What is "theology" in "public theology" and what is "public" about "public theology"?

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Abstract

This article sets out to argue that institutional Christianity does not have the exclusive rights to "doing theology". Since Plato theology has assumed systematization of ideas on the transcendent divine. The practice of theology is to be found in both the professional academy and in the public square. Spirituality is not to be reserved for people longing for God within the context of today's mass consumerist populist culture. Spirituality and religion overlap and, therefore, today's postmodern spirituality need not result in the end of religion. However, institutional religion is indeed dying and "public theology" is not about theologians or pastors "doing theology" in the public square. Public theologicans are the film directors, artists, novelists, poets, and philosophers. The article argues that "public theology" could facilitate a dialogue between the theological discourse of academics and the public theological discourse. The article shows that "public theology" does to an extent overlap with ecclesial and contextual theology. In its core "public theology" is seen as the inarticulate longing of believers who do not want to belong.

1.   INTRODUCTION

The notion of "public theology" is a newcomer to the field of religious studies and spirituality. Some confusion, however, reigns among its users. My contribution is an attempt at further clarification. Against the background of the symposium and the recent discussions on public theology, my article aims to

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respond to how the concept "public" is used.[2] On request, it focuses on the views of William Storrar.[3] Dr Storrar's point of departure is the late David Bosch's notion of a paradigm shift in missiology. Storrar (p 5) asks in Lecture 1: "But what is *public* about public theology and its *public* paradigm of mission?"[4]

This article – a reworked version of the paper – aims to argue that the institutional Christianity does not have the exclusive rights to "doing theology". I will argue that, since Plato, the concept "theology" assumed the systematization of ideas on the transcendent divine. Today, the practice of theology is to be found in both the professional academy and in the public square. *Spirituality*, however, is not to be reserved for people longing for God within the context of today's mass consumerist populist culture, while *religion* is reserved for ecclesial institutions. I will demonstrate that spirituality and religion overlap. Today's postmodern spirituality therefore does not need to result into the end of religion. Although I argue that institutional religion is indeed dying and much theological activity has shifted from the academy to the "public square", I am of the opinion that "public theology" is not about theologians or pastors "doing theology" in the public square. Public theology is the activity of the film directors, artists, novelists, poets, and philosophers. However, the article argues that "public theology" could facilitate a dialogue between the theological discourse of academics and the public theological discourse.

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[2] This article is a reworked version of a paper presented on invitation as a reflection on the notion "public theology" at a symposium during the visit of Professor William Storrar, President of the Global Network for Public Theology, to the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria in August 2008. This paper forms part of the section "Responsible South African public theology in a global area: Perspectives and proposals", organized by the Centre for Public Theology of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, 4-5 August 2008. The article does not focus either on the South African context as such or the impact of globalization on this context.

[3] Dr William Storrar is the director of the Center of Theological Inquiry at the Princeton Theological Seminary (NJ) and the first president of The Global Network for Public Theology (see www.ctinquiry.org/gnpt/index.htm). These papers are titled "Doing public theology in a global era, lecture 1: Public anger – the stranger's gift in a global era; lecture 2: Public spirit – the citizen's gift in a global era".

[4] The frame of reference for my article, "What is 'theology' in 'public theology' and what is 'public' about 'public theology'?", was derived from works of Clive Pearson (Vice-Principal of the United Theological College and Associate Director of the Research Group on Public and Contextual Theologies, Charles Sturt University, Australia), Dirkie Smit (2007:11-46; an Afrikaans version was presented at the Centre for Public Theology of the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, on April 23rd, 2008), the *International Journal of Public Theology* (Storrar 2007:5-25), Charles Taylor (2007), Elaine Graham (2005), Gerhard Sauter (2007:149-165), Jurjen de Groot (De Groot, de Jong & Markus 2007) and Graig Van Elder (2007).

2.   PUBLIC THEOLOGY AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE

In the introduction above I made it clear from the onset, that "public theology" is for me not about theologians or pastors "doing theology" *in* the public square. I am aware that this view is quite unconventional. I myself am a professional theologian employed in the context of the academy. However, I do not see "public theology" as something to be studied in a systematic way by professional theologians at universities or seminaries.[5] Quite the opposite. The fact that a Centre for Public Theology exists as part of the infrastructure of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, and that I as biblical scholar participate in this symposium, means that academics are challenged to engage with the theology that people in the public square are doing.

According to me, "doing theology *in* public" as "the Christian's … *voice in* [the] global square" does not necessarily imply the identification of the "Christian's own identity … in this global square" (quotes from William Storrar 2008b:3, my emphasis). I agree, the "question of how we understand Christian identity is central to doing public theology in a global era" (Storrar 2008b:4). However, we need to distinguish, in Storrar's terminology, between *voice* and *identity* and subsequently between, on the one hand, believers who constitute institutional Christianity and, on the other hand, "neighbourhood saints", "strangers", and "fellow citizens" (Storrar 2008b:7-8).

Strorrar's profile of people, "who live a complex life of multiple identities", needs to be restructured by discerning which voice belongs to whom. The voice and identity of the *two* groups dialoguing with each other, should be distinguished. They are, on the one hand, the theologians or believers (i.e. those in traditional Christian institutions, congregations or even "missional congregations") and, on the other hand, the public theologians (i.e. the "neighbourhood saints, etcetera"). According to me, Storrar's notion of the "gift of the stranger" correlates with the latter – including the "gift of the neighbourhood saint" who could be a hospital nurse, a choir leader, a migrant, a professional artist, philosopher, poet, film director etcetera.

When this "gift" constitutes a "disciplined" reflection one could call it "public theology". Or otherwise, we should reach consensus in the academic guild that the term "theology" could mean "God-talk" even in a "non-disciplined" manner. Yet, even if we agree that "theology" amounts to any kind of reflection on the divine, there would still be a big difference between the "professional theologian" doing "theology" in "public" and the "stranger" doing "theology" in public. I would like to reserve "public theology" for the latter,

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[5] See the definition for the term "theology" provided by Ebeling (1957) and Deist (1984:172).

distinguishing between academics reflecting on "theology" which is performed in the "public square" and the "strangers" who are responsible for this "public theology". This public-theological discourse breathes a kind of spirituality that has been questioned by present-day philosophers who ask: is this still "religion"? Among them are Jacques Derrida (see Caputo, Hart & Sherwood 2005:33) and Charles Taylor (2007:507-508). Another illustration of my point is that the format of public theology does not remotely look like that of an academic paper, lecture or text book. Public theology emerges in multifarious facets: in movies, songs, poems, novels, art, architecture, protest marches, clothing, newspaper and magazine articles.

Yet, the question remains: Who are these " public theologians"? Where would one find them? To my mind this symposium *is* not public theology. We are here *reflecting on public theology*. The social location of public theologians is not the university campus, but rather the public square – in other words, the modern-day *agora* – wherever it may be situated in the "global village" or in the cyber space.

Present-day public theology seems to be embedded in modern-day postsecular, populist culture, stripped from "its critical function as it was absorbed into mass-consumer culture" (Melton 2001:4).[6] Often, within such a context, charismatic leaders, as the sociologist Max Weber (Kim 2007)[7] called such figures decades ago in the face of rising Hitlerism, bring "good news" to a desperate "unthinking mass following" – a kind of civil gathering of a "'sectlike society' with its own parlance" (Weber's terminology).

Though I appreciate the contribution of public theology to our postsecular age – while being aware of the pitfall of the so-called *liberal* stance of "repressive tolerance" (Storrar 2007:15; Simpson 2002:139) – I, however, do not consider all manifestations of public theology to necessarily

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[6] Thomas M Schmidt (2007:338) refers to our postsecualr society's "Kohärenz zwischen säkularen und religiösen Überzeugungen" as the dynamics within the secular society where conventions have to "adapt or die" – my version of his expression "Anpassungszwänge und Konventionen einer säkularen Merheitskultur" In explicit reference to Habermas (1962), James Van Horn Melton (2001:4) describes this "public sphere" as "more open and accessible forms of urban public space and sociability" but it has become stripped from "its critical function as it was absorbed into mass-consumer culture" (cf Storrar 2008:6). Storrar and Melton concur with Habermas that a critical and rational discussion is still possible in this new "global public sphere" (Melton 2001).

[7] "If the genuine self-rule of the people is impossible, the only choice is between leaderless and leadership democracy (*Führerdemokratie*) … Leadership democracy is, however, not solely reliant upon the quality of its leaders, let alone that of a caesaristic dictator. In addition to electoral competition, Weber saw localized, yet public associational life as a breeding ground for the formation of charismatic leaders." (cf Max Weber [1910] 2002. "Voluntary associational life (*Vereinswesen*)", ed and tr by Sung Ho Kim, *Max Weber Studies* 2/2, 2002).

be conducive to the "public good". On the more negative side there are the evangelical-charismatic manifestations within a populist culture, which are accompanied by typical biblicistic fundamentalism. On the more positive side, public theology's "postfoundational grammar" expresses what I call "the inarticulate longing of believers who do not want to belong" (Avis 2003:108). Some of these believers have already reached a "second naiveté" (Wallace 1995) – they are able to experience transcendence in everydayness. Characteristic of such a spirituality are post-theism and post-fideism,[8] individual or communal contemplative prayer and an "art" of Bible reading in which the narratives of struggling, confessing, cursing, praying, believing people from biblical antiquity[9] serve as mimesis for believers today who "think outside the box" of the institutional religion. If they would like to form an alternative community (to the institutional church) in which to experience and express their "alternative" faith, such communities could be termed *the church on the other side* (MacLaren 2000) or even *churchless Christianity* (Hoefner 2001).

Jean Bethke Elshtain (1995; in Storrar 2008b:4-5) refers to the obstacle of people living out their "complexity of public and private identities" where we "literally cannot understand one another". According to Storrar, "the task of public theology is to call Christians out of that world of mutual incomprehension into the world of public citizenship in the company of strangers." He asks: "Do Christians only speak their own strange language or can they learn the language of strangers and find in the conversation mutual understanding, common ground, a common humanity and the possibility of making common cause in public issues" (Storrar 2008b:5)? My answer is "No" to the first part of his question, and "Yes" to the second.

The latest issue of *Theos: The public theology think tank* (Spencer 2008) states: the "cacophony of sometimes mutually hostile Christian voices in the public square" illustrates that the "church's biggest obstacle to effective public witness is probably itself" (Nick Spencer 2008:79). In the same "public theology think tank", the insight of the United Reformed Church is quoted: "Public proclamation does not, however, simply mean shouting the gospel at anybody, irrespective of whether they are listening, a point EA [the Evangelical Alliance] publications emphasise, perhaps because aware that

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[8] See Andries van Aarde (2008), Theological trends in our postsecular age. Forthcoming article *Verbum et Ecclesia's* commemoration of the University of Pretoria's centenary celebration in 2008.

[9] See, for example, Walter Brueggemann's (2005:170-171) description of the "new characteristics of post-liberal exegesis".

evangelicals sometimes do just that" (in Spencer 2008:41). If Christians wish to do theology in public, the Baptist Union of Great Britain's statement provides the appropriate programme: "The New Testament documents seem to suggest that the best mechanism for delivering social transformation would be the Christian community living as Jesus intended" (in Spencer 2008:42).

For the purposes of a conversation about doing theology in the public square and being a present-day missional community, it is not only important to clarify the notion of "public", but also those of "theology" and "public theology. My frame of reference it that of a postmodern biblical hermeneutist. The following constitute my points of departure:

- the term "being a missional community";
- the trajectory of Christianization, secularization, globalization, postsecularization;
- Plato's characterization of "theology" (Burnett 1967);
- Peter Berger's term "sacred canopy" (Berger 1961, 1967, 1970, 2004, Berger & Luckmann 1975 & Van Aarde 2005, 2008);
- the public versus the private domain;
- what public theology is not, but with what it does overlap to an extent:

  - ecclesial theology;
    contextual theology;[10]
  - civil religion; moral care;

With the term "being a missional community" I do not intend to think in the first instance from the perspective of the traditional institutionalized "organized congregation" which is invited or tried to be persuaded to "school" volunteers to be sent as "missionaries" to the present-day "global village" with the intent to lure "the stranger" into the known ecclesial institution. If this would be the case the congregation remains to be a kind of "house-train". According to me, Bosch (1991) represents a "transition" between "being congregation imbued with the spirit of a missional house-train" and "being a missional community" in which heart room is made to accommodate the present-day postsecular "*public paradigm of* mission". De Groot, de Jong & Markus (2007) speak of a *missional congregation* on this side of the bridge and Van Elder et alia (2007) of a *missional community* that already crossed the bridge.

Graig Van Elder (2007:38-43) describes the "aptitudes" of a "missional church" in our modern-day context as, among other things, an anticipation of

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[10] See, inter alia, Barbé (1992:181-191); Jin (1992:198-206); Hunt (1992:207-210).

both "new insights into the gospel" and a "reciprocity" which "occurs when the cultural group that has brought the gospel into another context is itself changed by those who received the gospel."

According to Van Elder, ministry "is always contextual and thus also practical." For him it "means that all forms of ministry are going to bear the patterns and shape of the culture in which a congregation is ministering." He demonstrates that this "point introduces the important issue of how confessions function in congregational life. In reality there can be no universal confession: every congregation needs to learn how to confess the faith in its particular context. While it needs to draw on historical confessions to engage in confessing the faith, a congregation needs actively engage in translating the themes and insights of historical confessions in order to address the issues within its own context."

Van Elder understands that "organization is always contextual, and thus also provisional." Fir him this "point introduces the important issue of how polities are to function in congregations. In reality, there can be no standardized polity … [P]olities need to be adaptive and flexible as they consciously take context and culture into consideration in the midst of the processes of forming and reforming."

3.   CHRISTIANIZATION, SECULARIZATION, GLOBALIZATION AND POSTSECULARIZATION

According to Clive Pearson,[11] the notion public theology presupposes that Christian beliefs and doctrines would be considered to be relevant to the public, because its origins are to be found in a context where people have privatized Christian faith for personal need and salvation. Pearson is of the opinion that public theology, although embedded in an academic endeavour, functions to mobilize Christians to become politically involved. For him public theology is inclusive by nature. The individual is seen as part of humanity. Pearson believes that such a globalized perspective has consequences for traditional theism in which the Transcendent controls heaven and earth. However, the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric worldview was not accompanied by a shift in the conception the Transcendent. Because public theologians are aware of the pluralistic nature of society, they deal with the issue of diversity when they address societal issues (such as language, human rights etc). There is a reason why in public theology society is called a "market place", because many "products" are on offer and theology and

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[11] "What is public theology?", in www.edu.au/faculty/arts/theology/pact/documents/What_is_Public_Theology.pdf.

religion are only two among many other. Therefor, according to Pearson, "public theology seeks to provide resources for people to make connections between their faith and the practical issues facing society."

In this description of Clive Pearson a trajectory can be identified. The followers of Jesus institutionalized Christianity. This institution influenced all spheres of life and was the most important supporter of monarchies. The power of monarchies and the church was usurped by the bourgeoisie. This is called secularization. Some people opted to be "unbelievers" whereas others chose to retain religion, but to engage with it critically. Contramovements represent either an attempt to reinstate orthodoxy, or an escape into charismatic evangelicalism. However, both share the epistemology of fundamentalism. Many "liberal theologians" decided to remain part of institutional religion. This was the secular era of consumerism and a global economy, supported by information technology, which led to "superficiality and depthlessness" (Ritzer 1997:225).

Insight into the role of master narratives, such as globalization and consumerism, and the damage they do to individuals, leads to a reveille of small base communities that derive their energy from spirituality. Charismatic leaders make use of spirituality to establish and increase their popularity. The membership of established churches dwindles. In this postsecular age the choice for "unbelief" is exposed as actually simply having been the suppression of spirituality. With the re-emergence of spirituality this suppressed spirituality revives, but it has "nowhere to go". Those who have chosen the critical option feel alienated from the popular culture – they are critical also of the element of mass hysteria. Some of them join the emerging Christianity which exists parallel to the church. Others remain seekers in the public square. Mainline churches continue in a much diminished and ever diminishing form and suffer a leadership crisis.

Building on Rick Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer (2003:218), Yolanda Dreyer (2008), practical theologian of the University of Pretoria, identifies a three-fold task for public theology:

- to include the public in the practicing of theology;
- to include everyday matters in theological reflection;
- and to facilitate dialogue between theology and contemporary culture.

From a useful previous article of Yolanda Dreyer (2004) on "seekers among the youth" it becomes clear that her insight into the important aspect of dialogue between practical theology and public theology (Dreyer 2004:919-920) is borrowed from, on the one hand, Don Browning and Francis Schüssler

Fiorenza (1992) and, on the other hand, from scholars such as R Osmer (2003), F Schweitzer (1999:307-321), P J Palmer (1981), and R Oswald and S Leas (1987).

> Not all practical theology is public theology, in other words aimed at a non-ecclesial general audience. Practical theology is also theology for the church, that is for a Christian audience, and is theology for an academic audience. Nevertheless, one of the tasks of practical theology is to include the public dimension in its work … The vision has broadened to include the context of everyday life on a local, national and global level. The task of practical theology in this regard is "bringing theology into dialogue with contemporary culture" (Osmer & Schweitzer 2003:218) … practical theology should be based on "a critical reflection on the church's dialogue with Christian sources and other communities of experience and interpretation with the aim of guiding its action toward social and individual transformation" (Browning 1991:36).
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> (Yolanda Dreyer 2004:919)

In a sense the use of the term "public theology" by all these scholars mentioned above is based on the pioneering work of David Tracy (Holland 2006) and Ronald Thiemann (1991). The expressions by Tracy, namely "the public vocation of the theologian" and "the public character of theology" speak for themselves (see Scott Holland 2006:25).

Yolanda Dreyer explains contemporary pluralistic culture as suspicious of grand narratives which tend to silence smaller stories. Seekers who see themselves as "Christians" do not regard conformity as important but are rather open to change in the lives of individuals and institutes. Such a point of view creates new perspectives that differ from modernistic dualisms like "church" and "world", "insider" and "outsider", and "sacred" and "profane". This is the reason why "public theology" is not civil religion: "Believers are seen as part of the world (not over against) and theology is not only an enterprise of the institutional church, but is also done in the world." In this world a variety of perspectives on *truth* exists. However, "public theology does not propagate a value-free or valueless perspective … People find *value* in their particular perspective." Dreyer concurs with Dingemans (1988:133-135): "the church is not where the 'pure dogma' is formulated and proclaimed, but where people live together in love." Although the "unity" of the Christian faith community lies in the fact that believers are followers of Christ and have received the truth from him (cf De Reuver 2004:233), this "truth can be different things for different people and can be celebrated and witnessed to in different ways"

(Dreyer 2008) She refers to Dingemans's (2001:276-301) use of the metaphor "round table church".

> That is where God and human beings meet and Jesus is remembered. All people are invited to the table. It is not about thinking and sounding exactly the same, but rather about searching together for God's truth for their individual and communal lives. There is tension in this unity (Dingemans 2001:286). The faith community is a junction where God and people, tradition and the world, challenges and reality meet (Dingemans 2002:142). At this junction one will find public theology.

> (Yolanda Dreyer 2008)

4.   PLATO'S CHARACTERISATION OF THEOLOGY

Gijs Dingemans' idea of a "round table" talk can be referred to as *theology*, because we should remind ourselves that institutional religion does not have the exclusive right to the term "theology". During the Middle Ages Christianity reserved the term "theology" for systematic, coherent, disciplined reflection on the divine – in other words an intellectual academic discipline (Ebeling 1957; Deist 1984:172). In the period before Scholasticism "theology" was not used in this sense. The very first time "theology" was used as a term, it did not refer to anything Christian. It was before the Common Era (5-4 BCE) and it came from Plato's *Respublica* where he distinguished between managers of city states and the "poets" in the public square – also the location where Paul found these "philosophers" (Acts 17:16-34). Plato called the poets "philosophers" and their compositions of myths "theology".[12] He took it for granted that rulers had control over what the "poets" were allowed to say and what not. This idea continued in Western thought until Luther's distinction between the two reigns. In this way the Reformation was one link in the chain of "mondialatinazation" (Derrida's term). This secularization gave theology the freedom to have a voice in the public square again. It liberated theology from the control of the institutional church. Today theology can be heard in the works of film directors, artists, novelists and poets, not only from the pulpit or in seminaries.

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[12] At the beginning of the Common Era (1-2 CE) Plutarchus, in his *De Iside et Osiride* 378E-379E (Sieveking 1935), also referred to "disciplined thought about the nature of supernatural power". According to Macmullen & Lane (1992:109), we find in Plutarch's work "rationalizing remarks on both Greek and Egyptian religious rites offered by general man of letters and cultivated citizen of both the Greek and Roman world."

5. PETER BERGER'S SACRED CANOPY AND CIVIL RELIGION AS "BAD FAITH"

Berger's (1967) insight that the dynamics of social realities is dialectically influenced by a "symbolic world", referred to as the "sacred canopy", was especially attractive to theologians at universities and seminaries. Peter Berger, born in 1929 in Vienna, is currently director of Boston University's Institute on Religion and World Affairs. The problem of the Euro-centric world, says Berger, is that it fails to distinguish between the two reigns. In order to describe the problem, he utilizes Jean Paul Sartre's term "bad faith" (in French: *le malheur de la conscience* – the evil of the consciousness) (see Berger 1961:39-57; Van Aarde 2005b). Sartre called it "bad faith" because it would "misrepresent choice as destiny and thus deny the choices actually made" (in Berger 1970:78). Human choices are often construed as a "God-given calling or vocation" without acknowledging one's own desires and self-interest, in which neither God nor the Other features. To expose religion that is nothing more than an acculturated orientation towards traditions, "all the traditions", according to Peter Berger (1970:82), "must be confronted in search of whatever signals of transcendence may have been sedimented in them." By criticizing "bad faith" in this way, a door is opened for authentic faith. For Berger (1970:82) it "means an approach grounded in empirical methods of inquiry (most importantly, of course, in the methods of modern historical scholarship) and free of dogmatic a prioris (free, that is, of dogmatic assumptions of the neo-orthodox reaction)."

In his 2004 book, *Questions of faith: A sceptical affirmation of Christianity*, Berger takes a critical stance toward tradition in that he embraces, while simultaneously rejecting particular aspects of tradition. In his own words his argument is both "sceptical" and "affirmation" – and it does not represent an oxymoron: "My argument is sceptical in that it does not presuppose faith, does not feel bound by any of the traditional authorities in matters of faith – be it an infallible church, an inerrant scripture, or an irresistible personal experience, and takes seriously the historical contingencies that shape all religious traditions. Nevertheless, my argument eventuates in an affirmation of Christian faith, however heterodox" (Berger 2004:vii-viii). Similar to what can happen in "ecclesial theology" as product of institutional religion where civil religion could contaminate believers' unconditioned faith, is also possible in public theology when the latter manifests as civil religion. The result in both instances would be "bad faith".

6. THE PUBLIC VERSUS THE PRIVATE DOMAIN

A responsible hermeneutic of suspicion is hampered by a lack of insight into what "bad faith" constitutes as well as a Euro-centric inability to distinguish between the two reigns. The Bible witnesses to a totally different relationship between the two reigns than what has been prevalent since the era of Christianization and subsequent secularization. In biblical times culture and religion could not be distinguished. That is why it was possible for a "theologian" in the market place to speak about religion in a highly intellectual fashion. The private arena was seen as more holy and much preferable to the public arena which was seen as less holy and less acceptable. That led to the distinction between "insider" and "outsider". This is the operation basis for manipulation, exploitation and exclusion which, centuries later, led to revolutions by the bourgeoisie and "les miserables". Distinguishing between the acceptable *here* and the unacceptable *there* was a Christian inheritance from Greek metaphysics. This was perpetuated for centuries by theism supported by doctrinal fideism – or to formulate it differently: a symbiosis between religion and metaphysics.[13]

The first voice that was critical of such metaphysics was not that of Immanuel Kant, but Jesus. The irony is that "Roman Christianization"/ Eurocentric Religion never took Jesus seriously. For Jesus *perfection* was not integrating immanence and metaphysical transcendence, between earth and heaven, but a morality lived on earth as it is in heaven. For him, *perfection* (in Greek: *teleios*) was *holiness* (in Greek: *hagios*) and holiness was *moral care* (in Greek: *oiktirmôn*) (See Mt 5:48; Lv 19:2; Lk 6:36). He brought "insider" and "outsider" together. He preached "integrity". For this he was killed, but lives today for those who take his cause (*Sache*) seriously – those hermeneutists of suspicion who dare to expose "bad faith" by their cultural criticism.

7. WHAT PUBLIC THEOLOGY IS NOT, BUT WITH WHICH IT DOES OVERLAP

7.1 Ecclesial theology

In the dialogue between academic theology and public theology there are two very specific dangers. The first is the problem of hybridity. Academic theologians may feel that they have to steer the dialogue with academic insights. The aim is to "educate" those in the public square. The second is the problem that ecclesial theology has been socialized to the extent that it

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[13] According to Jürgen Habermas (2001:24-25), the reason for this symbiosis was the Hellenization of Christianity: "Die Hellenisierung des Christentums hatte zu einer Symbiose zwischen Religion un Metaphysik geführt: Diese löst Kant wieder auf". Habermas (2007:395) hints at the possibility that in the experience of the earliest Jesus followers this symbiosis, with the help of Platonic thinking, brought about an estrangement from the existential trust in the saving act of God.

subconsciously determines people's God-talk inside or outside the church. Traditional dogmatic tenets will then be the starting point from which the opinions in the public square are evaluated. Such opinions will only be regarded as valid in as much as they conform to existing dogmas. An example of such a "public theology" can be found in the work of Gerard Sauter (2007:149-165).[14]

On the one hand one can understand that Sauter (2007:55-76) tries to eliminate the antagonism against Dogmatics. However, when he uses the term "memory of dogmatics" as the model in terms of which public opinion should be heard, he goes too far. Perhaps William Storrar (2008) unwittingly falls into the same trap with his logical priority of the Chalcedonian way of thinking which will certainly silence those "strangers" who have become alienated from institutional religion. According to me, William Storrar (2008) contradicts himself when he, on the one hand, seems to endorse Thiemann's thinking by stating, "if we only participate in the public sphere to assert the superiority of our Christian viewpoint and to dismiss all others, then we make no constructive contribution to the renewal of our local and global public life" (Storrar 2008:4) and, on the other hand, seems to endorse Sauter, by stating "This formal way of thinking (= the "Chalcedonian pattern of conceptual thinking about how to relate the human and the divine [to] preserve the Christian identity of the neighbourhood saint and the public theologian") enables us to hold together our faith and life of discipleship in the Church and our opinion and life of citizenship in the public sphere without separating or confusing the two sets of terms. *It also enables us to maintain the logical priority of divine revelation over public opinion* in participating in the public sphere and doing public theology, without dismissing the human opinion or silencing contrary voices" (Storrar 2008:10; my emphasis). If Christians want to uphold their ecclesial-theological conceptual thinking they do not need to regard this "formal way of thinking" as something with the status of "logical priority" over public opinion – the logical consequence of this would amount to the silencing of diverging voices!

The academic theology taking precedence in the dialogue with the public sphere can possibly be justified when the empirical categories of *emics* and *etics* in sociology are used. These terms are derived from the theory of language. They distinguish between *phonemics* and *phonetics*. Phonemics is the study of empirical observation of how natives use language. "Emics" is about "the natives' point of view". Phonetics is the study of pronunciation. The

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[14] Sauter's point of view is particularly clear where he differs with Ronald E Thiemann (1992:46-52). According to Sauter (2007:160), "public theology has to inspire responsibility for the common good, to strengthen the notion of the distinctiveness of religious beliefs as motivations, but most of all to integrate them into a permanent public discourse … [Thiemann] is concerned more that the voice of the church be heard in public than that the basic practices of the church, like proclamation and intercession, be known … This approach diminishes the church's main point of contact with public affairs even if Christians are no longer a majority within the society."

aim is to identify norms for how a specific language should be pronounced. "Etics" is about the point of view of one who is informed (Van Aarde & Joubert 2008). When this analogy is transferred to public theology, one may be tempted to classify the public as "natives" and academics as the "informed". This constitutes unacceptable hybridity.

When the content of academic theology is filled with "doctrinal truths", the dialogue with public theology disintegrates on account of the asymmetrical discourse from which secularization wanted to depart. Therefore, public theology is not ecclesial theology. They do, however, overlap to some extent. Empirical studies demonstrates "very little overlap between the 'two worlds'" (Heelas & Woodhead 2005:31-32). In the dialogue between professional theologians and the modern-day "poets" of public theology, academic theologians should identify to what extent traditional dogmas subtly influence the popular culture of the public square. This will show how some trends in present day public theology (the authentic discourse of the "poets" in the market square) are still chained to an out-dated theistic-fideistic paradigm.

This condition can explain why charismatic fundamentalism is often found in present-day public theology. On the other hand the legitimacy of the public's criticism of institutional religion should be heard. This criticism shows that the conviction exists in some circles of public discourse that current spirituality has replaced institutional religion. Some people, who find themselves within institutional religion, could utilize the criticism of public theologians as remedy for the disease of the established churches. In this way public theology can benefit institutional religion, on condition that the dialogue should be symmetrical in Jürgen Habermas's terms. There should be no hybridity from either the side of the academic theologians or that of the "poets".

I do understand William Storrar's positive use of the *formal* pattern of the Chalcedonian tenet of two "substances" without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. However, it is precisely the *content* of this formula which has caused diverse hostility within the Christian faith communities since the earliest times. To separate *form* from *content* in order to argue for a "both-and" over against an "either-or" is to burden the dialogue in public.

7.2   Contextual theology and pastoral, moral care

There is an apparent fusion between public theology and contextual theology. The difference between ecclesial and contextual theology is mainly the fact that the one is practised from the perspectives of ecclesial doctrines and interests, whereas the other does theology on grassroots level to benefit the marginalized in society. "Poets", who are the spokespersons of public

theology, have a similar agenda. However, public theology is not contextual theology and should not be confused with moral care, especially if this "pastoral care" originates within the context of pastoral theology. An example is the praiseworthy work by James D Whitehead and Evelyn E Whitehead (1980), *Method in ministry: Theological reflection and Christian ministry*.[15]

Contextual theology still operates as though institutional religion is the agent of hope. Public theology, on the other hand, represents a spirituality irrespective of the existence or the role of institutionalized religion. The language of the public theological discourse has to an extent been borrowed from institutional religion. The danger here is that the "poets" in the public square could inadvertently perpetuate out-dated dogmatic truth claims even though they find themselves squarely outside of the institutional church.

8.   IN/CONCLUSION

To summarize: where does one find public theology today? I believe one finds it in the modern-day *agora* where the philosophers, the poets and artists perform their public theology. Public theology forms part and parcel of postsecularization and exhibits the effects of globalization and postcolonialism. The public theologians of our time are the seekers who constitute an alternative religious society. Does this mean the end of religion? Not necessarily. These "base communities" – or rather "sub-communities" – differ from those base communities that were mobilized for an emancipatory struggle by contextual theologians a decade or two ago. Both the new seeker communities and the previous base communities aim to uphold the dignity of minorities – whether they are economically, ethnically, sexually, or politically marginalized.

In this kind of environment religion is privatized. The consequences of such privatization of religion are:

- •   a modern-day populist culture,
- •   a dying institutional religion,
- •   the emergence of charismatic fundamentalism,
- •   but also a rising faith among seekers.

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[15] See the discussion of Whitehead and Whitehead (1980), by Graham, Walton & Ward (2005:138-169). A "three-stage method of theological reflection in ministry" by Whitehead & Whitehead (1980:22) is described by Graham, Walton & Ward (2005:162) as follows: "1. ATTENDING: Seek out the information on a particular pastoral concern that is available in personal experience, Christian tradition, and cultural sources. 2. ASSERTION: Engage the information from these sources in a process of mutual clarification and challenge in order to expand and deep religious insight. 3. DECISION: Move from insight through decision to concrete pastoral action."

The "consequence" mentioned last, gives me hope. As biblical scholar I would like to explain this hope in a metaphorical way by borrowing my images from biblical antiquity. My vision can be compared with that of the first-century Lukan Paul when he looked at the *agora* adjacent to the acropolis in Athens. He saw a public square, the *plaka*, filled with as many gods as there are trees in a forest – a forest in which seekers could easily become lost while desperately praying to an "unknown god" (Acts 17:22ff) to miraculously protect them against pestilence of various kind.[16]

My vision of modern-day religious life is an image of two trees: the one reaching straight up into the sky, struggling to find some sunshine, but dying of pollution. It has been slowly poisoned over the course of many years. This is Christian institutional religion in its Eurocentric proposition-like format.[17] The other tree is much smaller and can almost not breathe. It also longs for some sun. This is the "church on the other side" where seekers perform their public theology. The dying tree could stay alive for many years yet, but stealing the smaller tree's sun by absorbing popular charismatic fundamentalism or to becoming a theatre instead of an ecclesia, would not prevent it dying from its deadly disease. The best it could do is to allow the smaller tree to grow – to allow God's sun to shine also on those who seek. Co-existence, dialogue could help it to acknowledge its condition and maybe God's amazing grace will also let it see the light, so that it could live longer.

Finally, to me, the question remains whether the cover of the first publication (Hansen 2008), of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, depicts a *Christian in public* or the *public's theology* (see cover art below). In the foreground is the Christian, Beyers Naudé, with his ecclesial robe and Bible, bringing the message of institutional religion *to the public*. In the background one sees the cameraman who communicates a public-theological message to the world. The cameraman stands on a military vehicle. I do not know if he was, when the picture was taken, affiliated with the military

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[16] See F F Bruce's ([1951] 1976:335-336) commentary, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek text with introduction and commentary*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press: "Pausanias (i.I.4) says that in Athens there are *altars of unnamed [and] unknown gods* [my translation of the Greek]. According to Diogenes Laertius (*Lives of Philosophers*, i.II0) the Athenians during a pestilence sent for Epimenides the Cretan (see on *ver*. 28), who advised them to sacrifice sheep *to the god on dut*y [my translation of the Greek] at various spots, and to commemorate the occasion altars to unnamed gods [Greek inserted originally] were set up (Cf. Plato, *Laws*, i.642d; Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* init.; Plutarch, *Solon*, 12)."

[17] Mike Stofka (2005:46-48) articulates my own postsecular conviction with regard to the challenge to abandon "proposition-like theism" as follows in his little booklet, *Further*, dedicated "To all people": "For each person in the physical world, formulas increase certainty, and thus reduce fear. They enhance survival, safety. And comfort. People cling to the idea that there is also a formula that governs spiritual decision-making as well as outer decision-making. But there can't be formula governing spiritual decisions, because then other people would flock to that formula; they would no longer freely choose what action to take."

sustaining the South African apartheid regime. Yet, for the metaphoric purpose of my argument, it does not matter whether the cameraman was in support of Beyers Naudé or not. The content of his public-theological message communicated through the television lens could be supportive of or subversive to totalitarianism. The point is: he is busy doing "public theology".

If both expressions, *Christian in public* and *the public's theology*, describe the nature of *public theology*, the question would be whether this fairly recent term really has developed a new disciplined system of knowledge about present-day spirituality or does it merely restate existing contextual theology under a new label – now that the aims, methodologies and issues of liberation theology have to be transformed because of globalization and because colonialism was replaced by post-colonialism and neo-colonialism (see De Gruchy 2004:45-62). According to John de Gruchy the task of contextual theology is to make the voices of the silenced heard. Now that the struggle is over, the era of public theology has begun.

However, is the struggle really over? I do not think so. The title of the essay "Out of utopia" by the neo-Marxist Rolf Dahrendorf (1968),[18] in which he exposed the totalitarianism of Stalinism, helps us to understand Emmanuel Levinas (1981:vii) when he reminds us of "the memory" of not only the victims of the National Socialists during the holocaust, but also of "the memory" of the always present victims among the "millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man".[19]

Therefore, to return to the theme of this symposium, namely "responsible South African public theology in a global area", the question which remains ringing in my ears – now that the ANC toppled the Nationalists' apartheid regime – is, *have the voices of the marginalized really been heard?* Should we as the "new" public theologians not return to our task as contextual theologians? Sexual and other marginalized minorities will do theology in the public square and we should bring our gospel message in dialogue with them.

If *religion* and *spirituality* are not two different terms for expressing the same thing,[20] then we have to begin to distinguish between the religious

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[18] Dahrendorf, R 1968. Out of Utopia, in Dahrendorf, R, *Essays in the theory of society*, 107-128. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

[19] See Levinas, E [1947[] 1981. *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*, tr by A Lingis. The Hague: M Nijhoff; cf Michel Purcell 2006. *Levinas and theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 4.

[20] In their empirical study on youth, culture and globalization, Chipani, Osmer and Schweitzer (2003, in Dreyer 2004:924) find: "For the most part, 'religion' was identified with institutional forms of religion and 'spirituality' with the individual's personal stance or moral/religious practice (e g an individual's personal relationship with God or putting into action those things she/he believes). Several of the interviewees who do not participate in a religious community used the distinction to make the point that you do not have to be religious in order to be spiritual (e g hold a moral stance toward life or form a centred, healthy way of life."

person *in public* and the *public's* theology – especially if we agree that academic theology does not have the exclusive rights to "doing theology".

Christian in Public

AIMS, METHODOLOGIES AND ISSUES IN PUBLIC THEOLOGY

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(Editor)

BEYERS NAUDÉ CENTRE SERIES ON PUBLIC THEOLOGY

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