

# The (demanding) history of South African public theology as prophetic theology



## Author:

Martin Laubscher<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliation:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Practical and Missional Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Martin Laubscher,  
laubscherm@ufs.ac.za

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The purpose of this article is to tell the story of public theology as prophetic theology in South Africa by highlighting some of the dramatic twists and turns in this history. It seeks to expose and interrogate those whose voices either did not differentiate (enough) between the two, or who have polarised the (apparent) different ways of doing theology in South Africa, assuming inevitably that we are currently on two opposing pathways towards the future. There is, I believe, a more nuanced way to explore these seemingly flat and contradictory ways of doing theology, as we critically reflect on the literature of the last three to four decades. Or, to state it a little differently (but with the same intention), it is no simplistic black or white matter as many seem too often to argue in their writings. We need to open and deepen the discussion in order to see how our knowledge might move on a specific trajectory and still mutate over time. Lastly, even if there are more creative common grounds and tensions to be explored in this particular narrative (with its many voices), I feel the need to point to some urgent, critical questions, perhaps taking us into new directions.

**Contribution:** The author seeks with this literature review to articulate the tensions in the development of public theology as prophetic theology within the South African context.

**Keywords:** public theology; prophetic theology; history; South Africa; demanding; mutation; trajectories.

## Introduction

Within the South African context, the phrase 'the history of public theology as prophetic theology' is a loaded one, and it has indeed a history. It is a complex history. It is a contested history. It is also, contrary to what some might think, a much longer history than often assumed. Thus, in saying this, I also believe it desperately needs to be told – as it is also a history with an envisioned future. It is, as with many other histories, important to tell, because getting a possible grip on the past, may enable us to define South African public theology as prophetic theology in the present and future tense.

The complexity of this debatable issue lies in how we are going to articulate the phrase 'public theology as a prophetic theology' with all its nuances. They are not the same, nor are they mutually exclusive (cf. Smit 2007a; 2008). Some people do not differentiate enough between the two (cf. Resane 2019) or contradict and oppose them unnecessarily (cf. Boesak 2019; Maluleke 2011; 2021; Urbaniak 2016a). Much of the current frustration – and in some cases even intense dislike and animosity – occurs when we imagine a seamless unity between the two (partly due to selective and often superficial readings of each other's work), or take the phrase, as such, for granted too easily. Though I, too, want to speak up and make a case for 'public theology as prophetic theology', I acknowledge right from the start all the temptations, dangers, and challenges of doing so, and also stress the importance of being committed to carefully navigate other opinions in this vast theological landscape with its long history. This is no easy task I can assure you. Only some of the most significant twists and turns will be highlighted. Besides the many intriguing developments along the way, it is also important to note that we often discern voices speaking from different places.

There is, of course, also another way to introduce the matter. For instance, reading Cronje's (2020) *The Rise or Fall of South Africa*, leaves one inevitably perplexed as voices of South African 'public theologians' can be recognised in all four the scenarios described in this work. I could hear the voices of colleagues referring to both the rhetoric and content of the improbable future and rise of South Africa, as well as in the very likely descent and eventual lamentable fall that Cronje

describes. Whether Cronje is right or not, is not necessarily my question, but rather whether we sense the – some creative, other unbearable – tensions among colleagues associated with public theology in South Africa today? In the end, I could not help but think again of – but also tinker with – Breitenberg's (2003) famous article of almost two decades ago, namely 'Will the real public theology (as prophetic theology) please stand up?'

The differentiation between the two terms, *public theology* and *prophetic theology*, is of extreme importance if we truly believe in some form of future for both these strands of theology. In order to articulate it correctly, we need to highlight both the creative differences and unbearable tensions between the two kinds of theologies. It is indeed not a simplistic black or white matter we are facing in this regard. There are various trajectories to reckon with, and at certain places they do overlap, deviate, and even oppose one another. There are indeed various ways in which the demanding nature of a phrase like 'the history of public theology as prophetic theology', can be interpreted.

In other words, I want to tell the history of public theology in South Africa in such a way that the prophetic theology in its many shades will be discussed in the first section. Inevitably, that will lead to the section to then tell how the presence of prophetic theology in South Africa has questioned the need and demand for public theology. In suggesting all of this, it is important to state that I am not the first one trying to critically address the issue of public theology *and* (and in some cases even *as*) prophetic theology (cf. De Villiers 2009; 2010; Koopman 2009; 2019; Naudé 2016a; Vosloo 2019). In doing so, the main question is perhaps not whether previous attempts fail to convince (though some of the tensions clearly suggest just that), but rather whether there is not a need to constantly revise and re(con)figure the past towards a more open and creative future. The current trajectories and some of the tones in certain discussions (and in some cases again the lack thereof) between colleagues, seems to suggest that there is a need to do this kind of mapping. For instance listening to Smit (2017:69) in this regard, leaves us with much to ponder, because according to him there seems to be two kinds of 'public theologians' in South Africa today, namely those who embrace the term unconditionally and with much enthusiasm, and those who have their outspoken reservations in being associated with it. To complicate matters even further, it is important perhaps to note as well, that the reservations and eventual rejection of public theology per se is not only coming from the ranks of the black theology of liberation (BTL), but also from other Reformed theologians and ethicist like Bram van de Beek and Koos Vorster (cf. Vorster 2018). These schools of thought differ in their understanding of prophetic theology, as well as how they envision the church's (engaged) presence in public life and, somehow, they share a strange consensus of not being very excited about doing public theology per se.

In short, there is to my mind not only a need to familiarise ourselves with the current situation by retelling this story, but also room to indicate the burning need for more delicate and nuanced theological grammar in this regard. In conclusion, this history will be assessed and a constructive future imagined.

## Demanding South African public theology today?

The question is, what kind of theology is currently required in South Africa? In response to this question, Venter (2016) acknowledged public theology's presence but sees it, as only one of quite a number of schools of thoughts to be reckoned with. Obviously there are grounds and reasons why public theology is often driven, or seen, as singular and homogeneous – read: 'label and brand' – as to how we believe we are called or pressured to do theology in this context, but that might be a misleading and superficial way of framing the challenge. Or, in terms of what was said earlier, it is perhaps important to repeat that there are public theologians who accept *and* reject this term (or even 'label', if you may). One should be really careful not to make a case for public theology as the ever-present alpha (male) and omega (consumer in our midst), but so, too, should it not be seen as a fad, brand, label, or one of many available options we have at our disposal. The demand for public theology is perhaps exceeding the so-called disciplinary limits and confines of this emerging discipline.

Public theology has indeed made its case, influencing the entire theological encyclopaedia (cf. Ganzevoort 2020). Or, as in the case of the launch of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at Stellenbosch, it was initially indeed an open question, drawing some discussion in terms of which department and discipline at the faculty should actually host and drive this *for the faculty as such*. In short, although it is often associated with systematic theology and ethics, there are plentiful evidence of its presence in and influence on other theological disciplines as well (cf. Arel & Rambo eds. 2016; Brown 2020; Kim 2017; Naudé 2005; Storrar & Morton eds. 2004; Van Eck 2009). As was the case for instance with the various kinds of liberationist theologies that emerged since the 1960s, it 'permeated' almost the whole theological encyclopaedia, and public theology does stand, according to some voices in the field, on that very same trajectory. Or, to put the matter even more to the point: 'public theology is liberation theology for a liberal democracy' (Bedford-Strohm 2018).

Stating the above is, I believe, of immense importance, but it is perhaps still too vague and general. There is surely more to be added. The emergence of public theology was never just about the mere doing of public theology per se (subscribing to the ontology of a public theology), but it inevitably also had to discern *the kind of* public theology that had to follow. Responding to its demand, and especially to the questions of its origins, I do think it is important to state that we do not think about it in generic terms, but rather have an awareness

right from the start to emphasise the need and (prophetic!) sensitivity for a very particular kind of public theology that is required.

To give some indication of the above, let me refer to two important publications which frame the above matter quite aptly. On the one hand, there are, for instance, the very recent works of Agang, Hendriks and Forster (eds. 2020), titled *African Public Theology*; and Kaemingk (ed. 2021), titled *Reformed Public Theology*. Public theology might be a global development, and the manifestation of the mutation of liberation theology in democratic societies, but it also needs to be thoroughly rooted in its specific and unique context in terms of what form its witnessing will take. Now whether these very particular kinds of public theology fully succeed in this, is of course another matter, but at least in the titles and the ideas embedded within it, there is this clear and very particular sensitivity. This idea is, of course, neither new nor radical, as John de Gruchy (2004:45) already stated years ago in an important essay called, 'From political to public theologies: The role of theology in public life in South Africa', namely 'At the outset, we need to recognize that there is no universal "public theology", but only theologies that seek to engage the political realms within particular localities'. In fact, toward the end of the article, De Gruchy (2004) states emphatically:

[I]t seems self-evident that there will be and must be different approaches to public theology. This was certainly the case previously in the struggle against apartheid when political theology was reworked in various ways in terms of South African realities. So it is necessary to talk now about public theologies, rather than a public theology, both within the global the global post-colonial context and within our new multicultural democracy in South Africa. (p. 56)

Another urgent and somewhat misleading question is dating the conception of public theology in South Africa. Whereas public theology emerged for the first time officially in 1974 on the global scene (in the USA, by Martin Marty in reference to Reinhold Niebuhr's work), it would only reach our shores officially with the emergence of the post-1994 landscape (cf. Bezuidenhout & Naudé 2002:3). The first trace of the term I could find in the South African literature, is in an article by Ernst Conradie (1993) in which he showed both the differences in and similarities to North American public theology and its possible significance in the new South African context of a liberal democracy. It would then only be a few years later – by the beginning of the 2000s – that literature on doing public theology in South Africa would practically flood us. One expects that the establishment of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at Stellenbosch (21 November 2002) had a great deal to do with this. The ambivalence in this date is that when Breitenberg asked his profound and provocative question in the 2003 article, 'Can the real public theology please stand up?', we had a sense of being simultaneously mature *and* immature to respond. Seen from one perspective, South African public theology was then only in its infancy, after a quite long and stressful pregnancy (to put it mildly), while on the other hand, it also had the privilege of being rooted in the (*church*) *struggle*, and

being informed by insights and knowledge embedded within other contexts where it had already matured and developed a great deal.

However, this very specific point can be extremely misleading if we associate 'public theology' only with the coming of democracy in South Africa. It came later, but it was not as if we started from scratch (or just broke with the past; or, in fact, saw an entirely new day dawning). Ironically, whereas we previously did not refer to 'public theology' as such, though it was unconsciously at work, as it was almost too obvious and self-evident, we now all of a sudden were conscious and critically aware of it, because it was not a given that theology could be public at all. As Smit (2008) has rightfully argued in 2003, there are numerous questions concerning the most obvious assumptions we might have had about public theology within our context at that stage. The point is quite simple, and of great importance, namely that we should not be fooled by public theology's relative late emergence in South Africa. It might still be very recent (in comparison to other places) but it has some roots that go quite a long way back. Or, to phrase it a little differently, public theology's birth occurred within a very particular historical trajectory. It has specific roots one should not deny, suppress, or forget. We should not be fooled if its fruit look very different from its roots. It all comes from the same tree. Perhaps the new kid on the block is mature beyond its years.

Part of this logic is also present in the history bringing forth public theology itself. What we see in the transition from the theology of the 1980s to the kind of theology required in the early 2000s, was to a certain degree already present and active within the dynamic history in which theology mutated and manifested in alternative variants throughout the decades of the church struggle. Smit (2007b:167–168) mentions for instance how this very similar dynamic occurred during the 1980s when contextual theology, coming from black liberationist theology, and confessional theology had to mutate during the mid-1980s into prophetic theology. What happened after 1990 in the demand for public theology, should be seen against this backdrop of demanding prophetic theology that was such an integral part of our history, and assuming other theological mutations and variants are on the same trajectory.

However, let me add two more layers to 'the demand for public theology' that may just add to the complex relationship it has with the need expressed for prophetic theology.

A significant twist in this history lies for instance in how to read the challenge Piet Naudé (2015) saw clearly coming, when he stated the following in 2003:

The rules for 'being heard on the public square' have nevertheless changed irrevocably. They shifted from an assumed prophetic role for theology and the churches to one where 'prophecy' – if not replaced by a more 'priestly' mode – is tied up with the art of democratic processes and lobbying at all levels of government, often in the context of inter-religious rather than exclusively Christian negotiations. It includes the difficult requirement

that theology and the church meet other societal spheres (business, NGO – [non-governmental organisations] and CBO- [congressional budget office] structures, forms of civil society) on their own turf whilst in some way retaining a distinctly theological voice. It is further required that theology and the church communicate such a voice on issues of public concern in a manner that reaches the hearts and minds of leaders and ordinary citizens alike. (p. 354)

Since then, Naudé (2016a; 2016b) continued his critique on some of prophetic theology's inadequacies in functioning as proper public theology. His 2008 article, 'What has Accra to do with New York?', followed shortly in 2011 by 'Is prophetic discourse adequate to address global economic justice?', developed the above critique even further. In pondering Naudé's words over the years, I could not help but wonder whether he is truly out to question prophetic theology per se, or just some form of it. Stated differently: is it not possible that he himself is quite prophetic in these critical challenges he raised for prophetic theology within the context of the demand for public theology?

Let me conclude this section by adding the next layer to this complex history. If I am right in what was highlighted thus far, let me also admit that one should be careful not to generalise too quickly in this regard. On the one hand, we might have heard the need for various and particular kinds of public theology (a point raised earlier), and though some had to continue and mutate, it is important to remember that other kinds of public theologies not articulated were also challenged to repent and redeem themselves. The emergence of the *Kairos Document* and its call for prophetic theology, was in fact a call for a specific kind of public theology coming to the fore – with a deliberate intention also to expose and resist certain kinds of public theology in this process. Whereas the 'prophetic trajectory' (of the *Kairos Document*) was feasible for mutation into 'public theology', the other trajectories of church and state theologies were at the crossroads. Durand's (2002) little book in this regard, *Ontluisterde wêreld – Die Afrikaner en sy kerk in 'n veranderde wêreld* [Disenchanted world – the Afrikaner and his church in a changing world], remains an important source and informative take on what were at stake at this point. Or, to give another well-known example, often referenced and quoted in the literature (e.g. Vosloo 2017), is of course Willie Jonker's (1998) words towards the end of his *Selfs die kerk kan verander* [Even the church can change]:

While the struggle of the past forty years was mainly to challenge the way in which the Dutch Reformed Church [DRC] was a *volkskerk*, the following decades will probably involve the development of unity within the Dutch Reformed Church family of churches, as well as the conservation of the Reformed character of these churches and their prophetic role in society. (p. 221) [Own translation]

How the church – and in this instance especially the DRC (but so too all those churches and theologians siding with, or remaining trapped in the state and church theology trajectories of the *Kairos Document*) – would respond to this call, was

indeed implicit in the demand for public theology. Or, reading another important book of Jonker (2008) anticipating this transition, *Die relevansie van die kerk* [On the relevance of the church] (written in mid 1980s, but only published in 2008), how to understand public theology as prophetic theology was indeed the demanding question he rightly anticipated we would had to face in the decades to come.

In short, the demand for public theology could not deny the demanding nature of prophetic theology, as that has to be told as well.

## Demanding prophetic theology in South Africa today?

Marvin McMickle's famous phrase and title for his little book on prophetic preaching, *Where have all the prophets gone?*, is often raised in various theological discourses in South Africa the past decade (cf. Boesak 2017). It is for instance fascinating to see how prophetic preaching has become so characteristic of the homiletics post-1994 – especially given its apparent strange absence during the decades before 1994 (cf. Laubscher & Wessels 2016). In these circles, but also wider, among some systematic theologians in South Africa, we often hear this question, 'where have all the prophets gone?' (cf. Fortein 2019).

It is a fair question, but not necessarily always helpful. Is the question simply to enquire about the presence and absence of prophets in our midst? Not everyone who claims to be prophetic is necessarily prophetic. Can we discern the true prophet from the false prophet? Do we recognise the various forms and guises in which the prophets come to us? In short, there are numerous and various calls and demands for prophetic theology in South Africa, and one inevitable question is whether all the tongues speak the truth?

Or, to put it even more bluntly: the current call for prophetic theology goes pretty much against the grain of the demand for public theology. That is on the one side. On the other side, however, there are also calls for prophetic theology, ostensibly without much awareness of public theology as such, and with that no real sensitivity to the creative or unbearable tensions in this specific history. What makes the situation even more troublesome, is how it somehow still seems to reflect the divisionary lines in the past, apparently with a growing intensity. The most prominent voices are Allan Boesak, Jakub Urbaniak, Tinyiko Maluleke, and Vuyani Vellem. Each of them has their own specific point of critique, but they all agree increasingly in their dislike of public theology per se.

Boesak (2014:1066–1071) for instance, in an article for John de Gruchy in 2014, states the following under the heading of being 'outmaneuvered by democracy': 'We did identify the victory of the ANC with the victory of justice'; 'we have not reckoned with the fatal, seductive power of power'; 'we confused access to political power with closeness to the throne of God'; 'we exchanged our prophetic faithfulness for

what we called “critical solidarity”, except that our solidarity was more expedient than critical; ‘we confused Nelson Mandela’s South Africa, “a nation at peace with itself and the world” with the shalom of the kingdom of God’; and ‘as we became more and more mesmerized by Mr Mandela, we became more and more embarrassed by Jesus’. A refrain in his argument is the recalling of a theology that will again be ‘public, prophetic, and consistent’ (cf. Boesak 2014:1068–1069). On the one hand, there is a clear indication that people are using ‘public’ and ‘prophetic’ in the same breath. However, one cannot but wonder to what degree this is merely a nostalgic return to the past, rather than a more creative improvisation of the future. Since then his assessment of public theology, and also his retelling of the past, is much more explicit and critical, as Boesak (2019) states in one of his most recent publications:

I do not consider myself a ‘public theologian’. I am not contesting its right to exist, and these are all worthy goals. As a liberation theologian, however, I do have some concerns. (p. 130)

Listening to Boesak’s contributions over the years, there seems to be an ever-growing distance between public and prophetic theology. The demand for the one is not a demand for the other, or vice versa. Expressing prophetic theology seems to exclude the need for public theology. In fact, some forms of prophetic theology seemed to be bent on resisting public theology.

Space and time unfortunately do not allow me to go here into more detail into Boesak’s position, as well as into the work of Vellem, Maluleke and Urbaniak. All three colleagues have raised in their work their critique against other South African public theologians: Vellem (2018) on Piet Naudé; Maluleke (2011; 2021) on Forster and Will Storrar; and Urbaniak (cf. 2016b; 2018) in quite a number of articles on Nico Koopman. Despite the importance to take note of this trend, I am also not aware of any thorough responses the latter made against the former. Being familiar with the material and literature on both sides, I do think it is a discussion that is asking more from all of us.

Let me move on making one last remark, because as I said earlier, this is indeed not a clear-cut matter, as there are also voices calling for prophetic theology from quite different (opposite?) directions than what we have heard thus far. The demand for prophetic theology has not only come from voices who closely associate with black liberation theology, but also from within (certain) white confessional and reformed circles. As indicated earlier, it is quite remarkable to notice how many white theologians, who were perhaps still on the Kairos trajectories of state and church theology, were quite critically outspoken and vocal about the church’s prophetic role since 1994. For instance Strauss (2018), former moderator of the DRC, recently had it in an article about ‘The DRC’s prophetic voice over against the SA government in the decade after 1994’. What is quite noticeable from this argument, is the lack of sensitivity to and awareness of any demand or critique concerning public theology during that

time. Whereas earlier debates in the DRC during the 1980s was especially concerned about the ‘strange and alien nature of the church’ (‘vreemdheid van die kerk’) in some fascinating discussions between Jaap Durand, Flip Theron, and David Bosch (in eds. Bosch, König & Nicol 1982), Strauss seems to be more concerned about the ‘strange new South Africa’ after 1994. For instance, Strauss (2018:421) has it against the fact that ‘in comparison to the critique that was raised against apartheid in *Kerk en Samelewing* 1986/1990, the new SA received little pushback from the church’ (own translation). It is extremely difficult to read this article and not get the impression that the prophetic role of the church, according to Strauss, is nothing else than being the watchdog over the state, and where possible, to blow the whistle, ring the big bell, and sound the alarm. Its take on of prophetic theology is clear, namely the louder the social critique, the better the prophetic voice of the church. And let me be fair and add that he is not the only one who imagines the prophetic role of the church similarly; there are indeed many voices from various circles who often echo this sort of rhetoric. As Strauss (2018:425) states towards the end of his article, there is the demand for prophetic theology, because ‘[T]he synod [of the DRC] was not on the front pages of the newspapers any more’, and thus not prophetic, and therefore the need, call, or demand for prophetic theology ‘again’ (own translation).

In short, the demand for prophetic theology came from various fronts the last decade or so, and there seems to be a shared form of disillusionment with both the situation in the country and church since 1994. The question is, however, to determine whether such a demand for prophetic theology really could succeed without sensitively adhering to some of the demands for public theology? Moreover, knowing there have been some attempts to develop this closely-knit relationship between public and prophetic theology, it begs the question why the narrative has reacted in the way it did. Why do these approaches not fully satisfy?

## The demand for public theology as prophetic theology in South Africa today?

As indicated already, I understand that I am neither the first nor the last to grapple with this specific question. There are several (public and prophetic) theologians who have done very constructive work in this regard (Laubscher 2022). In various ways and on numerous occasions, have they raised and addressed the question in an inclusive and complementary manner. However, as the previous section shows, not all are necessarily convinced, aware, or interested in terms of what is (perceived) to be done in this regard.

Therefore, and against this fragmented background and reconfigured story, it might be wise to pause for a moment, pondering what we have heard, and suggest a few markers and critical thoughts for the road ahead.

Firstly, it is more important than ever to acknowledge that public theology has its roots in the struggle and prophetic theology. The question is indeed whether a struggle identity can be embodied in positions of power. For instance, how do public theologians, as prophetic theologians, have an edge, if they are not on the edge? Or, let us take it from another angle and ask whether public theologians care about whiteness and others without seeing themselves implied and exposed by the very question? Surely, the Word is event, but what about being still an *event*? Does it speak for itself, and more importantly, does it still address us in order to speak hopefully through us? Furthermore, it is not just a given question of embracing and doing public theology per se, but of constantly discerning and envisioning – prophetically – what it means and entails within a specific context. In other words, a public theology can only be a prophetic theology if it is on the move. It is not just about the time of grace, but rather the ‘timing of grace’ (cf. Cilliers 2019). In that sense then, the Word is not only ‘gebeure’ (event), but in particular ‘gebeure’ (moving the margins of what seems to be possible). In short, whether we speak of public theology in different modes (Koopman 2009; 2019), or acknowledge and develop it as an appropriate mode of public discourse in a democratic society faced with global problems (De Villiers 2010; 2020), perhaps it is time to acknowledge and embrace this struggle and particular movement anew.

Secondly, this does not entail being stuck in reverse and returning and romanticising the (often tempted nostalgic or demonised) past. Demanding prophetic theology without acknowledging the emergence of public theology, might contradict the very essence of prophetic theology itself. The idea is rather to hear and envision anew how an historical awareness and its roots and trajectory are in effect propelling us forward into a new context. Of course (public) theology needs to be critically scrutinised, but then in such a way to spur it on into an inspired future. Perhaps, in prophetic theology, it may be learned and acknowledged, from its conception in public theology that theological tasks continue to call for more than just social commentary and critique, precisely because such a stance assumes being open, teachable, and receptive to others, and to the ever-growing complexity we find ourselves in.

In short, one demand clearly needs the other, and the other demands it clearly. It is time we hear and learn anew that we need a demanding other. This His-story (Word) is not yet done with us. It is on the move, or demanding to be continued.

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M.L. is the sole author of this article.

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