

SOME THOUGHTS ON ‘PUBLIC THEOLOGY’ AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

This essay explores the notion of “Public Theology” as developed in the North American context. It is explained in terms of the effort by theologians to regain some form of “public space” that was lost due to theology’s marginalization and privatization after modernity. How this displacement of religion came about is briefly explained with reference to the shift in the idea of the “public” in classical Greek culture and modern secular societies respectively. Thereafter three traits of a public theology is highlighted: its mode of argumentation, accessible style of communication, and its focus on contemporary social issues. The paper closes with a few remarks about the importance of a public theology in SA since the establishment of a liberal, democratic dispensation.

1. Introduction

In the opening paragraphs of his book on Christian theology and the culture of pluralism, David Tracy claims that, “all theology is public discourse” (1981: 3). Kaufman calls theology “a public, contextual enterprise” (Cady 1991b: 93), and Moltmann elaborates:

As the theology of God’s kingdom, *theology has to be public theology* (my emphasis): public, critical and prophetic complaint to God – public, critical and prophetic hope in God. Its public character is constitutive for theology, for the kingdom of God’s sake. Public theology needs institutional liberty over against the church and a place in the open house of scholars and the sciences. Today this liberty has to be defended against both atheists and fundamentalists (1999: 5).

The term “public theology” first appeared in the title of a 1974-analysis done by Martin Marty on the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (Stackhouse 1997:165). The term emphasised the idea that theology is neither merely private nor a matter of distinctive communal identity, although it may be intensely related to personal commitments and to communal worship. Public theology raises an argument regarding “the way things are and ought to be, one decisive for public discourse and necessary to the guidance of individual souls, societies, and, indeed, the community of nations” (Stackhouse 1997: 165). The term was soon taken up by others. David Tracy, for example, extended the term in his notable work referred to above (1981).¹ Other contributors on this topic, are *inter alia*, Robert Bellah, Robert Benne, Martin Marty and Richard John Neuhaus.²

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1. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). Tracy connected the idea to the Roman Catholic heritage as represented by John Courtney Murray - a contemporary of Niebuhr - whose work is quoted by Lindsey (1992: 44) as “the foundational framework and guiding force of contemporary American public life”.
 2. Bellah, R. and Hammond, P. 1980. *Varieties of Civil Religion*. San Francisco: Harper & Row; Benne, R. *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-First Century*. Minneapolis: Fortress.; Marty, M. 1974. Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience. In: *Journal of Religion*. 54 (October): 332-

The term “public theology” has been increasingly accepted amongst theologians in the North – particularly by those concerned about the ethical quality of society. There is general agreement amongst these theologians that the Christian faith has public implications and should form part of public discourse. There is, though, very little consensus regarding the proper form for a Christian public theology (Thiemann 1991: 19). A small but growing number of theologians have begun to call for the development of a “Public Theology”, which, as Hollenbach (1976: 299) suggests, should “...illuminate the urgent moral questions of our time through explicit use of the great symbols and doctrines of the Christian faith”.

Whilst the proposals vary, the attempts share a common desire: to counteract the marginalization and privatization of contemporary theology. As Cady (1991a: 107) explains, dissatisfaction with the displacement of religious beliefs and values from the public realm has stimulated significant discussions over their (the theologians’) appropriate role in the determination of public policy and sparked renewed interest in the phenomenon of civil religion.

As the focus will be primarily on discussing the phenomenon “public”, Habermas’ definition of a public sphere is enlightening: “A realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed ... A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body” (see Thomas 1992: 458).

Cady (1991a:108) explains that the meaning of “public” takes on different nuances depending upon what it is being contrasted to. Public (as being open and intelligible to all) can be understood in opposition to “parochial” (that which is not universally shared, e.g. a religious affiliation). Public (if it is understood to reflect a social realm) can be contrasted with “private” (that which is a personal/individual realm of life), or with “professional” (that which depends upon occupational training) where what is public will be intelligible to all without academical exclusion.

With this in mind, let us examine how the very concept of “public” developed and how a “marginalization” or “displacement” of religion (and theology) from the public realm came about. In this regard a brief sketch of the private-public duality in Greek and modern societies respectively is enlightening.

2. Public and private in the classic Greek culture

The Western world’s perception of “private” and “public” developed, *inter alia*, on the basic assumption of Greek philosophy. Cady (1991a: 110) explains that the ancient Greek version of public life has recently captivated interest, largely as a device to gain critical distance from our own social set-up. Secondly, because theology has been peripherised in the public arena, this attraction to the Greek model rests upon the idea of “equality” derived from the dialogic character of Greek public life. Interest in, if not – as Cady (1991a: 110) describes it – a romanticisation of, ancient Greek civic life reflects a growing discontent with the modern exegesis of public life which bears little resemblance to its Greek counterpart.

Following the thoughts of Hannah Arendt (see 1954)³, a brief overview of the differentiation between public and private as understood by the Greeks may be offered here.

339; Neuhaus, RJ 1986. *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

3. Conradie (1993:25) warns that Arendt’s analysis of the Greek *polis* may be criticized as romantic, nostalgic and oversimplistic, nevertheless equally relevant.

In classic Greek culture, a distinction is made between public and private as two spheres of existence. “Every” citizen belongs to these two orders of existence (though, in reality it was only free men who could participate in the public life as women, children and slaves were excluded). The Greeks esteemed the public sphere higher than the private (or domestic) sphere. Where the private sphere represented inequality, limitations and deprivations, the public sphere (or *polis*), on the other hand, was seen as the domain of freedom and equality. Here human identity and excellence were achieved via participation in the more exalted forms of life like drama, art, philosophy, sport, dialogue and politics in which men could distinguish themselves (also Cady 1991a: 110, Conradie 1993: 25). To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through dialogue and persuasion. That was in direct contrast to the private domestic sphere where the household head tended to command rather than persuade.

In ancient Greece, the political or *polis*-realm was the sphere of freedom. The public life was the only life worth living, where free men could deal (publicly) with matters of mutual concern, shaping their common destiny. Dialogue was extremely important within the public sphere. The public life was distinguished from the private life in that it knew only “equals” (whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality). Equality, therefore, far from being connected with justice, as in modern times, was the very essence of freedom: to be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled, existed (Arendt 1954: 33).

In his description of Hellenistic culture, Stegemann (1996: 105-106) affirms this view: Life was divided in two spheres, the “public” and the “house” (private). Everything that happened outside the house, was seen as public. Thus, everything that was conducted “unter freiem Himmel”, for example, political-administrative, legal, and economic activities, *the official religious-cultural happenings*, and the non-private social contact, were part of the *polis*. One can conclude therefore, that religion, was seen as a “public activity”, and not a mere private happening, as would later be the case in the modern era onwards.

Conradie (1993: 25) summarizes the ancient Greek’s understanding of “public sphere” as, firstly, the sphere where everyone present could be seen or heard, and therefore enjoyed a maximum degree of *public-ity*. Secondly, the public sphere was the arena where people could gather without overcrowding one another – precisely because it was the primary *locus* for distinguishing oneself. Thirdly, in the public sphere decisions were taken democratically and through persuasion – not by force. Dialogue as the means of taking decisions was therefore extremely important within this public sphere.

These values prevalent in the classic Greek *polis* stand in direct opposition to the modern tendency towards privatization, concludes Conradie (1993: 26).

Although the Greek ideas are helpful in our quest to understand the private-public-dichotomy, they are - as Cady highlights (1991a: 110) – not adequate in clarifying the forces that have contributed to shaping the modern geography of the public and private realms. To understand our own interpretation of these spheres, the effect that the Enlightenment has had upon shaping the modern outlook, must be briefly noted.

3. Public and private in the modern⁴ world

The gulf between the private and the public still existed somehow in the Middle Ages, though it had lost much of its significance and changed its location entirely (Arendt 1954: 33). While on the one hand it was now the Catholic Church that offered men a substitute for the citizenship that had formerly been the prerogative of the *polis*, the secular realm under the rule of feudalism was in its entirety what the private realm had been in antiquity (Arendt 1956: 54). Habermas calls this medieval period the “representative public sphere”, as the feudal authorities (clergy included) represented public power before the people rather than for the people (Thomas 1992: 458).

With the Enlightenment, however, the relation between private and public changed considerably. By the end of the eighteenth century, the representative public sphere had disintegrated and had given rise to the “bourgeois public sphere”, with this sphere being the mediator between the private sphere and the state (Thomas 1992: 459). The ideology of this bourgeois public sphere was that it was open to all, (although in fact open only to white, educated, noble, males - similar to the ancient Greek society). Interestingly enough, although on the one hand, “public” is highly inclusive insofar as it encompasses all persons, it did not, on the other hand, include those aspects of individuals that make them distinct. It reduces the individual to a least common denominator of personhood, separating the self from the characteristics and roles which determine personal identity. The specifics of individual personal history are irrelevant within the public realm (Cady 1991a: 112).

The Enlightenment contribution to the structuring of our public and private spaces was forged in response to a social crisis rooted in the Protestant Reformation and the lengthy religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. To re-establish social peace, religion was increasingly relegated to the private sphere and a secular discourse was developed to articulate the nature of political and social life. Enlightenment thinkers sought to develop a form of discourse and a minimalist vision of the good that could be shared irrespective of religious affiliation. This vision informed what later developed as philosophic liberalism, and which became imbedded in the personal and political fabric of Western life (Cady 1991a: 111). Modernity, consequently, is the intellectual and cultural heritage of the Enlightenment thoughts, namely, the rejection of traditional and religious sources of authority in favour of (objective) reason and (scientific) knowledge.

It is understandable, as Smit (1999: 39) points out, that modernity was critical of tradition, as traditions were seen as human constructs. Therefore, they would be critically examined by using historical, objective methods. The communities upholding these traditions are viewed with skepticism, for individuals, as autonomous, rational and equals, are independent of any authoritative community. Thus, the traditional roles of religion are drastically affected. The sacred canopy provided by religion or metaphysics no longer exists. As religion cannot fulfill the integrating role it previously played, society becomes secularised.

According to Smit (1999: 39) this secularization and pluralization did not mean that there is no place for religion. On the contrary, religion could still be important as long as it restricts itself to the private sphere of the individual's personal and intimate life or to the

4. Hunter (1994: 13–14) explains that the term ‘modern’ (coming from the Latin, *modo*, meaning ‘just now’), was first applied in the fifth century by church authorities as a way of signifying the distinction between the Christian present and a Roman pagan past. The term seemed to appear and reappear exactly during those periods in European history when people became aware of some new changes dawning against a vague backdrop of an ancient preceding order. With the French Enlightenment, however, the concept acquired a new meaning as a distinctive and superior period in the history of humanity.

boundaries of a particular religious communities' activities. Thus, in a modern, secular society, religion becomes privatized due to a loss of its place in public life.

The implications are clear: its connections to other subsystems, such as politics, economics, the public media, the legal system, and public education are seriously threatened. Through this process of privatization religion has become something that one can afford to ignore. Religion is seen as a matter of private belief and taste; anyone has the right to hold whatever religious beliefs he or she wishes – as long as it does not interfere with public life. Moreover, the changing demographics also effected the social impact of theological reflection. The previously homogeneous religious sphere is replaced with a more diverse society, reinforcing the assumption that theological reflection bears little relation to the public realm. Hence, theology becomes politically and academically marginalised. It becomes merely the self-expression of a particular church tradition (Cady 1987:193; Conradie 1993:27; Smit 1999: 39).

This displacement of religion through the Enlightenment implies a permanent constitutional crisis for theology. Metz (in Metz & Moltmann 1995: 32) warns that a privatistic reduction of theology (in which the *logos* of theo-logy is entirely concentrated on religion as a private affair) holds the danger of losing continuity with the messianic cause of Christianity. A rationalistic reduction of theology holds the further danger of a radical abandonment of symbolism and mythology under the excessive cognitive pressure of the abstract modern world of the sciences. In the words of Cady.

“Whatever its virtues, the modern epoch has not been hospitable to religion, let alone to theology, and consigned both to the private realm where opinion, not knowledge, reigns supreme. The increasing attacks upon modernity and its characteristic assumptions and sensibilities have emboldened theologians to seek a legitimacy and role denied to them in recent centuries. The intellectual and social currents loosely associated with the movement of postmodernism⁵ create a more receptive context for the theological reflection. Many theologians are seizing upon the amorphous movement of postmodernism to legitimate their enterprise without adequately confronting the need for basic changes in the genre of theology” (1991b: 81).

The revision of the Enlightenment construal of the public constitutes both the ground and the goal of what became known as “public theology” (Cady 1991a: 113).

4. Public theology after modernity

In general, there are three ideal-typical possibilities for a community of faith in response to modernity. The first is retreat, where faith withdraws from any conscious interaction with the modern world (although there is no complete flight from modernity's pressing realities).

5. Although this discussion is primarily focused on “modernity”, a few remarks should be made about postmodernity. An oversimplified definition of postmodernity (as it still remains a vague term) is, an era after 1945 where there is a progressive loss of confidence in, if not failure of, the Enlightenment project, especially in all the old certainties and justifications of Western society; and with them their hierarchies, elites and bureaucracies (Sampson 1994: 31). Niebuhr said, for example, in 1944, that modern secularism “creates a spiritual vacuum” and that “it stands on the abyss of moral nihilism and threatens the whole of life with a sense of meaninglessness” (Bellah 1986: 80). Postmodernism, according to Cady (1991b: 88), offers theologians a way not only to contribute to the dismantling of modernity but also to secure for religion a space that is not determined, overshadowed, and marginalized by science. In and through this movement theologians correctly perceive that the incipient signs of a new epoch portend a better future. She warns, however, that the shifts associated with postmodernism lend themselves all too easily to forms of theology impotent to combat the growing marginalization of theological reflection. Especially disturbing is the way in which elements of postmodernism are appropriated for confessional theologies, theologies that are particularly beguiling because of their avant-garde, academic veneer.

A second strategy is embrace, where faith consciously accommodates the cognitive and normative assumptions of the modern world (eventually sharing a more secular/this worldly orientation deprived of the mysterious and supernatural), and lastly, resisting, where faith chooses to engage with the modern world but opposes its secularising effects in the effort to preserve its orthodoxy. Though, in the act of engaging with the modern world, sometimes accommodating, sometimes opposing, transformation, nevertheless, will occur (Hunter 1994: 22-23).

In the light of the aboved discussion, public theology may fall into the third category, namely resisting the secularization of society, and with that the displacement of theology from the public to the private through deliberate engagement. The challenge is to develop a public theology⁶ that remains based in the particularities of the Christian faith (thus preserving its orthodoxy), while genuinely addressing issues of public significance.

The main implication regarding the study of the concerns of public theology is quite clear: will religious convictions and theological analysis have any real impact on the way our public lives are structured, irrespective of which public the theologian chooses to interact with? Can a truly public theology have a salutary influence on the development of public policy within a pluralistic democratic nation? The real challenge to a public theology is to find a way – within the social, cultural and religious pluralism - to influence the development of public policy without seeking to construct a new Christendom or lapsing into a benign moral relativism (Thiemann 1991: 43).

Public theology, therefore – in continuation with theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* – is an attempt to understand the relation between Christian convictions and the broader social and cultural context within which the Christian community lives. In order for that relation to be properly understood, the theologian must offer a detailed “description” of the fabric of Christian thought and practice in the broader social and cultural setting within which Christians seek to live. For Thiemann (1991: 21) the goal is to identify the particular places where Christian convictions intersect with the practices that characterise contemporary public life.

The effect of modernity is not only a reshuffling of what is “public” and “private”, and which life-spheres are assigned to each, but also implies a radical pluralizing of “the public”.

Public theology therefore addresses basically two issues: first, how can these varied publics be described; and, secondly, how - once described - does theology engage with each of these publics? In simplified terms, this could be described as the “address” and “method” of public theology.

Concerning possible “addresses”, David Tracy’s and Max Stackhouse’s viewpoints on the different publics will be briefly set out:

Tracy’s contributions to defend the public status of theology is noteworthy.⁷ He rgues that, since the public is not one homogeneous entity, but diverse realities, the way a

6. The term “Public Theology” needs to be understood as representative of various schools of thought. Conradie (1993: 32-45) gives a thorough description of two approaches to public theology: a) the approach, as suggested by Tracy, explaining or justifying Christian truth claims in a way accessible to publics external to the Christian community, and b) the intra-textual approach as represented by theologians such as George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, Stanley Hauerwas, Ronald Thiemann and others, describing the way in which Christian truth claims function within a particular faith community.

7. To mention but a few: 1975. Theology as public discourse. *Christian Century*, 92, 280-284.; 1977. The role of the theologian in public life: some reflections. *Word & World*, 4(3): 230-239.; 1981a. *The analogical imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism*. London: SCM Press.; 1981b. Defending the public character of theology. In *Theologians in transition. How my mind has changed series*. Wall, JM New York: Crossroad.

theologian strives for publicness will vary according to the particular audience he or she is addressing. Each theologian addresses three distinct and related social realities: the wider society (that is the technoeconomic realm, the realm of polity and the realm of culture), the academy (theology), and the church (sociological and theological reality). Each type appropriates a different sense of “public”. Furthermore, different subdisciplines of theology will utilize distinctive forms of discourse and warrants must be developed for each. Theology is a generic name not for a single discipline but for three: fundamental theology, systematic theology and practical theology.⁸ Oversimplified, one can categorize the three subdisciplines as: fundamental theology addressing the academy; systematic theology oriented towards the church, and practical theology related primarily to the public of society (Tracy 1981; see also Cady 1987; Thomas 1992).

The task of fundamental theology is seen as that of the exploration of metaphysical questions and will necessarily remain at an abstract level with reasoned arguments (this interpretation of public reflects the Enlightenment model of reason). Systematic theology entails the interpretation of the religious classics of a tradition, thereby enabling a more concrete form of reflection. This sense of public reflects a contextual interpretation of reason (Cady 1987:196-197). Although Tracy primarily developed his thoughts on public theology around fundamental and systematic theologies, Conradie (1993: 30) mentions that the call for a public theology is often focussed on the role of theology in the larger society (the political and economic spheres).

To be effective in this pluralistic society, Stackhouse (1997: 166) is of the opinion that Public Theology should claim four “publics”. Firstly, what he calls the authentic religious public, with “holiness” as its focus. The second public is the political public, with “justice” as its anchor word for creating a just society. The academic public is the third one with (scientific) “truth” as aim, and lastly, the economic public with “creativity” as its essence. The role public theology can play in these four different “publics”, will differ according to different questions asked, for example, a public theologian will concentrate on a) the religious public with a question of what can be preached / taught to a community of worshippers, b) the political public with a question of how to provide the moral and spiritual fibre that would allow just and responsive politics to function legally, c) the academic public with a question of what can be offered as convincing arguments, warrants and evidence in the dialogue among scholars, and fourthly, d) the economic public with questions encouraging creativity in production and distribution.

Regarding the second question concerning the method or “mode of argument” in public theology, a certain convergence appears:

Tracy (1981) concentrates especially (but not exclusively) on the question as to how the public status of theological truth claims can be defended. His concerns are specifically focussed on the privatization of religion and the situation of pluralism in religion. He

113-124.; 1984. The role of theology in public life: some reflections. *Word & World*, 4(3), 230-239. 1987. Particular classics, public religion and the American tradition. In *Religion and American public life*. Lovin, R (ed.), New York: Paulist Press. 115-131.; 1989. Afterword: Theology, public discourse, and the American Tradition. In *Religion and the twentieth century American intellectual life*. Lacey, MJ (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1990. *Dialogue with others: The interreligious dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Michigan.

8. Thus far Tracy has elucidated two of his three subdisciplines, fundamental theology and systematic theology. Fundamental theology has been developed most fully in *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975), and systematic theology in *The Analogical Imagination*. He has indicated that a study of practical theology will be forthcoming (Cady, 1987: 194).

believes that a public theology will avoid or overcome the privatization and marginalization of religion. This is achieved via its public discourse, meaning that it appeals to all people on grounds that any reasonable person would accept.

Placher (1985:407) identifies three different modes of arguments for a public theology: Firstly, it appeals to warrants available to any intelligent, reasonable, responsible person. This agrees with Tracy's viewpoint that theology should be conducted openly and that it should render its truth claims available to all rational persons (1981: 64). Theology is also public if it understands religion as fundamentally a public, communal activity, not merely a matter of the individual's experience; and thirdly, if it effectively addresses contemporary political and social issues. It is clear that if Christians would opt out of their pluralistic society's debate, the *polis* would be both unaffected and unimpressed (Placher 1985: 414).

For Cady (1987: 198) a public Christian theology is an attempt to discuss the moral and religious dimensions of some of the urgent public issues and to illuminate these with reference to the symbols and doctrines of the Christian faith. To identify the specifications of a public theology, she proposed a model which incorporates three components and which clearly link with aspects of Tracy and Placher: a) an open form of argumentation; b) an accessible style of communication, and c) a focus on timely issues. These three components requires some further discussion.

The open form of argumentation

The call for a 'public' way of doing theology usually includes a call for the cultivation of an authentic public life. It is important to create opportunities where a sensitivity for public issues is developed and where these issues can be debated through open dialogue and persuasion. Public life (and public theology) is closely related to *dialogue*. The criteria for dialogue usually centres around concepts of rationality. If Christian theology wants to make contributions to debates on public issues it cannot merely appeal to Scripture or the Christian tradition as if such appeals will by themselves settle the issues at hand; it will have to defend its truth claims in a way accessible to others in the public spheres (Conradie 1993: 30-31). The challenge, though, even in taking into consideration issues such as "rationality", is to develop a public theology that remains based in the particularities of the Christian faith while genuinely addressing issues of public significance. Too often, Thiemann (1991:19) warns:

... theologies that seek to address a broad secular culture lose touch with the distinctive beliefs and practices of the Christian tradition. In their zeal to engage a public realm theologians tend to adopt concepts and forms of analysis foreign to the Christian faith. On the other hand, theologies that seek to preserve the characteristic language and patterns of Christian narrative and practice too often fail to engage the public realm in an effective and responsible fashion. If Christians are to find an authentic public voice in today's culture, we must find a middle way...

The accessibility and style of communication

If theology is to have any success at overcoming its cultural marginalization, it is essential that it pays more attention to questions of style and audience. It is pointless for theologians to denounce their shrinking audience when much they write is unintelligible outside, if not inside, their own professional guild. As Cady (1987: 203) explains, technical, jargon-filled discourse fails as public address. Unless the content of the communication is relevant and persuasive, the intelligibility of its expression is immaterial. Cady quotes Josiah Royce,

saying that theology should address the central problems of the age rather than perennial, abstract theological issues, and reconstruct the tradition in the light of contemporary insight (Cady 1987: 204).

The style of most theological writing reflects the academic audience at which it is aimed. Extensive references to the literature and endless qualifying footnotes have become the hallmark of this form of writing. Perhaps even more problematic is the tendency to adopt the jargon of particular schools of philosophy or theology, thereby limiting even further the accessibility of one's work. Obviously public theologians should keep all the different publics in mind, not only the academic public. It is true that the academic public comes with its unique style and rhetoric. All public theology, of course, does not necessarily mean a theology that is intelligible to every single person. As a form of critical reflection, it presupposes a literate, informed audience. This element of elitism is an inevitable component of all intellectual disciplines (Cady 1990: 393; Conradie 1993: 31-32).

The focus on timely issues

The public theologian should function as a social critic, seeking to address contextual, public issues from a theological perspective. The task of a public theology is to contribute to the upbuilding and the critical transformation of our public life. If the theologian engages in open inquiry rather than citation, this form of theology can, as easily as philosophy, ethics or literary criticism, be considered a genre of public reflection. In one sense this means overcoming the privatization of religion and theological reflection, refusing to confine them to issues of personal and interpersonal spirituality.

Cady (1990: 385ff) remarks that a public theology is not simply a theology with a political agenda, despite sharing the aim to overcome the depositioning of religion. It seems to move beyond a "minimal vision of what is possible among people", recognizing that "if we envision the public as nothing more than a battleground between divergent self-interests, we create a dismal self-fulfilling prophecy". A public theology seeks to cultivate a sense of common life as the indispensable basis for political activity. The task of public theology is to build and nurture a sense of common life, a vision of interdependence that precedes the political.⁹

This vision of interdependence nurtures an acknowledgement of a shared public life that underlies and precedes political, social and moral divisions. It undertakes this task out of the conviction that the absence of a sense of such a common life produces divisive, unself-critical and anthropocentric political and moral factions. However, a public theology also seeks to facilitate political, social and moral analysis of this common life in an effort to transform this life in the direction of a universal community (Cady 1990: 392).

The surge of the public theological debate is mainly a North American, and to a lesser extent a Western European affair. However defined or reconstructed, it rests on the premise of a significant shift in the private-public realms of society as brought about by modernity. This raises the interesting and complex question of a "public theology" in a context like South Africa. Are the conditions here an approximation of developments in Western societies, or are the contexts so different that one could shrug the public theology-debate off as an interesting, but ineffectual Western hemisphere debate?

9. To limit public theology to such a task, however, runs the risk of defending a highly reactionary ideology that provides a sacred canopy for all manner of inequities.

5. Public theology in South Africa? Some preliminary observations

In my view there are at least two reasons for taking this debate seriously, and for giving it a specifically South African focus:

Firstly, the social forces shaping South African society over the last two decades, and particularly since 1990, led us with an “Absturz” into the modern era. Despite the vastly varied socio-economic conditions in South Africa, which in some cases render “modernity-speak” as such inappropriate, the forces of globalisation, mass-media communication, rapid urbanization, entrance into the world economic system, focus on science and technology, as well as democratization, led to increasing features of “modernity”: privatization, the loss of a sense of community, disregard for authority and a sense of displacement *vis á vis* tradition. The effect on the “morphology” of the Christian faith – institutionally speaking – seems clear: A growth in charismatic- and house-churches where – whether in mass meetings or small groups – the privatization of religion is paradoxically confirmed by a theology and worship style which tend to assume a church-world dualism.

Secondly, the acceptance of our widely praised constitution represents a powerful institutionalization of modernity with its emphasis on individual rights and a clear distinction between church and state. Both sides of the church struggle against apartheid operated from the premise that religion, by the very structure of our society, had public significance. This space has been usurped after democratization by the publics of the economy and the law (legal system). This caught the Christian churches – unaccustomed to a “theology of democracy” or to alternative methods of public opinion-formation via open dialogue - off guard; leaving them with a sense of directionlessness (and a serious leadership vacuum).

- We are still learning how to be church as part of civil society and in partnership with NGO’s and CBO’s.
- We are still learning how to address “timely issues” in a priestly rather than prophetic mode of discourse.
- We are still learning how to face the challenge to engage other disciplines within the university to guard against intellectual isolation/monologue, and show the specific theological contribution to issues of public concern.
- And we are still learning to translate “theology-speak” into accessible forms of communication in an open, dialogical manner.

In short, more than ever, we need to give public account of the hope that is in us (1 Pet 1:15).

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