especially, tree planting.⁵³ In many contexts environmental concerns are expressed in the form of prophetic witness and forms of resistance against environmental threats and a wide range of economic and environmental injustices. It is not yet clear what may emerge from such fermentation. Unless these local projects can be translated into a viable and attractive economic vision they will remain marginalised.

In the context of ecumenical Christianity the notion of "sustainable community" instead of "sustainable development" has gained some acknowledgement in recent years.⁵⁴ This concept is often backed with a theological orientation on the whole household of God (*oikos*), which has become for some a new theological root metaphor. The power of this metaphor lies in its ability to integrate especially three core ecumenical themes on the basis of the Greek word *oikos* (household) – which forms the etymological root of the quests for economic justice (the *nomoi* or regulations within the household), ecological sustainability (the *logos* or underlying principles of the household) and ecumenical fellowship (*oikoumene* – participating as members of the whole household of God). It is often argued that the management of the house (economy) should follow from the underlying principles or logic of the household (ecology). In my view discourse on the whole household of God is best understood within the context of the whole work of God (creation, providence, redemption, completion), which has traditionally been described as the "economy of the triune God" (*oikonomia tou theou*), from which the term "economic trinity" has also been derived. Christian communities live on the basis of the conviction that the whole household (*oikos*) belongs to God and has to

⁵¹ See Hudson (2002).

⁵² See the critique of this concept in Mugambi (2001:40-42).

⁵³ There are many contributions which reflect on the significance of such projects. In addition to ones already quoted above, see also Getui (2000).

⁵⁴ On the notion of "sustainable community", see especially Wellman (2001). For a critical analysis of this notion, see Conradie (2000, 2002).

answer to God's economy. It should be noted that such ecumenical discourse has been employed in South Africa as yet in only a few contributions of a more academic nature.⁵⁵

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⁵⁵ On the notion of the household of God (*oikos*) as a theological root metaphor, see Conradie (2000, 2005, 2006), as well as the doctoral thesis by Warmback (2006).

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BECOMING A HUMAN BEING IN SOLIDARITY: CONFRONTING NEO-LIBERAL DESTRUCTION – TOWARDS LIBERATION FROM TRAUMATISATION, GREED, FEAR AND STRESS IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE¹

Ulrich Duchrow²

INTRODUCTION

It is a great honour and joy for me to be able to introduce a project on a vital theme that a team of psychologists, economists and theologians, including myself, are working on. We have held five seminars between 2003 and 2005 on the theme in the title of the address at the University of Heidelberg and have summarised the results of these in a book that was published in German in 2006.³

The issue that we address in this book and in the seminars that led up to it is the following: the majority of the world's population has had enough of *globalised neo-liberal capitalism*. Millions die from its excesses yearly – between 30 and 40 million people. The earth is also dying – plants and animals die and become extinct; air and water are polluted beyond use. A small number of economists, political scientists and others have worked out clear alternatives to this situation. However,

¹ Address delivered at the Seventh International Conference on the Social Psychology of Liberation, University of Costa Rica, Guanacaste Campus, Costa Rica on 18 November 2005.

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³ The authors of the book are Reinhold Bianchi, Vincenzo Petracca and myself from Germany, René Krüger from Argentina and, from Costa Rica, Germán Gutiérrez, who collaborated for part of the process. The German title of the publication is: *Solidarisch Mensch werden. Psychische und soziale Destruktion im Neoliberalismus – Wege zu ihrer Überwindung* (Hamburg/Oberursel: VSA/Publik-Forum). Translated literally, it means: “Becoming a Human Being in Solidarity. Psychological and Social Destruction in Neoliberalism – Ways to Overcome it”.

these alternatives are not being implemented. Political institutions often are either blackmailed or co-opted and corrupted by the economic and financial elites, and their helpers are helpless to prevent this from happening. In any case, with very few exceptions, these role players do not represent the interests of the majority of their constituents, but rather serve the interests of big owners of capital through their legal and security apparatus. Democracy has become a farce.

It has been said that hope for solving this problem lies in the *social movements* and this is true. In addition to the old trade unions, people are rising up, are protesting, resisting, and working on alternatives in every corner of the world. They are even achieving partial victories. But the globally, economically powerful (traditionally called the bourgeoisie) always manage to find new ways to further their own interests. For example, it was possible to stop the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) with the aid of social movements and several governments. The WTO, who wanted to introduce new liberalisation programmes, has also been prevented from doing so since its meeting in Seattle in 1999. However, the USA and the EU are now forcing bilateral trade agreements upon their individual victims in the south, which are more devastating for the countries concerned than the original agreements that were planned but that could not be accomplished multilaterally. The only explanation for this is that an insufficient number of people offer resistance or support alternatives to it. The counter-forces “from below” are apparently still too weak.

So, one question that follows is: why do more people not rise up and join those who are struggling in solidarity for human life and the earth? Is the majority of humankind not dramatically affected by the current economic, social and ecological catastrophe? Consternation and information about the causes of this catastrophe and the ways out of it are apparently not enough to lead to decisive action. There exists a longstanding debate on the question whether capitalism will collapse owing to the crises produced by itself, necessarily and systematically. Theoreticians such as Gramsci have long since observed that a strategy for changing structures in societies must take into account both subjective and objective conditions that exist in those societies. But then the greatest riddle appears: how is this supposed to happen? How do people become strong, individually and collectively, as subjects?

However, even this question still is too general. It belongs to the essence of capitalism that it divides people. At the outset capitalism, to put it rather bluntly, divides people into winners and losers. This is evident with regard to those who are “really down” and those who are “on top”. But it also divides those groups that we used to call the middle classes, again into winners and losers. And they (the middle classes) are divided not only with respect to their material existence. On the contrary, neo-liberalism also is responsible for specific forms of psychological

destruction within these various groups. One cannot simply speak of “people” when one wants to concretely investigate the detrimental psychological effects of neo-liberalism and how it can be overcome so that liberation towards a common life in action and solidarity becomes possible. Rather, one must take into consideration the various specific human groups in the neo-liberal context with of all of its antagonisms and in its specific material and psychological situation.

This is the methodological heart of our book *Solidarisch Mensch werden*: it tries to understand from “below” the material, social, societal and psychological effects of neo-liberalism. At the same time, it explores and tests initiatives that may lead to emancipation from these effects. This is meant in a specific, non-individual therapeutic sense. Naturally, it does make sense to give psychoanalytic treatment to individuals made psychologically ill by neo-liberalism – if that is possible without at the same time healing society. However, the issue we address is expressly politically intended, that is, with reference to social, economic and political life, because the healing and liberation of individuals can only take place from a perspective of common healing and liberation. Here we find a central future problem, namely: how will the middle classes choose between the options open to them? In the face of the intensified crisis of neo-liberalism, will the middle classes again turn to authoritarian or fascist options, as in the time following 1929 in Germany or during the period of the dictatorships in Latin America? Or will they choose to join the underclass, to work towards overcoming the causes of the crisis, as has partially been the case in Argentina recently? This is a choice that faces middle-class churches as well – at least in Europe. A particular obstacle in this regard is the isolation of people, which is inherent in neo-liberal capitalism. According to the latter’s basic ideology, people are competing individuals and human nature is characterised by the struggle of all against one another (Thomas Hobbes). Our answer to this is that only by working together can human beings create a society in which human dignity is respected, a society geared towards maintaining a planet that can nourish and sustain future generations.

With the above in mind, our book consists of three parts:

1. Will the elites continue to drive humanity and the earth towards the precipice or can a conversion towards life succeed?
2. Losers, winners and the middle classes under neo-liberalism.
3. Becoming human beings in solidarity in a different possible world – but how?

1. TOWARDS SUICIDE OR LIFE?

I will spare you another list of shocking stories and statistics. We all know them. The essence of the world-wide experiences of the majority of people is the

realisation of the growing division within and amongst societies between losers and winners, and the destruction of the earth's life-support systems. With regard to globalisation we refuse to speak of a *process* in which one can discern positive and negative elements. We distinguish between, on the one hand, the *process* of growing global interdependencies and challenges called for by global structures and patterns of irresponsible behaviour and, on the other hand, the neo-liberal *project* of global capitalism that subjects life in all of its dimensions to the unique, irresponsible logic of capital accumulation. This we view as a deadly state of affairs, doomed to be suicidal in the long run. This process also has clearly recognisable actors and strategies. It has been *ideologically* prepared by a transnational network of neo-liberal thinkers – above all organised in the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS) under the leadership of Friedrich August von Hayek.⁴ With the support of think tanks, reorganised university institutes, the buying out and founding of magazines and the training of journalists, economists, politicians and church personalities, the MPS has developed and set into motion a successful strategy to win back “hearts and minds” for the ideological hegemony of liberalism which had been lost in the catastrophe of 1929. By *political* and *military* means, as well as by way of its *secret services*, the USA, beginning in 1953 in what was then Persia, removed socially responsible governments and, with the support of local elites, installed national security dictators, the likes of which are notoriously well-known in Latin America. It was the task of these military dictatorships to open up access to natural resources, production sites and markets for transnational capital and, through the purchase of usually second-class Western industrial products and prestige projects, to propel their governments into debt. This, in turn, gave international creditors and finance institutions the opportunity to steer and exploit the national economies through their heavily indebted public budgets. *Economically*, this strategy was implemented through the liberalisation and deregulation of international capital markets which then, in addition to their free, speculative “casino games”,⁵ could and still can drive up already high interest rates and avoid taxes on capital gains with the help of tax havens. This is the way in which the growing gap between private wealth and public poverty is widened. It has as its sole objective the increase of capital returns at the cost of working people, public goods and services, and nature.

In terms of *content* neo-liberal global capitalism is based on the granting of an absolute character to private property and the contracts which, competing in an

⁴ Cf. Cockett, R. 1994. *Thinking the Unthinkable. Think Tanks and the Economic Counter-Revolution, 1931-1983*. London: Harper Collins; Walpen, B. 2004. *Die offenen Feinde und ihre Gesellschaft. Eine hegemonietheoretische Studie zur Mont Pèlerin Society*. Hamburg: VSA.

⁵ This refers to the catchword sometimes used to describe this economic strategy as that of “casino capitalism”.

absolute market, are responsible for the transmission of monetary profit and the accumulation of capital. Von Hayek gives classic expression to this:

A free society needs moral ground rules which can ultimately be summarised by saying that they are for the preservation of life: not the preservation of all life because it might be necessary to sacrifice individual life in order to save a greater number of other lives. For that reason the only real moral rules are those which lead us to the 'life calculation:' private property and the contract.⁶

Based on the fallacy that there is not enough to go around for everybody, this means that private property and the ability to negotiate contracts in the marketplace become the judges of life and death or, more precisely, determine who the victims of this "human sacrifice" will be. The essence of neo-liberalism is the abolition of the social functions of the state and the latter's transformation into a security state for property holders and entrepreneurs. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke first stated this in anthropological terms in the 17th century.⁷ They defined human beings as individual proprietors who always strive for more wealth, power and respect and therefore are involved in the one-against-all struggle in the marketplace. They saw as the sole function of the state the protection of property and contracts. Macpherson uses the term "possessive individualism" for this political-economical anthropology, which expresses particularly well the idea of "being possessed" that is included in this view. Possession leads to being possessed. Everybody needs property for use in order to live with dignity. Those who have more than they need invest their surplus property as exchange value in the capitalist market in order to increase it further. The consequence is that through the exchange-value of property for accumulation, many people around the world are being robbed of their property for use which they need for life in dignity. It is characteristic of neo-liberalism that, on the basis of the private ownership of the means of production, it not only sharpens the classical industrial capitalistic exploitation of workers, but even reverts to early capitalist forms of expropriation. For this reason, it has justifiably been called "predator capitalism".⁸

⁶ In an interview supporting Pinochet and his economic advisor, Milton Friedman, the latter also member of the MPS, published in the Chilean newspaper *Mercurio*, 19 April 1981.

⁷ Cf. Duchrow, U. and Hinkelammert, F.J. 2004. *Property for People, Not for Profit: Alternatives to the Global Tyranny of Capital*. London and Geneva: Zed Books in association with the Catholic Institute for International Relations and the World Council of Churches, chapters 2 and 3.

⁸ Cf. Zeller, C. (ed.). 2004. *Die globale Enteignungsökonomie*. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot.

By now, world-wide more and more people understand these mechanisms and are organising themselves in order *to resist it and to work out alternatives to it*. An expression of this new consciousness is to be found in the social movements which meet in the World Social Forum. Up to now they have had limited power, they still are a counter-culture and not yet fully on the way to breaking the neo-liberal hegemony and establishing a new leading culture. How can this movement be strengthened? To answer this question we turn to *the biblical-liberation-theological perspective and method-from-below*. Liberation cannot be achieved through “dialogue with the powerful”, as most Western churches or other reformists suggest. Liberation has to originate from the liberation and organising of the “victims”, who can also be joined by members of other classes in solidarity with them. This has been demonstrated in many publications of the DEI (Departemento EcuMénico de Investigaciones, Costa Rica) and has been well summarised by Enrique Dussel.⁹

Psychologically, the group that produced *Solidarisch Mensch werden* worked with this perspective “from below” with inputs from *relational psychology* (in contrast to individualistic, drive-oriented theoretical methods). We made use of object-relation theory¹⁰ and especially of trauma psychology.¹¹ We also drew on Eric Fromm. The object-relation theory in essence stresses that, from infancy onwards, a person is not to be understood as an isolated individual, but rather as a relational being – beginning with the mother-baby relationship. However, we prefer to use different terminology. To refer to the mother as an “object” would mean using the language of Descartes, which takes as its point of departure the dualistic splitting of the (rational) subject and material object and, in so doing, reflects the capitalistic idea of the isolated, competing individual. For that reason, in order to describe relationships, we prefer to use the language of Levinas by saying that the “self” emerges in relation to “others” – the first usually being the child’s mother, his/her first “reference person”. In the course of a child’s further development, the adult partner, however, does not consist of only one person. On the contrary, society at large, groups within society and political and economic institutions also become partners and mobilise early childhood experiences and the psychological patterns of the infant, albeit via his/her experiences of specific persons.

⁹ Cf. Dussel, E. 2000. *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión*. Madrid: Editorial Trotta.

¹⁰ This theory was developed by Fairbairn, Winnicott and others and is presented in an historical overview by Greenberg, J.R. & S. Mitchell 1998 (11th ed.). *Object Relations in Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge, MA./ London: Harvard University Press.

¹¹ Bianchi, R. 2003. “Neoliberalismus als soziopsychischer Traumatisierungs-prozeß”. In *Zeitschrift für Psychotraumatologie und Psychotherapeutische Medizin* (Part I, April 2003; Part II, July 2003).

The above point of perspective can be called that of *primary intersubjectivity*, intersubjectivity referring to the ultimate relatedness of the emerging psychological subject, and with it we are in agreement with Winnicott's ingenious statement: "There is no such thing as a baby". In other words, we are convinced that one cannot examine a baby without starting from the relational unity of baby-mother. We can speak of the birth of subjectivity only with reference to its emergence from intersubjectivity; the structural building of the developing personality points to the basic, real experiences in the intersubjective sphere and the internalisation of these experiences.

The identification of the micro-structural, intersubjective psychologically interconnected experiences of the small child has removed the basis for psychological atomism since the basic, underlying character of intersubjective relatedness remains decisive in the life of the adult as a participant in, and as one affected by, social structures. The adult individual also remains dependent on the constructive inner and real, basic relationships with the significant contexts of his/her existence: school, family, friends and colleagues as well as religious and political loyalties. Satisfactory social integration enables an affirmation of the entire personality which, paradoxically, only then makes possible feelings of autonomy. The basic social dependency of the individual can best be termed the *basic structure or matrix of social relatedness* and makes it easier to analytically understand the mutation of this relationship structure by changes in social-economic relations. A benign basic matrix of social relatedness allows for a feeling of continuity and security; it provides the presupposition towards individual influence and control over important areas of one's existence and planning; it contributes substantially to the support of good inner relations with various sorts of partners and their strong influence on bad relations with other partners. On the other hand, a malignant matrix of social relatedness tends to reactivate bad inner relationships with others created in infancy and thereby has pathogenic psychological potential. In this manner biographical-individual-psychological dimensions, on the one hand, and socio-psychological dimensions, on the other, are connected and allow us to clearly recognise and describe their interaction. From this basis, described here in very general terms, we now turn to the particular analyses.

2. LOSERS, WINNERS AND THE MIDDLE CLASSES UNDER NEO-LIBERALISM

2.1. What do the losers suffer?

The examples of Argentina and Germany enable us to see the socio-economic exploitation, expropriation, exclusion and impoverishment of a growing number of people, as well as the deprivation of their political power. On this basis, the

traumatic effects for losers become visible. The undermining of the relatively benign matrix of social relatedness of the European welfare state, and to a lesser extent that of Argentina, as well as the sharply increased destruction of indigenous communities, affects all members of such societies and not just the individual victims showing its accompanying symptoms. However, particularly for the victims (the losers), perceiving the changes in their basic social matrix, its hostility towards their needs for individual security, stability and support has a troubling and frightening effect.

The relational approach mentioned above also has a constitutive trauma-ethical implication. Fairbairn understands the building of psychological structures as a process initiated by traumatisation during infancy. For him the decisive phase is the “schizoid position”. This refers to early childhood experiences of loving acceptance and respect on which the child depends; it concerns the experience of an effective reciprocity – the child experiencing not only the mother’s love, but also her acceptance and treasuring of the child’s love. The unavoidable and widely differing experiences of the absence of love and of rejection of his/her own love are highly threatening for the child. He/she feels ultimately threatened by the loss of self and psychological destruction. Fairbairn identifies two defence mechanisms used to ward off these threats, which he also views as constitutive foundations of the construction of the self, namely: (a) splitting the threatening partner, the “other”, into his/her good and evil parts, and (b) the internalisation of the evil part. This splitting and internalisation primarily serves as a way to gain control over the threatening reference person – the evil from the other is taken up into one’s own interior, so the relationship to the real other is positively maintained, albeit at the cost of now being burdened with the threatening “other” within oneself. The splitting and the internalisation of early reference persons thus result in the splitting of the self into the respective partial “others”. According to Fairbairn, the essential task of structure building is to defend against the hostile-aggressive interior “others” – psycho-neurotic disorders indicate as their primary cause the near destruction of the defensive balance and the traumatic entrance of the destructive-threatening other.¹²

For Fairbairn an important aspect of the investigation of traumatic causal relationships is a productive-systematic consideration: it concerns the *relationship of trauma victims to the perpetrators*, the bad feelings or feelings of guilt on the part of the victims. With the concept of *moral defence*, Fairbairn opens up a perspective for understanding the real and internalised relationship of the individual to those destructive others and relationships. In contrast to the super-ego concept, which is centred on the internalisation of the social authority relationships, Fairbairn clearly

¹² Fairbairn, R.W.D. 1986/1952. *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

sees the concept of moral defence as basically *moral reversal*. With the development of the ability to make moral generalisations, the evil persecuting powers of earlier times are transfigured into powerful idealised authorities. The unconscious reason for this reversal is that it means more for the child to be bad in a world ruled by good others, i.e. it is possible for him/her to achieve good rather than to be good in a world dominated by strong, evil authorities with the accompanying fears of threats and isolation and feelings of despair. In the judgment of the authors of *Solidarisch Mensch werden*, the concept of moral defence or reversal offers a basic psycho-dynamic addition to the concept of *orientation trauma* which through confusion strengthens the relations of the victims to the perpetrators – as Fischer and Riedesser have described it.¹³ This leads to an affective-cognitive relationship towards the thinking patterns of the perpetrators and adds to the severe depressive mood and self-blame of which the victims suffer, amongst other factors. In these early relational and internalisation cases, as informed by trauma theory, psychological constellations and dispositions are developed that, in the context of later sociogenic burdening experiences, are reactivated and can be strengthened in a malignant way.

In strategic terms the above view helps to explain why victims do not spontaneously join the resistance against and the struggle for alternatives to powerful systems and actors who have destructive socio-economic and political effects on their own lives and those of others.

2.2. The psychodynamic of the middle classes

In the middle classes the same trauma-psychological constellation has even more dangerous socio-psychological and political consequences. The current phase of capitalism has now moved beyond the destruction and traumatisation of the lower classes to the destruction and traumatisation of the middle classes. This can easily be demonstrated by the examples of Argentina, Germany/Western Europe. Although I use the comprehensive term “middle classes” here, in *Solidarisch Mensch werden* we do, in accordance with the detailed analysis of Pierre Bourdieu, differentiate between the various milieus that exist within the middle as well as other classes. These milieus are characterised by a mentality of upward mobility and are strongly influenced by the entrenched individualism of the system and also lack the historical, collective experience of solidarity and of the common struggle of the working classes. Both of these factors make the middle class particularly helpless at this moment when neo-liberal capitalism is dividing a minority of winners from the majority of losers. The middle classes show a clearly recognisable fear of a sudden fall, a crash. In such a situation the schizoid patterns

¹³ Fischer, G. and P. Riedesser 1998. *Lehrbuch der Psychotraumatologie*. München: Ernst Reinhard.

of early childhood defence mechanisms, as described above, are mobilised and in the case of the middle classes this typically has three consequences:

- The “moral reversal” is reproduced, resulting in a view that “those at the top” cannot be the sinister cause of this threatening development. In other words, an illusionary consciousness is produced since every analysis shows that it is big capital and the corrupted political elites who are responsible for the socio-economic problems that affect both the middle and the underclasses.
- Thus, according to the psychodynamic of the middle classes, the cause of these problems must lie elsewhere. Subsequently they either direct their aggression not at those responsible, but at themselves, resulting in depression – a rapidly growing phenomenon in the middle classes – or at those below them who are still weaker (e.g. at foreigners, who seem to them as threatening their jobs, or at criminals). In turn, right in line with neo-liberal thinking, this results in the middle classes calling for a security state as protection against these scapegoats.
- The economic and political elites deliberately make use of this psychosocial mechanism. The example of Germany illustrates this. Here, since the time of Bismarck towards the end of the nineteenth century, wage-dependent employees (white collar workers), especially civil servants, has purposefully been enticed with modest privileges. It has also been suggested to them that they were better than the proletariat, with the clear intention of preventing them from joining the proletariat’s cause and demands for the recognition of their rights against the exploiting upper classes. In the words of Kracauer, “to separate those whose alliance could damage them was always a basic goal of those in power”.¹⁴

2.3. What drives the winners?

The classical expression for the force that drives the winners is greed. Desires are called *epithymia* in Greek, while greed is called *pleonexia*. In the early church these were considered deadly sins. Even Aristotle reflected brilliantly on the observation that the purpose of the natural economy is to satisfy the demand for limited life needs in household communities.¹⁵ It is a matter of use-property. However, as soon as money – which can be accumulated and hoarded on the basis of the exchange value of property, since it (money) does not lose its value – enters the scene, this results in greed. This also creates the illusion in people, especially the rich, that one could gather limitless amounts of money and riches and thereby purchase endless, eternal life. So greed for money is a sign of a person’s inability to relate to his/her own finite nature and mortality. But through egoistic private accumulation of

¹⁴ Kracauer, S. 1971 (1st ed. 1929). *Die Angestellten*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, p. 76.

¹⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, chapter 8-13.

social wealth, the greedy destroy the community of the polis on which they are dependent. Furthermore, they destroy not only the community, but themselves as well: "Murder is suicide", as Franz Hinkelammert has often said and this rings true, not only for today's globalised world. The words of Jesus Christ add to this analysis by stating that placing one's trust in the "gathering of treasures" has a religious quality. It amounts to idolatry, the worship of wealth, which he called Mammon.

That which was considered as anathema and was therefore politically rejected and legally prevented in ancient societies, under capitalism has become the foundation of economic and social systems. In the capitalist view egoistic economic activity is viewed as creating general prosperity, the "wealth of nations" (Bentham, Smith). That is to say, greed became the *positive* propelling element of the entire system. For this reason, it would be short-sighted to view the question of winners and losers in neo-liberal capitalist societies solely as an individual ethical dilemma for the capitalists. The system *itself* is being driven by unlimited private greed for growth and, conversely, it produces greed. Psychologically it can be classified as an addiction, a pathological dependency linked to a kind of narcissism without limits. Empirical studies on so-called "gambling research" have shown that the system drives its actors, who always need more because otherwise they will sink in the competitive struggle raging around them, whereas the whole thing merely amounts to an exhausting race in a neutral gear – not unlike guinea pigs or rats running endlessly in a stationary turning wheel. The psychosocial researcher Peter Jüngst¹⁶ has proposed the thesis that the USA, viewed psychologically, is the driving force behind increasingly rapid hyper-capitalism because: a) it gave people, especially those with weak communal bonds, the opportunity to immigrate to the "New World" and, once there, to continue to conquer ever new spaces ("going west") – Jüngst calls this philobatie; b) after the furthest physical boundaries had been reached, this drive was transferred, especially to inflate the financial bubble because capital-based retirement systems – in contrast to those structured on the basis of solidarity – produce such gigantic pension funds that these exert pressure to then further expand through speculation. In his book *Der Gotteskomplex* ["The God Complex"], H.E. Richter also proposes the thesis that, following the break from the transcendental regulation of society in medieval Europe, people themselves aspired to assume the role of God.¹⁷ The self thinks that it must constitute itself and does this through a megalomaniac-like acquisition of power by harnessing the power of science, technology and capital. The ego-society that results from this drive is exclusively oriented towards the masculine,

¹⁶ Jüngst, P. 2004. "Raubtierkapitalismus"? *Globalisierung, psycho-soziale Destabilisierung und territoriale Konflikte* Griessen: Psychosozial-Verlag, pp. 56ff.

¹⁷ Richter, H.E. 1979. *Der Gotteskomplex*. Hamburg: Rowohlt.

conquering, violent, mathematically-rational powers in human beings and represses compassion and sympathy for others or feeling-relationships. It also represses women and “natural peoples” – the latter by being referred to in racist terminology. Above all, this kind of society rapes mother earth.

Those whose political strategy relies on “dialogue with the powerful” in order to change or regulate the capitalist system should, in the light of the interaction between the system and the addiction it causes, remember Jesus’ words in Luke 19:ff.: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.” Of course, this does not mean that some of the rich are not beyond repentance, as the story of the chief tax collector Zacchaeus, shows.

3. BECOMING HUMAN BEINGS IN SOLIDARITY IN A DIFFERENT WORLD – BUT HOW?

3.1. Healing and liberation in order to become human beings in solidarity

The authors of *Solidarisch Mensch werden* based their considerations in this regard on the results of recent research on brain function (Damasio¹⁸) and relational psychology (H.E. Richter¹⁹). From both perspectives this research demonstrates that the founder of Western capitalism’s basic scholarly assumptions, René Descartes, was empirically wrong. Brain research shows this on the basis of the interaction between thought, body, feeling and environment, as does relational psychology with regard to the relationship between the self and its relating partners. From this, Richter in his book develops a way out of the “I-society” towards a “we-society”. An essential element to this is the acceptance of one’s own given limits and one’s own death, so that one must not be continuously driven towards invulnerability and superior strength. In addition, our group of scholars proceed on the basis of years of work in Latin America, co-ordinated by DE, on the subject.²⁰ What has already been seen in relational psychology and in brain studies, namely that human beings are not isolated individuals but rather *relational beings*, is confirmed by this analysis of the ethical and political concept of the subject. Intersubjectivity is primary. But in addition, the intercultural, inter-religious character of this relational structure is emphasised – this is especially important in the context of the globalised world. In accordance with the older insights of Latin

¹⁸ Damasio, A.R. 1997. (3rd. ed.) *Descartes’ Irrtum. Fühlen, Denken und das menschliche Gehirn*. München/Leipzig: List Verlag.

¹⁹ Richter, H.E. 2003. *Das Ende der Egomane – Die Krise des westlichen Bewusstseins*. München: Knauer.

²⁰ Cf. *Pasos*, No. 103, 2002; Gutiérrez, Germán. 2001. *Globalización, caos y sujeto en America Latina*. San José, Costa Rica: DEI.

American Liberation Theology, we recognise that the subject is not a purely theoretical construal (as it would be when one works on a Cartesian basis). Rather, we view the subject only in terms of “orthopraxis”, as acting alongside and with those who are crying out. Here, to become a subject (together with others) is related to fundamental and constant travelling down a common road, accompanied by constant self-criticism, so that all can join in thus preventing the appearance of hierarchical structures within the alternative movement. With this approach, it is not a question of power but of the transfiguration of power itself (cf. the Zapatista approach).

This approach to overcoming the violent ego can be reinforced by some foundational *biblical discoveries regarding the question of the origins of the humanness of human beings*. Walter Wink worked this out superbly in a new book, *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man*.²¹ According to Wink, during the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century BCE, in the midst of the Babylonian Empire and in critical discussion with it, those in priestly circles close to the prophet Ezekiel were pushing for revolutionary insights of man and woman as the image of God. In the context of the ancient oriental world, the statement in Genesis 1:26-31 (“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”) was revolutionary on more than one account.

- In the Babylonian Enuma Elish myth, human beings were created from the blood of a murdered god in order to serve the gods – especially to work for them, because the gods were tired of working themselves.²² In the biblical text, human beings are blessed and honoured as men and women to become God’s co-workers. Apart from this, in ancient oriental societies the king alone was viewed and referred to as constituting the image of God. To speak of the king in such terms served as an ideological legitimisation of his authority and therefore of his right not to work and to have others work for him. Genesis 1:26-31, written by those in exile in Babylonia, by stating that *all* human beings are created in the image of God, to work freely and responsibly *with* God, can be seen as *an eminently subversive text, directed against imperial powers and forced labour through slavery*.
- According to this text, from the outset human beings were created *as male and female* in the image of God, i.e. *as relational beings* – relational both in their mutual relationship and in their relationship with God. Indeed, the words of the text show beyond doubt that *God himself/herself is a relational being*, and explicitly that he/she has both male and female poles – or in other words, transcends gender.

²¹ 2002. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress.

²² *Ibid.*:28.

- On this basis follows the surprising insight that *only God is fully human*. To be human in the sense of being *imago dei* (image of God) means becoming human in the sense of being oriented towards God as *the* genuinely human One. Insofar as God becomes incarnate in us, we will become human. In the words of Wink, “Jesus embodied God in his own person in order to show us how we can embody God” (*ibid.*:30).

What was said in Genesis 1:26-31 is again confirmed in the famous vision in chapter 7 of the Book of Daniel. There the world’s kingdoms appear as carnivorous animals that are confronted and overcome by the kingdom of God bearing a human face. The kingdom of God should be translated as “God’s dominion-free human order”. This is also Jesus’ central message against the repressive structures, i.e. the patriarchal order and the suppression of women and children; economic exploitation and the impoverishment of entire classes of human beings; the family as the main instrument for the socialisation of children into submissive roles and values; hierarchical power structures that favour the strong and disadvantage the weak; the reversal of justice by those who, by so doing, defend privileges; racist arrogance and ethnocentrism; the entire sacrificial system with its beliefs in holy violence.

Accordingly, in Matthew 25:31-46 (in the parable of the epiphany of Jesus in the poor) all of humankind shall be judged according to whether they helped “the least” of these brothers and sisters in satisfying their basic needs: hunger, thirst, clothing, shelter, health and freedom. All of Jesus’ life, words, actions, as well as his life-sacrifice were directed towards this one end, to liberate the humanity in human beings and to help them achieve the breakthrough towards realising their full humanity. This process of becoming fully human can be summarised, in the words of Klaus Ottomeyer,²³ as follows: working in cooperation with one another, loving one another in reciprocity and struggling with tenacity for peace that is based on justice ...

The psychologist Lifton expresses this humanisation of humanity by means of the emancipative struggle beyond repeated suppression with the term “human species mentality”.²⁴ It refers to the necessity of the cognitive-affective integration of all humankind into the individual psyche, so that the latter orientates itself towards the life of all. Today this stands especially in opposition to, and resists, the *exclusion mentality* that destroys the social fabric of society through neo-liberal policies and an economy under the dictatorship of shareholder value and big-finance

²³ Ottomeyer, Klaus. 2004. *Ökonomische Zwänge und menschliche Beziehungen. Soziales Verhalten im Kapitalismus*. Münster: LIT.

²⁴ Lifton, R. J. and E. Marcusen 1992. *Die Psychologie des Völkermords. Atomkrieg und Holocaust*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, pp. 272ff.

investment. It is also opposed to, and resists, the *extermination mentality* lying behind the imperial concept of the feasibility of nuclear war. In *Solidarisch Mensch werden* we also cite Erich Fromm in this regard, who contrasts the “always wanting to *have* more” (greed for property and power) with a life of *being*, in which the structures of sharing are joined with the authentic ability to experience and to relate.²⁵ *This is the heart of the matter: the relationship between becoming human and becoming a society in solidarity.*

3.2. AN ALTERNATIVE ECONOMY AND POLICY: VISION, STRATEGY AND PRACTICE

There are resources in ancient traditions that also give a vision of alternative economies and policies.²⁶ In ancient Israel, since the 8th century – directly following the introduction and expansion of the new market economy based on property, the levying of interest and money – efforts arose at resisting the new form of economy that was developing. Proceeding from Greece, this kind of economy was beginning to divide all ancient Near Eastern societies into those that were unable to pay their debts and ever-accumulating interest, and as a result often lost their lands, given as collateral and becoming debt-slaves, and those who, through the same mechanism, accumulated large tracts of land and had their debt-slaves work them. The prophets rose up against that development with ominous criticism and, in co-operation with peasant movements, struggled for legal reforms. Finally, under the Hellenistic-Roman world empires, strong violent and non-violent resistance was offered in the drive towards an alternative economy. Jesus himself inspired his followers to form cells of people living in an alternative economy – an economy of “enough for everybody” and in cooperative forms, sharing property, etc. Such an economy envisioned the sufficiency of all victuals of life for all members of society as related in the manna story in Exodus 16. In this story those who had gathered much did not have *too* much, but enough. And those who had gathered less did not have too little, but enough to live on. The Zapatistas call this a “society in which all have a place in harmony with nature”. In the Ecumenical Movement we call this an “economy at the service of life”.

The economist David Korten has convincingly incorporated these ancient visions and practices into today’s scholarly theory-building in his *The Post-Corporate World: Life after Capitalism*.²⁷ His central thesis is that the economy, “dis-embedded” from all social and ecological contexts (Karl Polanyi), is following the paradigm of Cartesian and Newtonian mechanics. In this paradigm the economy functions as a money-multiplying machine for property owners. An economy that takes life-

²⁵ Fromm E. 1976. *To Have or to Be?* New York, NY: Harper & Row.

²⁶ Duchrow/Hinkelammert, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.

²⁷ Korten, D. 2000. San Francisco, CA: Berret-Koehler.

contexts into consideration must, however, work in accordance with the *paradigm of living organisms*. In this paradigm it becomes clear that a single cell that continues to grow egoistically with no regard for the rest of the organism is a cancer cell. It grows and multiplies until it kills its host – and then dies itself. Here, murder equals suicide – exactly what absolute capitalism does to all societies, and ultimately to the earth, if not stopped. In contrast to this model, the cells in the organism function independently of each other, but also always in a variety of interactions with each other and their environment, so that the entire organism – and with it themselves – has the greatest chances of survival. With this paradigm a healthy economy is built, based on local-regional, varied, independent units, that then join networks of larger units (just as in life itself).

Viewed from an economic perspective, this model is already growing on a world-wide scale with initiatives for a “social economy in solidarity” (Marcos Arruda²⁸). It works in co-operation, instead of in competition, with others, in a decentralised instead of centralised way; it transcends the false alternatives of monopoly-directed private capitalism and centralist state-capitalism (also called real socialism); it strives for the *social appropriation of the earth’s resources and the fruits of the common work in society*.²⁹ This requires a *double strategy*.³⁰

3.2.1. “Starve the cancer – Nurture life”

Starving the capitalist cancer by:

- (a) Demythologising the neo-liberal disorientation ideology.
- (b) Saying clearly “No!” to capitalism by resisting and refusing to co-operate.

Nurturing life by:

- (a) Finding and promoting alternatives that transcend capitalism in local-regional areas. Areas of action are, above all: Local Exchange and Trading Systems (LETS); co-operative banking; decentralised production of alternative energies (sun, wind, water, biomass); local co-operative production, marketing and consumption.³¹ However, plants administered by the workers and their networks themselves also form part of the local-regional alternatives.
- (b) Struggling on all levels for the social appropriation of stolen resources in post-capitalist perspective – an alternative economy in the context of the real power situation cannot simply be generally “introduced”. People who are negatively

²⁸ Arruda, M. 2003. *Humanizar o infra-humano – A formacao do ser humano integral: Homo evolutivo, práxis e economia solidária*. Petrópolis, Brasil: Vozes.

²⁹ Cf. Zeller, *ibid.*

³⁰ Using Korten’s concepts, *ibid.*:262ff.

³¹ Douthwaite, R. 1996. *Short Circuit: Strengthening Local Economies for Security in an Unstable World*. Dublin: Lilliput Press.

affected must join together with those who are in solidarity with them and organise the necessary alliances themselves. This must be done in order to approach concrete goals and to integrate these into an overall perspective of societal appropriation. Some examples of this are: the struggle for land, for public goods and services (such as water), for fair taxation, etc. The protagonists to whom people can relate in order to become subjects in solidarity include, especially, trade unions, social movements and churches in their diverse social forms.

At the same time the above two concrete areas (3.2.1 a and b) hold the potential for healing and liberating towards becoming human beings in solidarity with those who have been traumatised, frightened and addicted. In this destructive situation healing is possible only when those who are being healed are at the same time aware of the real possibility of an alternative praxis. Both the local-regional social economy and the building of alliances for the re-appropriation of the earth's resources and the fruits of common work are essentially based on the creation of concrete groups and movements for common work and struggle. Groups and movements are the primary means by which a life in relationship – as opposed to the capitalist ego-society, which drives individuals to wage war against each other – can be regained.

A new “great story” with more and more stories of hope

By now there exist many stories of healing, liberation and conversion, and of practical alternatives. To relate these stories in new and creative forms must and will serve to overcome the disorientating capitalist media. The crisis of capitalism is so great – though the possible spreading of its cancer, in amongst other places China, might extend its life somewhat – that the time has come when a great cultural shift may be possible and with it the breaking of the hegemony of neo-liberalism. This can be seen in the growth of the social movements (above all within the framework of the World Social Forum) and in the fact that in all religions (including those of indigenous communities) basic rethinking processes are under way.³² To be sure, faith communities are divided into antagonistic groups. On the one hand, especially in the USA, one finds fundamentalist powers that support neo-liberalism and imperialism as we know it. On the other hand, we have the theology of liberation powers that release the spiritual resources of healing and liberation, and who co-operate with the social movements. In the middle there are many undecided powers that choose to avoid conflict with power and wealth.

³² Duchrow, Ulrich (ed). 2002. “Colloquium 2000. Faith communities and social movements facing globalisation”. *Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, no. 45, WARC: Geneva.

Under these circumstances, to win over and convince as many churches and faith communities as possible to voice a clear “No!” to neo-liberalism and to join in concrete action and the struggle towards alternatives is of the utmost importance for the future of humankind, for two reasons: (a) neo-liberal capitalism itself is a fundamentalist religion and must be defeated also at a spiritual level; (b) the choice made by the middle classes will be a decisive factor. If they continue to cling to the illusionary coalition with the elites, the majority will go under. If they should find the way away from alliances, in solidarity with the exploited and marginalised, this united power will be central to the societal appropriation of resources and the formation of new participatory political forms. The example of Argentina, for now at least by way of the promising initiatives undertaken there, shows that this is possible. Furthermore, the World Council of Churches as well as the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches have been involved since 1997/98 in the quest for an alternative to neo-liberal globalisation. Their General Assemblies have produced astounding resolutions, amongst these the famous confession of the General Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, *Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth*, accepted in Accra (2004). Initiatives such as these show that not only a “different world” is possible but also human beings who have rediscovered and renewed solidarity.

PUBLIC WITNESS IN THE ECONOMIC SPHERE? ON HUMAN DIGNITY AS A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE¹

Nico Koopman and Dirkie Smit²

A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE FOR PUBLIC WITNESS IN THE ECONOMY

Public theology also takes place as public witness – although, of course, this is by far not the only meaning that the term “public theology” has. At least within the tradition of Reformed Protestantism, however, a strong conviction has always prevailed that the church and therefore church theology is also called to public witness. How this witness should take place has always been a major question, and even within Reformed Protestantism it has been a deeply controversial issue. For centuries, and in South Africa in particular almost throughout the twentieth century, the question of public witness has often been restricted to the so-called relations between church and state, or church and politics. The problems and challenges regarding the misuse of political power were so dominant that the church and theology in the years of the struggle against apartheid concentrated, probably with good reason, on these questions of public witness in the political sphere.

Over the last decade or more this situation has changed, for many reasons. Internationally, the growing presence of economic globalisation – often impacting in fundamental ways on national politics and local culture – has opened the eyes of many to the major way in which the economy has always been pervasively present in affecting the lives of people. Southern African Christians cried out publicly about the excluding and destructive forces of this global economy, and their voice – for example, expressed in the Kitwe Declaration – became part of the large choir of voices in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, first at Debrecen and then in Accra, witnessing publicly that the economy is a matter of life and therefore a matter of faith (Smit 2003; 2004). The ecumenical church in the form of the World Council of Churches joined in this cry through its decisions in Harare, but also through a large number of projects, discussions, studies, decisions and

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper read at a consultation between the Beyers Naudé Centre and the Evangelical Academies of Bad Boll and Arnoldshain, Bad Boll, Germany, Dec 1-4, 2004.

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negotiations. It became increasingly clear to the self-understanding of the church, world-wide, not only to Reformed Protestantism, that the church's public witness should also be concerned with the economic sphere and with our common economic life.

In South Africa that has become glaringly obvious. Taking the kind of both historical and systematic analysis seriously – that, for example Sampie Terreblanche provides in his *A history of inequality in South Africa 1652-2002* (2002) – South African church and theology should probably have spoken publicly about this much earlier and much more strongly than some did, from time to time, but it is obvious why the political dimensions dominated the understanding both of society and of the calling of the church to public witness. Deeply intertwined with the political history of South Africa was the history of the power shifts that Terreblanche describes, the inter-related histories of power, land and labour, leading to systematic exclusion, gross injustices and human suffering. Public theology and the church in its public witness should certainly be concerned about, and speak about, these realities – but how?

The difficult questions facing the public witness of church and theology in the economic sphere – not only in South Africa, but indeed everywhere – are the same questions that have always faced the public witness of the church concerning political life as well. What knowledge does the church possess on the basis of which it can witness? How should it speak, to whom should it speak, when should it speak, about what should it speak, and what should it say? With which authority can it speak? Indeed, the church with its theology is here dramatically faced with the challenge that ecumenical theologian Keith Clements has so clearly described and helpfully analysed, namely the task of “learning to speak” (Clements, 1995).

One particular aspect of such a process of learning to speak in the economic sphere is, of course, the question concerning a theological perspective. There are many other crucially important aspects as well, concerning the adequate analysis of the situation, the discernment of the proper moment, the finding of a proper genre, and many others. Of fundamental importance, however, is whether the church as church has anything worthwhile to say, whether theology as theology has any contribution to make, any distinctive perspective from which to discern what is at stake and from which to contribute to discussions of economic life.

There can be little doubt that Beyers Naudé would have been convinced that Christians and particularly also, although by far not only, Reformed Christians are indeed called to speak and act in the economic sphere. There can be little doubt too about what he would have regarded as one proper theological perspective, namely the fundamental importance of respecting the dignity of all human beings. For basic theological reasons, reasons integral to the Christian faith and his understanding of the Christian gospel, he would probably have argued that our

shared economic life should serve human beings. He would have protested against forms of economic policy and activity denying or violating human dignity and its concrete expression in human rights.

As Christian, minister, ecumenical church leader and social activist, Beyers Naudé became known world-wide as spokesperson for those whose human dignity and human rights were violated and who did not experience justice, including many forms of social and economic justice. On 20 June 1985 he participated with Dorothee Sölle in an interview on IKON Television in the Netherlands. In this interview he described (1985:10) injustices such as apartheid as violations of human rights and dignity. He even indicated that these systems of dehumanisation have theological roots. "What are the basic roots, what are the deepest roots of such an injustice, of such inhumanity? ... This is wrong, this is inhuman, and this is evil". It is no wonder that this one refrain was heard again and again during the many public commemorations around his funeral, all over the country and abroad – that the mystery of his remarkable life of courage and his service was his deep respect for the integrity and dignity of human beings, all human beings, precisely also those who were not of his own descent and culture, and precisely in a special way for those who suffered daily under systemic social, political and economic injustice.

The South African struggle against apartheid – in which Beyers Naudé was so deeply involved – was a struggle for human dignity, but precisely therefore very definitely also a struggle for justice, including social and economic justice. The South African Constitution, the major legacy of that struggle, very clearly spells out this vision of human dignity and human rights. It is, however, also fair to say that delivery on the social and economic justice that the Constitution envisions and promises has thus far in different ways been slower than many had expected and hoped for. There may be many and complex reasons for this – lack of political will; inadequate legal frameworks; failing human resources, education and training, capabilities and skills; even moral degeneration, greed and corruption; unfavourable economic conditions, partly caused by crime and violence; and, according to many, present international and global economic realities. There is, however, also a widespread perception in South African circles today that delivery on social and economic justice is a mirage (Hayek), and that striving for human dignity and human rights should not be claimed to be a guiding principle for the economy, because the economy is an autonomous sphere of life, which should be organised only according to its own guiding principles, laws and norms.

Christian theology, of course, does not speak with one voice. Historically, the dominant theological traditions – including the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant traditions – have developed different views concerning ethical approaches, including theories of justice and definitely different views regarding the economy.

Even within these traditions themselves – for example, Protestantism, or even more specifically the Reformed faith – different approaches complement and often contradict one another. There is, therefore, no single authoritative theological position regarding human dignity and the economy. All claims are therefore modest and contextual, and reflect specific traditions, experiences and perspectives. The following comments are accordingly also made from one specific perspective, namely that of Protestant and ecumenical developments during the last century, particularly associated with the confessional tradition of *Barmen* and experiences of resistance against injustices in Germany, Latin America and apartheid South Africa.

“AS THOUGH THERE WERE OTHER AREAS OF OUR LIFE”

From this specific theological perspective, affirming an intimate relationship between justice – including political and social but also economic justice – and ethics, and therefore between morality and theology, is of crucial importance. All forms of total separation between the economic sphere and ethics that have developed historically, particularly since Western modernity’s separation of so-called autonomous spheres of human life, and therefore all claims for economic and political rationalities excluding moral and ethical discourses, are seen as one-sided and suspect from this perspective.

Major reasons for affirming such an intimate relationship (between economy and ethics) are given both with the nature and content of the Christian faith, but also with historical experiences of large-scale injustices, including the failure of twentieth-century legal systems and political and economic rationalities. Three historical episodes can serve as brief reminders demonstrating the thrust of this theological tradition, namely the *Theological Declaration of Barmen* (1934), the *Belhar Confession* (1986) and the recent *Covenanting for Justice* of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Accra.

The *Theological Declaration of Barmen* was a powerful protest against the so-called autonomy of political – or any other – rationality, excluding convictions of faith and ethics. *Barmen’s* first thesis claims that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. The three verbs are of crucial importance – hear, trust and obey. Christians have to do this “in life and death”, which is a clear allusion to the *Heidelberg Catechism*. This foundational christological claim rejects any form of so-called natural theology, claiming that there are also other ways of knowing other gods, other words to hear, trust and obey.

The second thesis claims that, “As Jesus Christ is God’s assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same seriousness is he

also God's mighty claim upon our whole life". For the present argument, the rejection is very important: "We reject the false doctrine, as though there were other areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords – areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him". *Barmen II* is at the same time a theological protest against doctrine without ethics, and a theological protest against ethics separated from doctrine and theology (Huber). Since the church belongs to Jesus Christ, Christians should live like people who belong to him. He is at the same time God's assurance of forgiveness of all our sins *and* God's mighty claim upon our whole life.

The addition "our whole life" is of particular importance, as the explicit conclusions of the rejection show, calling it false doctrine if anyone should claim that there are "other areas of our life in which we do not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords". This is a rejection of all versions of the so-called autonomy (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*) of different spheres of (modern) life, understood in such a way that the gospel of Jesus Christ has no implications for those spheres of reality.

When the (then) Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa confessed its own faith during the struggle against apartheid in a new confessional document, the *Confession of Belhar*, the theological tradition of *Barmen* played a direct role. Specifically in the third article, on the compassionate justice of God, the thrust of *Barmen* is retained but now applied to justice, clearly also economic justice, in a way that moves beyond *Barmen* itself: "We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; that in a world full of injustice and enmity He is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that He calls his Church to follow Him in this; that He brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that He frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that He supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for Him pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that He wishes to teach His people to do what is good and to seek the right; that the Church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the Church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; that the Church as the possession of God must stand where He stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others. Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel".

When the Southern African Alliance of Reformed Churches met in Kitwe, Zambia, to reflect on the effects of economic globalisation on societies in Africa, the *Belhar Confession* played a major role in inspiring their Kitwe Declaration. Together with similar documents from other regions and countries, these cries of suffering and exclusion contributed to the decision of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to declare a *processus confessionis* regarding economic injustice and the destruction of creation. At its General Assembly in Harare the World Council of Churches joined this process, which also led, among other things, to encounters with the IMF and the World Bank (“Common goals, separate journeys?”) and the recent AGAPE studies. At their Assembly in Winnipeg the Lutheran World Federation issued a call to participate in transforming economic globalisation. Under the initiative of the WCC, the WARC and the LWF, major world communities, including the Anglican and different Orthodox communities, studied shared ecclesial entry points into economic globalisation and a common spirituality of resistance. As a new and important phase in their own process of considering whether and how the Christian faith itself is challenged by the present realities of the global economy, the recent Assembly of the WARC in Accra published a *Covenanting for Justice* document claiming that “global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians” (art. 15).

For the Reformed tradition at least, such convictions already draw on Calvin’s own life and thought. During a recent consultation in Geneva Calvin’s own social and economic thought was commemorated and an English translation of the influential and celebrated French work of Andre Bielér on this theme was announced. For Calvin and the Reformed tradition, and very specifically in the more ecumenical expression it found in *Barmen* and *Belhar*, Christian faith and economic justice are intimately related.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES?

From this specific theological perspective, however, this relationship is not and should not be construed as one of identity. Instead, it is of crucial importance to distinguish between, on the one hand, economic and, on the other hand, ethical and theological discourses. All forms of identification between the economy and ethics that have historically developed are deeply problematic and even dangerous, since they can easily lead to ideological misuse. Any form of moralising of the economy should be rejected.

This theological perspective, rather, will show affinity with those economic theories and practices that seek for guiding principles, while respecting as fully as possible the realities and norms of economic life itself. Broadly speaking, it will seek to contribute both loyalty and criticism and reform to existing economic systems. Both these approaches – loyalty and criticism – are deeply embedded in

the biblical and Christian traditions. This obviously raises many questions, including questions concerning the guiding principles involved. When should loyalty become criticism and reform? What would be the theological norm? Which criteria of economic justice are used to discern between moments of loyalty and criticism?

For this specific perspective, theology does not claim to have its own (alternative) theory of economic justice. Rather, it seeks to engage with others by drawing on its own sources and resources, thereby hoping to contribute to some broad theoretical orientation concerning economic justice, which could be helpful in formulating economic approaches and theories, in evaluating economic realities, developments and trends, and in evaluating economic policies, measures and activities. This theology would clearly support political and economic attempts to implement, practise and embody forms of social and economic justice and join forces with those criticising and resisting failures to embody such forms of justice. But according to which norms, which guiding principles?

In this respect, both Old and New Testament records offer a valuable orientation and perspective, the Christian tradition of interpretation provides instructive developments and case studies, and recent and contemporary ecumenical discussions help to discern critical issues and insights. At least six possible forms of theological contribution to such discussions could be foreseen.

HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS?

Firstly, this specific theological perspective brings an eschatological (in philosophical terms: teleological) orientation to the discourse. It speaks a language of hope. It reminds everyone of justice not yet real and fulfilled. It thereby moves and inspires agents for justice, and it empowers those who suffer under present injustices not to surrender hope and not to accept their fate without struggle and resistance. It calls the church and all believers to keep praying, to long for this justice and to dream of this reign and, therefore, to take all possible small steps of witnessing to this coming reality.

Secondly, precisely because of this eschatological orientation, it strengthens critical and self-critical thought. This theology encourages those involved in working for justice – particularly also in economic spheres. It supports all those actors, including theorists, practitioners and activists, who seek to strengthen theoretical paradigms that will lead to legal, economic and social transformations and to practical policy implementations that will contribute to serve economic justice. From the perspective of the Christian faith, it reminds everyone to remain self-critical, that full justice will never be realised historically, so that even – and

precisely – the best economic scenarios remain open to (self-)critical evaluation and improvement.

Thirdly, based on the content of the biblical traditions, as understood in particular twentieth-century contexts of historical injustice, this theological perspective advocates a view of political and economic justice taking very seriously the perspective of those who suffer under such injustices. Perhaps this is the most characteristic material contribution of the biblical traditions concerning justice to any contemporary theory of justice (Bedford-Strohm, 1993). In South Africa it is this perspective that has been expressed in the third article of *Belhar*.

Fourthly, it is therefore to be expected that this theological perspective will show a special sensitivity to all those – individuals, groups and categories of people – who suffer forms of injustice, oppression, rejection, exclusion, violation or abuse. For this reason, the church sometimes, under specific historical circumstances, feels itself called to be a voice for the voiceless, a public conscience, an advocate for the oppressed, or a critical, prophetic challenge to authorities and powers. Such claims do not imply that the church – in whichever form – has an alternative theory of economic justice, but only that its own message and the very reason for its existence, its faith, involves a calling to care for those who suffer injustices, and to plead and act on their behalf. The involvement of the ecumenical church and theology today in issues of economic globalisation provides an instructive example. The church does not in principle resist contemporary global transformations in any of their complex forms (whether cultural, political or economic), but is concerned with some of the disastrous effects of economic globalisation in its present form, especially the exclusion, marginalisation and triage of many, including many living in Africa today. In asking whether this form of economic life should not concern the faith of Christians – the way the major ecumenical bodies, like the WARC at Accra, are framing the question – they do not claim to have any alternative theory of economic justice, but they remind everyone of the suffering of many, and of the injustice of this, and appeal to everyone in positions of (legal, social, economic and political) responsibility and influence to take this suffering seriously.

Fifthly, this theological perspective understandably shows a strong affinity for those theories of justice in which the dignity of the human person is regarded as central. The inalienable worth and dignity of the human person is the boundary that may not be transgressed, the norm that may not be ignored, the ultimate criterion to apply to social, political and economic life together. Again, this is argued on inner-theological grounds, based on the content and thrust of the biblical message – although it has been very controversial within theological circles. Despite all these historical and even recent theological debates, it is fair to claim that contemporary ecumenical theology is in very strong agreement that the

message of the gospel, the good news of the loving and gracious Triune God, affirms in all its aspects the importance, value and dignity of human beings.

What is human dignity? Can it be defined or described? Is it possible to give material content to the notion of human dignity? Recent and contemporary discussions have shown that this is not really fully possible, even in those circles where people are deeply committed to the notion of and dedicated to serving and protecting human dignity. Still, it is possible to agree on certain characteristics, often defined negatively, for example in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, suggesting that human beings deserve to be protected from fear and from want. Of course, these are very broad and general guidelines, and their implementation will always remain open, dependent on concrete interpretations and realities, yet, they are not for that reason without importance and usefulness. From this theological perspective, it is indeed a very helpful guideline to link human dignity to freedom from fear and freedom from want, and to search for means of common life, including economic life, that could contribute to protect human beings – very specific, concrete individuals and groups of human beings, under very specific and concrete conditions – from causes of fear and causes of want that could indeed be prevented.

Sixthly, for that very reason, contemporary ecumenical theology (after earlier hesitation) also strongly supports theoretical paradigms in which human rights, as the concrete embodiment of inalienable human dignity, are central. Human dignity, precisely when understood as protection from fear and want, is defended when human rights, both so-called individual and social rights (although the distinction is problematic and not very helpful), are defended and implemented. This is not a strong claim, for example, that human rights can be based on or deduced from Scripture, or that they developed historically as direct product of the Christian tradition, or that they represent a universal value system simply to be accepted in its present form by other traditions and cultures, but simply the modest claim that in their complex and controversial inter-relationships and in their openness to continuous improvement and criticism, contemporary human rights provide “perspectives of a human world” (Huber and Tödt, 1977), with very strong analogies to central convictions of the Christian faith. This is also true of South Africa, and part of the reasons why churches and the local ecumenical church enthusiastically support the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and often eagerly monitor real or potential human rights violations. It is in fact for that reason that churches could be expected to show a particular interest in implementing the so-called social and economic rights, whether as already formulated in the Constitution, or perhaps in even stronger form as well.

PUBLIC THEOLOGY AND THE PUBLIC CHURCH?

It would therefore be totally consistent with the faith, confession and theology of the Christian church if the South African ecumenical church, denominations and congregations, including church leaders and individual believers, would show very strong commitment to support human dignity as guiding principle for life together, including our economic life, and accordingly the increased implementation of social and economic rights – and if the church would be very concerned about slow social transformation and delivery of such rights. To the extent that the South African church – understood in this comprehensive way – is not eagerly involved in supporting such implementation and does not contribute to the formation of public opinion and thereby practical policies in this direction, it would indeed be inconsistent with the faith, confession and theology of the church.

This theological perspective follows those theoretical positions which argue that human rights are not only implemented by legal means, for example, also against all restrictive views claiming that only individual rights should be regarded as proper rights, since they are obviously justiciable and enforceable. Rather, human rights are promoted, implemented and realised, firstly, by political means; secondly, by legal means; and thirdly, by resistance (Huber, 1996; for protest and resistance, see Huber, 1987). Accordingly, the political and social preconditions must also be created without which human rights could not be enjoyed, including many of the rights formulated in the South African Constitution's Bill of Rights regarding environment (24), property (25, for example, on land reform), housing (26), health care, food, water and social security (27), children (28), education (29), language, culture, religion and life in community (30 and 31). From this theological perspective, the state indeed has the responsibility to respect and protect, but also "to promote and fulfil" these rights (Chapter 2, 7(2), Constitution). Necessary social and economic measures must be implemented and initiatives in the formation of public opinion preparing, claiming and welcoming such measures should be supported and strengthened.

Under specific circumstances, theology may be concerned with all three ways of implementing human rights, including economic rights. It can support victims of violations seeking legal remedies, especially when other social institutions fail to act (the second means). It can also join others in forms of public resistance whenever human dignity is systematically violated (the third means). Recent South African history bears witness to both these forms of theological involvement. The ecumenical church has been deeply involved both in helping victims of human rights violations as well as in civil disobedience (regarding specific laws seen as unjust) and public resistance of the apartheid system as such. Under normal circumstances, however, theology is particularly concerned with the first means of implementation, namely the political – creating the political conditions, strengthe-

ning the political will, finding concrete political policies and decisions, supporting practical political measures and actions. Through the formation of public opinion, political action is made possible that will provide the conditions, including economic conditions, necessary for freedom and living lives of human dignity.

Theology does this primarily by serving the church, as a complex institution, with many forms and activities, and with the ability to influence South African society in important ways. So-called public theology and the public church participate in the formation of public opinion – with all its practical consequences also for the implementation of social and economic justice – fully aware of being only voices amongst many other voices, and without any special claims (Koopman, 2003). Public theology includes social ethics, the so-called ethics of social institutions or different spheres of life in modern societies. The public church has different modes of discourse as well as a wide range of activities at its disposal. The Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology is dedicated to serving these purposes through such research, education and involvement (www.sun.ac.za/theology/bnc), thereby hopefully contributing to more social and economic justice in South Africa today.

Therefore, the Beyers Naudé Centre gladly participates and cooperates with partners in South Africa and Germany, as well as with partners in other disciplines than theology, as is the case at this conference (i.e. the disciplines of economics, business, and related fields). Together we strive to discern the significance of human dignity and human rights for the economy in a globalised world. And we do this in the hope that in a humble way these efforts might contribute to the dawning of the day when every person experiences a humane life, a life of dignity and joy.

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THE BEYERS NAUDÉ CENTRE FOR PUBLIC THEOLOGY: FIVE YEARS ON

Nico Koopman¹

The Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology (BNC) was officially founded on 21 November 2002. This Centre is the brainchild of Professor Russel Botman, the current rector and vice-chancellor of the University of Stellenbosch. Botman, together with former US rector, Professor Chris Brink, and former dean of the Faculty of Theology, Professor Daniel Louw, visited the late Dr Beyers Naudé and his wife Ilse in Johannesburg to ask his permission to name the centre after him. Professor Botman was also the first director of the Centre, until he took up the position of vice-rector of the University of Stellenbosch after a few months and was succeeded by the Centre's current director and the author of this article, Nico Koopman.

1. A THEOLOGICAL VOICE IN PUBLIC LIFE

The researchers or associates of the BNC reflect on public life from a theological perspective. We believe that the Triune God matters for all walks of life. We reflect on the meaning, significance and implications of Trinitarian faith for public life. A Trinitarian approach enables us to focus in a comprehensive albeit not exhaustive way on the story of God's involvement with Israel, with Jesus Christ and the church through the ages; in fact, with the whole of creation. Whilst guarding against ethicising theology, and against inferring blueprints for public life from Trinitarian faith, we do explore the vision of public life that Trinitarian faith does offer.

Theological engagement with public life implies that theology provides a framework, for example, that of the dawning of an age of *shalom* and the coming of the kingdom of God, that gives meaning to and a *telos* for our engagement with public issues. Theology also offers unique motivations for public engagement, for example, obedience to God and striving towards a life of holiness. Moreover, theology makes unique contributions with regard to the contents of public moral

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issues, for example, that in order to solve the problem of poverty we need more than merely juridical and forensic justice, but also sacrificial, compassionate justice.

2. A THEOLOGY THAT FOCUSES ON THREE PUBLICS

At the BNC we strive to focus on three publics as defined by David Tracy (1981), namely the academy, broader society and the church.

2.1 Public theology and the academy

According to Tracy (*ibid.*:56-59), the academy is the public or social location where serious, critical scientific enquiry by various disciplines take place. In its engagement with the academy, theology is challenged to provide arguments that people from diverse religious and secular traditions can recognise as reasonable. In this discourse appeals are made to universal categories such as experience, intelligence, rationality and responsibility. Claims are made with appropriate warrants, backing and rebuttal procedures. Although Tracy acknowledges that theologians confess allegiance to specific religious traditions or specific praxis movements bearing religious significance, he appeals to them to abstract themselves from their faith commitments for the sake of critical analysis of their religious and theological claims, both by those outside of, and those that belong to, their own religious traditions. This abstraction does imply remaining uninvolved and a quest for objectivity in a positivistic fashion.

In all publics, but perhaps more so in the academy, public theology makes a choice in favour of scientific reflection, for making faith convictions as far as possible rationally accessible to all reasonable people, for constructing arguments that will pass the tests of coherence, consistency and logical reasoning. However, theology does not have to distance itself from its faith commitments, but ensures that such commitments do not exclude scientific scrutiny. The age-old Christian phrase *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) coined by Anselm of Canterbury in the 11/12th century, needs fresh application in this engagement by theology with the academic public.

Theology also engages with other disciplines, strives to understand them, to learn their language, to learn from them, to make its own language accessible to them and also to enrich them. In partnership with other disciplines, theology aims at the formation of citizens of character and public virtue, at serving society by way of thoroughly scientific labour, and at contributing to the restoration of dignity in all walks of life.

Public theology drinks from the wells of contextual theologies such as Latin American Liberation Theology, Black Theology in South Africa and the USA, Political Theology, and Feminist and Womanist Theology. It learns from different

confessional approaches to theology, for example Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Mennonite and Roman Catholic. It also acknowledges that various theological disciplines contribute to the development of adequate models of public theology. Although public theology is mostly done in the context of systematic theology and social ethics, it is also informed by all other theological disciplines. Moreover, public theology aims, amongst other things, at bringing to the fore the inherent existential and public nature of all theological labour in the variety of theological disciplines.

2.2 Public theology and society

South African theologian Dirkie Smit² offers a very helpful description of modern democratic societies. He is of the opinion that modern societies consist of four spheres, namely the political and economic spheres, as well as that of civil society and that in which public opinion is formed.³

The political sphere focuses on the state, government, political power and the control and regulation of public life. The economic sphere concerns aspects such as the so-called autonomous market economy, globalisation, ecology, science and technology. Civil society focuses on themes related to the relationship between theology and (amongst others) the institutions, organisations, associations and movements of civil society which, independently from the state and economy, strive to enhance the quality of life, to satisfy the needs and promote the interests of people, to transform the nature of society and build the common good, i.e. a life of quality for all. Schools, legal bodies, cultural and sports clubs and neighbourhoods all are institutions of civil society. Sociologically speaking, churches form part of civil society. The area in which public opinion is formed focuses on themes such as the nature of society, the common foundational values of society, the common challenges and priorities of society. The ensuing public opinion paves the way for jointly striving towards the common good.⁴

² Cf. Smit, D.J. 1996. "Oor die unieke openbare rol van die kerk". *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* September 1996, pp. 190-198.

³ Tracy (1981:6-14) divides the public of society into three spheres, namely the realm of the technoeconomic structure of society, which deals with the organisation and allocation of goods and services; the realm of polity, where the aim is to embody social justice in the traditions and institutions of society through the legitimate use of power and force and the regulation of conflict within the rule of law; and finally, the realm of culture which includes art and religion, and explores and expresses the meaning and values of individual, group and communal existence.

⁴ Smit's distinctions coincide to a high degree with those of Jürgen Habermas. For the latter the democratic public consists of four spheres. At its centre are government, the civil service, judiciary, parliament, political parties, elections and party competition. Outside this core system, but still belonging to the state, there exists an inner periphery

The engagement of theology with political institutions, business and trade unions, sport and cultural bodies, schools and other institutions of civil society, with different media of modern communication – within the appropriate parameters, modes and styles outlined above – might prove to be fruitful in building human and natural societies of peace, justice and dignity.

2.3 Public theology and the church

To understand the use of the word “church” in public theological discourse, Dirkie Smit once again offers a valuable typology when he identifies six forms of the church.⁵ The first four constitute the church as institution. These are worship services, local congregations with their various practices, denominations and ecumenical bodies. The other two forms constitute the church as organism, namely individual Christians in their normal daily roles in family, work, neighbourhood etc., and individual Christians in their roles in voluntary organisations.

- *Worship services* have the potential of transforming people into just people who can in their turn enhance the social and economic transformation of society. The impact of worship on ethics, also economic ethics, is increasingly appreciated by a growing number of authors. Recently American theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells edited a book in which a plea is made for an end to the separation of worship and ethics that occurred under the influence of Immanuel Kant. In this publication various authors demonstrate, from a variety of perspectives, how worship impacts on our ethical choices, policies and moral living in different walks of life, specifically also in the area of social and economic justice.⁶ The transformative, subversive and revolutionary potential of worship services are investigated by an increasing number of theologians. They are increasingly convinced that those participating in worship see alternative realities that are in conflict with the

of institutions such as regulatory agencies with powers delegated by the state. The second public sphere, which forms part of the outer periphery, consists of organisations that Habermas calls customers, i.e. business associations, labour unions and private organisations. The third public sphere, which also forms part of the outer periphery in turn consists of organisations he calls the suppliers, i.e. voluntary associations, churches, new social movements and public interest groups. Fourthly, Habermas leaves room for the public opinion that is formed by the dialogue of public interest groups and professionals who, as the sensors of society, identify, draw attention to and interpret social problems and who, with the aid of the media, propose solutions and apply pressure that can bring about change that will better the situation of especially the disadvantaged. Cf. Habermas, 1996.

⁵ Cf. D. Smit, 1996. “Oor die kerk as unieke samelewingsverband”. *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 36 Junie 1996, p. 119-129.

⁶ Cf. Hauerwas and Wells, 2004.

beforehand realities in a world where injustice reigns supreme and they are transformed so as to participate in the building of these alternative realities. Those who pray for daily bread see a world where there is bread enough for everyone and they participate in creating such a world.

- Various *practices of congregations* also promote the fulfilment of social and economic rights. The definition of practices by the American theologians Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass⁷ is very helpful. They define practices as follows: “By ‘Christian practices’ we mean things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world”.⁸ Practices refer to cooperative and meaningful human endeavours in which certain beliefs, virtues and skills are intertwined with certain behaviours, relationships and symbols.⁹ Examples of such practices are baptism, Holy Communion, worship, prayer, singing, catechesis, public witness, the diaconate and various dialogues.
- *Denominations and ecumenical bodies* can embark on the so-called priestly task of showing solidarity with the marginalised and the wronged. This care, compassion and solidarity are expressed in the various diaconal services of churches. Denominations and ecumenical bodies also fulfil their prophetic task of clearly spelling out the vision of a good society in which people enjoy a life of dignity and justice. This prophetic task also involves a critique of a society in which the conditions for such a good society are not met. Churches also spell out this vision and offer this constructive critique by way of declarations of faith and even confessions of faith. Churches on denominational and ecumenical level also have the responsibility to intervene in public policy processes.¹⁰ It is crucial to help ensure that laws are formulated that enhance the vision and ideals of justice and dignity contained in the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution as well as the principles in the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights.
- *Individual Christians in their normal daily roles and in voluntary organisations* are equipped by the institutional church to participate in appropriate ways in various sectors of society for the advancement of a life of dignity for all. The

⁷ Cf. Dykstra and Bass, 2002:13-32.

⁸ *Ibid.*:18.

⁹ *Ibid.*:19 -21.

¹⁰ North American theologian J. Philip Wogaman (2000:264-273) summarises the public responsibility of churches as follows: “Influencing the public ethos, educating the church’s own membership about particular public issues, participating in advocacy and lobbying initiatives, supporting specific political parties and candidates with positive records on civil rights and other social justice issues, encouraging lay Christians to establish a Christian political party if circumstances warrant this move, engaging in truly extreme situations of oppression in civil disobedience and even participation in violent revolutions.” The contentious nature of some of these proposals is obvious.

institutional church, through its worship services, congregational practices, denominational and ecumenical policies, declarations, confessional statements and public actions and witness, contributes to the transformation of individual Christians into people who live according to specific virtues. North American theologian J Philip Wogaman defines a virtue as the tendency and predisposition to be and to act in accordance with goodness.¹¹ Virtues are incarnated, embodied, practised values.¹² Where these virtues, with their personal and public dimensions, are cherished and developed,¹³ a significant contribution is made towards materialising a life of dignity for all.

3. SOME PROGRAMMES OF THE BNC

How then are the above insights, objectives and aspirations promoted and applied in practice in the activities of the Beyers Naudé Centre? In cooperation with local and international partners, the BNC is involved in various programmes that can be grouped under seven main themes: (1) faith and social identity, (2) human dignity and human rights, (3) congregations and public life, (4) just peace-building, (5) globalisation and justice, (6) moral formation in public life, and (7) civil society and public opinion.

3.1 Faith and social identity

- The theme of faith and social identity offers, in partnership with the International Reformed Theological Institute (IRTI) at the Free University in

¹¹ Cf. Wogaman, 1988, especially Chapter 2.

¹² The Christian tradition formulated seven virtues. Four of them are borrowed from Greek philosophical thinking, specifically from Aristotle, and are called the cardinal virtues. Justice entails that people embody fairness, commitment to a life of equality, dignity and joy for all. Just people are even willing to sacrifice for the sake of the other. The other three cardinal virtues are temperance, discernment or wisdom, and fortitude or courage. The three theological virtues that complete the list of seven Christian virtues are faith, hope and love. All these virtues impact on a life of social and economic justice and dignity for all. For very helpful accounts of the virtues see, besides the works mentioned above about approaches to moral decisionmaking, also Hauerwas and Pinches, 1997 and Richardson, 1994.

¹³ Much work has been done recently in the field of moral and virtue formation. Both the theological and anthropological dimensions of these process are investigated. For a general orientation to the process of moral formation, see Koopman and Vosloo, 2002. For a very helpful description of the various modes of moral formation, see the important and famous work of Dutch Roman Catholic theologian J. van der Ven, *Formation of the moral self*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). Van der Ven identifies seven modes of moral formation, namely discipline, socialisation, value transmission, value clarification, moral development, emotional development and character formation.

Amsterdam, as well as the Moluccan Theological Council in Houten, Utrecht, conferences and publications on matters such as diversity, land reform, unity and reconciliation.

- This theme also includes a new project on Coloured identity in South Africa in the context of plurality.
- Together with IRTI and the Mkar Centre for Public Theology and Development, we embarked on a research programme with the theme “Religions and the search for the common good in pluralistic societies”.
- With the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the EMW in Germany as partners, the BNC organised and hosted an international conference and produced various publications focusing on the meaning for Christian life in contemporary societies of the Barmen Declaration and the Belhar Theological Declaration.

3.2 Human dignity and human rights

- In cooperation with colleagues from the disciplines of law, economics and sociology we completed a research project on the fulfilment of social and economic rights.
- In partnership with the Kampen Theological University we are focussing on an ongoing basis on issues such as human dignity in theological perspective, human dignity at the edges of life, and human dignity and violence.
- We also participated with partners of the Faculty of Theology at the Bochum University in Germany in a project with the theme of “Religion and illness in post-secular societies”.

3.3 Congregations and public life

This programme has been undertaken in cooperation with the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. It specifically explores the significance of congregational practices for public life, e.g. those mentioned above in paragraph 3.2, namely worship services, prayers, Holy Communion, baptism, Bible reading, and practices of hospitality and forgiveness. Specific points of focus are public matters such as economic justice and restitution, violence and crime, and the formation of public virtue and character.

3.4 Just peace-building

In partnership with the South African Council of Churches, the Christian Council of Sweden and the Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation, BNC participates in an international project on the global arms trade. A spin-off of this cooperation is the participation by the BNC in initiatives aimed at the development of human

security and peace-building initiatives in various contexts and includes work towards the overcoming of violence and crime in their many manifestations.

3.5 Globalisation and justice

The programmes related to this theme deal with issues such as the humanisation of globalisation, which includes matters such as social, economic and environmental justice, globalisation and gender justice, the variety of ways globalisation impacts on northern and southern countries. Partners in these programmes are the German Evangelical Academies Arnoldshain and Bad Boll, the Ecumenical Service for Social and Economic transformation (ESSET), the Fellowship of Christian Churches in Southern Africa (FOCCISA) and the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa (EFSA).

3.6 Moral formation and public life

In the Western Cape province the BNC, together with the Universities of the Western Cape, Cape Town and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology as well as with the Moral Regeneration Movement, launched the Ethical Leadership Project, which is funded by the provincial Department of Social Development. It focuses on the development of leaders of public virtue and character in all spheres of public life by drawing on the moral and spiritual resources of various religious and secular traditions.

3.7 Civil society and public opinion

- In partnership with members of the Global Network for Public Theology the BNC is engaged in work on, amongst other things, local and global civil society.
- A programme on religion, the media and democracy was launched at the BNC recently.
- A programme under the auspices of the BNC that aims at having a more direct impact on the formation of public opinion and the processes of public policy-making is due to commence in the near future. From time to time a group of about twenty experts on a specific public issue will meet over two days to discuss the issue in depth and to make public recommendations that will inform, strengthen and enhance public discourse, public policy and public action regarding the issue.
- Besides consultations, conferences and consequent publications that pertain to the various programmes of the BNC, the Centre also offers public lectures and discussion forums on a variety of public issues. Renowned local and international experts from a variety of disciplines act as speakers at these occasions.

The above outline of the programmes run independently or with other institutions by the BNC indicates the extent to which it focuses on issues that concern all spheres of society, that the work done at the Centre is done in an interdisciplinary way, that both scholarly voices as well as the narratives from so-called grassroots level are listened to, that an ecumenical approach is adhered to, and that the Centre also functions on an inter-religious basis, and that we wish to draw on the insights of secular voices as well. In this way too we hope to reflect that, in the midst of a plurality of sometimes conflicting, opinions and positions, the Beyers Naudé Centre is guided in its programmes also by and reflects an ethos of humility, cooperation, dialogue, frank deliberation, and tolerance and embrace.

4. CONCLUSION

Religion, particularly the Christian religion, has a record of ambiguity regarding its impact on public life. Religion can be either good news or bad news for a society. It can and has at times informed and legitimised ideologies such as apartheid and Nazism. However, religion also can oppose and help overcome evils such as these. At the BNC we hope that, by following the path of Trinitarian faith, ecumenical and interfaith work (which includes working with people of secular orientation), dedicated and disciplined *interdisciplinary* and *intradisciplinary* reflection, an ethos of dialogue, partnership, tolerance and embrace of the other, we can contribute to spreading the conviction that religion indeed can be, and is, good news for society. Religion can help to promote faith, hope and love in the world: faith that serves as a safe anchor for people; hope that provides a *telos* – a purpose, an end to live for; and love – public love that seeks the wellbeing, the flourishing, of all forms of life.

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The Church of Jesus Christ ... to be sure, is not of this world, but is church *in* the world and *for* the world, called to confront every person and every system with the gospel of Jesus Christ ... The Christian who shrinks from this, in this regard fails in his [*sic*] calling.

Beyers Naudé

Quoted in Die Transvaler, 11 August 1966 [transl. ed.]

AP: "Where does the role of a minister of God, of Christ, begin to take on a justifiable political connotation?"

BN: "At that point where the minister is confronted with the question whether the issue concerned is purely a party political one or whether, in fact, it touches a very deep moral truth. Where a basic Christian truth is threatened by any political action or any political policy a priest must stand up and speak out – not to criticise and condemn a specific party, but to state clearly what Christian truth, justice and love demands of everyone. And that includes the Christian members of that party. He [*sic*] must state clearly what needs to be done. If he doesn't do so, he does a great disservice, not only to the church but also to government."

Beyers Naudé

In an interview with Alan Paton, The Star, 13 December 1984

The difficult questions facing the public witness of church and theology in the economic sphere – not only in South Africa, but indeed everywhere – are the same questions that have always faced the public witness of the church concerning political life as well. What knowledge does the church possess, on the basis of which it can witness? How should it speak, to whom should it speak, when should it speak, about what should it speak, what should it say? With which authority can it speak? Indeed, the church with its theology is here dramatically faced with the challenge that ecumenical theologian Keith Clements has so clearly described and helpfully analysed, namely the task of "learning to speak".

Nico Koopman and Dirkie Smit

Public witness in the economic sphere? On human dignity as a theological perspective