

# The scope and influence of Public Theology in Africa



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## Situating public theology and this special edition

This special edition of *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* focuses on theology in the public sphere within the South African context, reflecting on issues under the rubric of 'Public Theology in Africa today'. I would like to express my gratitude to the editorial board of the journal for their willingness to publish this edition and for the help with all the aspects related to a publication of this nature.

The aim of this edition is to offer a variety of reflections within the diverse field of public theology. As Smit (2007:11) notes, while the designation 'public theology' has become progressively more prevalent, it is not always clear what is meant by it, whether it is used by practitioners or critics. He attributes this to an assortment of probable questions such as 'whether public theology wants to be a specific form of theology distinct from others, which would then apparently *not* be public' (Smit 2007:11, [*italics in original*]). The focus can often then be on the imaginable resemblances and deviations between public theology and other forms of theology.

This is the route taken by Stackhouse (2007:79), who argues that the position of the Christian religion in public can be illuminated 'if we recognize the differences between three often-confused terms', namely 'civil religion',<sup>1</sup> 'political theology',<sup>2</sup> and 'public theology'. Each of these, he (Stackhouse 2007:79) continues, has their own separate history, which involves a specific collection of presuppositions and associations. Stackhouse (2007) further explains that, although the term 'public theology' might have been new, it soon became popular, not because it was novel or raised new theological issues:

[B]ut because it seemed to capture one wide and deep, but widely neglected strand of the classical theological tradition ... rooted in the interaction of biblical insight, philosophical analysis, and the responsibility of the ecclesial community to engage in historical discernment and constant reformation of the social order because it believed that certain kinds of progress could be made in human affairs. (p. 86)

A further question that makes the term 'public theology' less clear, Smit (2007:11) notes, is 'if public theology does indeed want to be a form of theology, in what can it or does it want to be public?'. Here his focus is on the public influence of theology and the person, purpose and audience of theologians (Smit 2007:11).

Another route on the road in obtaining more clarity on what is meant by 'public theology', can be 'simply to reflect on what is meant by the term "public"' (Smit 2007:11). We all attach different meanings and distinctions to words, and the same is true with 'public'. In the debate on what 'public theology' means, it is also possible, Smit (2007:12) remarks, that 'people are talking at cross-purposes because they hear different nuances'.

In a recent chapter on 'The nature of Public Theology', Forster (2020:15) stresses that rather than speaking about 'public theology', we should speak about 'public theologies', as '[d]ifferent theologians, and theologians in different regions of the world, have very different approaches to the subject'. I want to echo this in the approach of this special edition. Given the diversity of contributors, a diverse number of approaches to the theme at hand are followed. While all the contributions in this special collection bring a unique perspective to the table, also in terms of their definition of public theology in the South African context, they also share a few characteristics. On the necessity of public theology in Africa, Agang (2020:4) remarks that, for too a great number

1.Civil religion, Stackhouse (2007:93) notes, is basically a civic order projecting its own experiences and ethics 'onto the cosmic order for the sake of social solidarity'.

2.A new wave of political theology, influenced in particular by Johannes Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, was directed by the notion that the pastor, the theologian, and the believer not only may publicly speak, 'but in fact must do so, since the policy of every political order needs direct guidance and transformation at the hands of theological-ethical insight' (Stackhouse 2007:84).

of people, there is a division concerning their faith and the remainder of their life, 'between the sacred and the secular world'. Agang (2020) pleads that Africa needs:

[N]ot just a Christian theology but a Christian theology that is concerned with how all aspects of human knowledge, understanding and faith in God can translate into a deep moral commitment to building a better society; one which is strong in faith, love, justice and wisdom. Such a theology can be called public theology. (p. 8)

Very broadly speaking then, all the articles that make up this special edition, are attempts to do exactly this, and are informed by the authors' commitment to the building of such a South African society.

The growing interest in, as well as criticism of public theology in Africa, is emphasised by Dion A. Forster in *African Public Theology? A conceptual engagement to keep the conversation alive*, in which he asks what we meant when speaking of 'African' as well as 'Public Theology'. Answering these questions can be either a descriptive or prescriptive exercise, and Forster draws on conversations around decolonisation and Africanisation in engaging different approaches. Within the South African context, where religion continues to be a significant factor in public life, this article makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion on faith and public life in South Africa.

The notions of populism and constitutionalism are examined and brought into dialogue with public theology by Kelebogile T. Resane in *Populism versus constitutionalism in South Africa: Engaging public theology through dialogue*. The dialogical nature of public theology is stressed by Resane in this approach, while some other characteristics such as its prophetic vocation, emphasis on anthropology and engaging methodology also come to the fore. This article further highlights the interdisciplinary character of public theology and contributes to the field by engaging with specific political ideologies in this regard.

In *Publieke Teologie of Koninkryksteologie? Gedagtes oor die sosiale relevansie van Gereformeerde Teologie*, J.M. Vorster discusses the

historical background of public theology as 'theology from below' and indicates several dualisms found in the work of different public theologians. He then suggests Kingdom theology as a corrective, arguing that it addresses the entirety of life, including socio-political justice and the righting of social wrongs.

The different types of tensions within the development of public theology as prophetic theology in the South African context is stressed by Martin Laubscher in *The (demanding) history of South African public theology as prophetic theology?* In tracing the historical development, he engages both those that conflated these two forms too much, and those that separated them entirely. This contribution calls for a more nuanced and deeper discussion, also in approaching the field in future.

In a public systematic theological examination of the public role of the power held by the anointed objects of neo-Pentecostal prophets, Collium Banda highlights the importance of critical consideration in *Propagating afro-pessimism? The power of neo-Pentecostal prophetic objects of human agency and transcendence in Africa*. In particular, he examines the messages on human agency and transcendence in the striving against poverty by the reliance on anointed objects and calls for an Afro-optimism that enhances agency and transcendence by relying on a biblical view of humanity.

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