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African Public Theology? A conceptual engagement to keep the conversation alive

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Interest in Public Theology is growing across the African continent. However, there are some important critiques of Public Theology and public theologians in Africa and from Africa. This article outlines three important critiques of Public Theology within the variety of African contexts. Having done so, it seeks to engage in a process of critical reflection on the two constituent concepts related to an 'African Public Theology'. First, it considers what we might mean when we speak of 'Africa' or 'African?' It does so by engaging relevant literature on the subjects of decolonisation and Africanisation as they relate to knowledge production and African theological reflection. Second, we ask, what do we mean when we speak of 'Public Theology?' Two broad approaches are presented and critically considered. First, we discuss a descriptive approach to Public Theology. Then we consider a more prescriptive understanding of Public Theology. In each instance we relate to both the critiques of Public Theologies in African contexts, and to the principles of decolonisation and Africanisation, as presented in relevant literature related to the debates and the context. The intention of this article is to take the three identified critiques of 'African Public Theology' seriously, and by means of critical conceptual engagement, to keep an important conversation on Public Theology in and from Africa alive.

Contribution: This article contributes towards contemporary debates on the relationship between faith and public life in South Africa. South Africa remains a deeply religious society. Religion plays an important role in the formation of moral values, social norms, and dominant practices in public life. Gaining a clearer understanding of what Public Theology is and how it is practiced, helps to further our critical academic understanding of the concept and its practice in contemporary life.

Keywords: Public Theology; African Public Theology; critical engagement; decolonisation; Africanisation.

Introduction

This article aims to engage in a process of conceptual clarification with regards to the emerging interest in theology and public life in some African contexts. For the sake of meaningful focus and conceptual clarity, it does so with a particular focus on debates around Public Theology that are taking place amongst some South African theologians. The article does not intend to offer normative or definitive understandings of the constituent concepts of Africa, theology and conceptualisations of the public sphere. Rather, it seeks to critically reconsider what these concepts may mean within the broader South African context.

As we shall see, each of these concepts can be understood, and spoken of, in a variety of ways and from a variety of perspectives. This article will discuss some of the ways in which the intersections of theology and issues of public concern are engaged in some African, and particularly South African, contexts. Some have categorised such intersectional and contextual theological engagement as a form of African Public Theology (or indeed African Public Theologies). Others have chosen to speak about Public Theology (or Public Theologies) in Africa, Public Theologies from Africa, or Public Theologies by Africans. We shall touch upon some of the distinctives of these varied understandings of faith and public life in some African contexts, and do so in conversation with three primary critiques offered by South African theologians. Moreover, this discussion does not wish to relativise the important theological, ideological and conceptual commitments that shape the ways in which theologians in varied African contexts, or operating from varied African contexts, engage issues of public and personal concern. Rather, the presentation of different understandings of the ways in which African theologians engage issues

Note: Special Collection: Public Theology.

of theological concern in public life is intended to offer some further conceptual clarification in this field of interest. In doing so, it aims to keep the critical conversation around Public Theologies in Africa, and particularly in South Africa, alive.

African Public Theology? Three important critiques

A book with the title, *African Public Theology*, was published in 2020 (eds. Agang, Hendriks & Forster 2020). This volume emerged from a conversation that took place at the 2016 Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT) meeting hosted at the University of Stellenbosch, in South Africa. Sunday Agang (the general editor of the book), writes:

> It was at the 2016 conference of the Global Network for Public Theology, hosted by the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at Stellenbosch University, that I sat down to chat with Isobel Stevenson, the senior editor for Langham Literature. We had worked together before and were glad to meet face to face. Our talk turned to the conference we were both attending, and she said, 'I need someone to give me a book on African public theology'. (eds. Agang et al. 2020:xv)

Agang felt that a book of this nature should 'not be the [*work of a*] sole author; the book should be a collaborative project by authors from across Africa so that it could speak to all Africa' (eds. Agang et al. 2020:xvi). And so, in partnership with Network for African Congregational Theology (NetACT),[1] the project began in 2017. The published volume comprises 29 chapters dealing with issues of faith and public life written by authors from across the African continent.

While the book has generally been well received, as one can expect, the project has also attracted some critical feedback. One of South Africa's most highly regarded contemporary theologians, Tinyiko Maluleke, raised some important concerns about the project. In a recent article, he (Maluleke 2021:303) questioned the 'wisdom of any theology that bears the name of the continent of Africa'. In addition to this he (Maluleke 2021:303) raised a concern, stating that what has become known as African Public Theology (the approach, rather than the book), 'seeks to sweep aside more than a century of theological reflections by fellow Africans'.

Maluleke's concerns resonate with critiques of Public Theology (as an approach to the task of theology) that have been put forward by some other South African theologians such as Rothney Tshaka (2007:533–548; 2014:1–7, 2021), Jakub Urbaniak (2016:495–538, 2018:332–352), the late Vuyani Vellem (2013:1–5, 2014:1–6), and Denise Ackermann (2005:63–76; in Smit 2017:68), to name a few. The individual authors speak for themselves (see references above), and their respective critiques have been presented and considered elsewhere (De Villiers 2018; Forster 2020a:23–25, 2021:17–22; Koopman 2019:104–107; Smit 2017:68; Van Wyngaard 2015).

1.The Network for African Congregational Theology (NetACT) (n.d.), is a network comprising 12 theological institutions from across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Of course, colleagues from elsewhere on the African continent are engaging the growing interest in Public Theology in a variety of ways that differ from their South African counterparts (cf. Berinyuu 2005:147–156). I have, however, identified three primary concerns that seem to cohere across this sample of critical South African engagements.

First, to what extent do public theological contributions in South Africa, and by South Africans, continue to perpetuate forms of colonial thinking and acting? This concern relates to the ways in which the South African critics understand that the task of theology in relation to issues of public concern is being undertaken. It is argued that some Public Theologies and public theologians in Africa rely upon theological methods, schools of theological thinking and primary theological questions that emerge from and perpetuate western colonial traditions, and of the violence that such traditions continue to enact upon Africans and Africa, or more specifically, how these are enacted upon South Africans and South Africa (Maluleke 2011:79; Urbaniak 2016:516). This is an important critique that must be considered by theologians working in and from South African contexts.

Second, to what extent do some contemporary South African Public Theologies intend to engage in what could be characterised as forms of theological imperialism and supersessionism, namely that Public Theology seeks to 'sweep aside … theological reflections by fellow Africans' and replace it with 'global public theology' (Maluleke 2021:303)? Maluleke (2021:302) cautions that such a 'global public theology' can easily 'degenerate into a smokescreen inside of which a hundred years of Black, feminist, and African theologies may be killed softly and obliterated out of history'. This raises an important concern, namely that Public Theologies and some public theologians seek to subsume other approaches to the work of theology, and contributions from theologians and theological schools within a universalising and all-inclusive theological oeuvre characterised as a form of global Public Theology. A consequence of this would be to deny the unique and necessary contributions of such theologies, as such an approach seeks to 'become a totalizing and global theological methodology', with 'unspoken imperial ambitions' (Maluleke 2021:297). Again, this highlights the importance of maintaining a de-colonial perspective on the methods, sources and intentions in South African Public Theologies. There are two broad strands to de-colonial theologies in South Africa. Some seek to identify, interrogate, and deconstruct the 'perverse logic' of colonialism which 'created pathologies among Africans' (Vorster 2021:48). These theologies are often focussed on the 'psychological, political, and socioeconomic liberation of Africa' (Vorster 2021:48). The second strand of de-colonial theologies in South Africa focusses upon 'the epistemological and linguistic impact of (de)colonialism in Africa' (Vorster 2021:48). I contend that where imperialism and supersessionism are the intentions (or indeed the case), they should be unmasked as such, and vigorously criticised.

Third, there are the important questions about who is doing Public Theology, and where it is being done? This critique highlights the complexity of individual identity and social identities in relation to the work of theology in South Africa. In South Africa the critiques have tended to centre around various categories of individual identity and social identity. The first is race (and in the South African context, the privileges and power associated with whiteness) (*Black theologies, African theologies, and the challenge of whiteness VLOG 34 18 August 2016* 2016; Van Wyngaard 2015). In South Africa we cannot yet move beyond how race and racial identity shapes our individual and social lives. White persons continue to enjoy the underserved privileges of colonialism and apartheid. Of course, as we learn from Critical Race Theory, these privileges are intersectional in nature. Cobus van Wyngaard (2015:479) argues that 'race remains important in structuring life in post-apartheid South Africa, but also that the South African public sphere in particular is a racialised space'. He (Van Wyngaard 2015:478, 480) goes on to argue that equal participation in the public sphere also relates to the intersectional aspects of social (and economic) class. Jakub Urbaniak adds further intersectional elements to the critique of identity, namely the importance of engaging social and geographic locations of theologians. He rightly points out that much of the drive for Public Theology in South Africa has emerged from academics at elite academic institutions (such as the University of Stellenbosch and the University of Pretoria, but of course also from former English-speaking institutions such as the University of Cape Town and the University of KwaZulu Natal). He comments that the work of one of South Africa's most notable public theologians is 'done in a neat office, not in the buzzing streets of South African cities and townships' (Urbaniak 2018:335, 340). In addition to race, social location and social class, gender is another important intersectional concern in South African Public Theologies according to some critics (Claassens 2019:185–186; Forster 2021:21–22; Maluleke 2021:302–303; McIntosh 2019:215–217; Thyssen & Davis 2021:1–2). One need only look at the bibliographies of courses that are taught on Public Theology or see who are cited in research articles, or consider the clustering of topics that get researched and addressed by public theologians to realise that men (often white men) in privileged social and economic positions (often at elite Universities) dominate South African public theological scholarship. One could thus be excused for questioning whether this could truly be classified as 'public' theology, when the 'public sphere' is a 'space available only to a certain class [*race, and gender*] of people' (Van Wyngaard 2015:478).

Of course, there are many other important and necessary critiques of Public Theology. However, those that are discussed above are pertinent to understanding why we need to interrogate the constituent concepts of what is often named as 'African Public Theology'. We shall thus consider some understandings of how the terms *Africa* and *Africans* are understood in some of these debates. Then we will discuss some of the different understandings of Public

Theology that are used by South Africans. Finally, we shall consider the complex notion of the 'public' in relation to Public Theology, or theological engagement with issues of public concern.

African theologies as an 'inside job'? On decolonisation and Africanisation

As noted in the previous section, each of the three primary critiques relates to what the critics contend, are varying understandings and misunderstandings of Africa and what it means to be African. As was already mentioned, these critiques are primarily framed within the historical and social concerns that shape current debates amongst South African theologians. However, they do bear some relevance to other contexts that share similar concerns across the African continent and in places such as Brazil (cf. eds. Von Sinner, Ulrich & Forster 2020).

The first critique, discussed above, relates to Africa's history and the teleological direction of perpetuating colonial thinking, and the violence of colonialism in the post-colony. The second relates to living authentically within our present African reality, while retaining the nature and character of what our theological contributions ought to be, to address the lived realities of African life. Universal categories are too weak to address the real 'pain' and 'anger' of African experience in the post-colony (Claassens 2019:190–194; Maluleke 2011:83, 85, 2021:302; Urbaniak 2018:334, 345; Vellem 2013:5). The third critique has to do with African identity and the resultant reality of identity politics. Who is speaking? What are they speaking about? To whom are they speaking? Who is being listened to? Who is not heard? What is ignored? Who is dismissed?

In light of this, it is wise to spend some time considering what we might mean when we speak of 'Africa' or refer to when we name a particular theological contribution as being 'African'. These terms and the concepts, people and histories that they refer to are rich, textured and complex (Mudimbe 2020:1).

The first thing that we can say is that Africa refers to both people and a place. The people who are called Africans comprise a rich diversity of ethnicities, cultures, religious traditions and histories. The place, on the other hand, most often refers to the continent of Africa which is as diverse as it is vast. From South to North, East to West, there is an endless variety of topography, geology, fauna and flora. In this regard, it is reasonable to argue that we should remain inherently contextual when we use 'Africa' or 'African' as an adjective that is coupled to 'theology' (Forster 2021:15, 24–28).

However, we also need to recognise that often Africans are viewed very differently by outsiders than they are by each other (Mbembe 2001:1). Colonialism, slavery, Southern

African apartheid (and its spread throughout the continent) as well as the ongoing exploitation of natural resources and human beings on the continent reveal the 'gaze' to which Africans, and our continent are subjected (Maluleke 2021:309–311). Afro-phobia, racism, and Afro-pessimism continue to live in the cultural imagination of many Westerners and, indeed, the West. The results are evident in the plundering of Africa's non-renewable resources, global economic and social inequalities (such as vaccine inequality during the Covid-19 pandemic), and punitive global trade policies and international relations. Achille Mbembe (2001:1) rightly noted that thinking 'rationally about Africa is not something that has ever come naturally' to the West.

In this sense, I would contend that theologians in Africa, from Africa, and those concerned with Africa, should rightly centre African concerns and lived experiences in their theologies. Of course there will be differences amongst Africans themselves, given the diversity of African contexts. Yet, Mbembe notes that when speaking of Africa or from Africa, we Africans need not justify our existence or our identities to the 'gaze' of external observers. Simply stated, we can reflect our reality and our lived experience with critical clarity, 'since [*African*] things and institutions have always been there, there is no need to seek any other ground for them other than the *fact of their being there*' (Mbembe 2001:3–4 [*emphasis in the original text*]). Why should this point be made? Simply stated: whenever Africans speak or write about themselves, their experiences, their places, they have to contend with prejudices, myths, half-truths and untruths about ourselves. Simply because the intellectual and political systems of the West dominate in the academy (including some African academic settings) in global politics or in economic systems that operate across the markets of the globe, this does not mean that they are more desirable, moral or sophisticated. They dominate because of a complex set of historical events which led to the world being configured in its current global and local forms (Forster 2018:1–4).

As theologians in African contexts, and from the African continent, we should exercise the right to question what is presented as normative in our contexts, or for our contexts. Of course, it stands to reason that we should do so in relation to those from outside of Africa who speak to us, or more pertinently mistakenly seek to speak for us.

In this regard Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni points out that Africanisation does not intend merely to remove one system and replace it with another, as it should be about truth, not about revenge. Somewhat controversially he cautions us against persons or systems whose intention is merely to 'villagise the university' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016:19). He suggests that we should be wary of persons and systems that are motivated by revenge, as these will not lead to true contextualisation and liberation; rather it unmasks the perpetuation of colonial intentions such as domination, othering and control. He (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016:19) asserts that, 'we must not remove the universality of the university

under the name of Africanisation'. In a related manner, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's understanding of Africanisation names a 'project of re-centering', which aims to reject, 'the assumption that the modern West is the central root of Africa's consciousness and cultural heritage' (in Mbembe 2016:35). This is an important emphasis, as it posits that Africanisation is not merely a response that is undertaken as a secondary activity, taking its direction from ideas and contributions that come from the West as if the West is the centre around which we operate – a powerbroker of knowledge. Africa is not a mere extension of Western ideas and ideals. We do not simply react to it, or act alongside or in relation to it. Thus, it can be understood that Africanisation is not only 'about closing the door to European or other traditions'; it is more specifically, 'about defining clearly what the center is' (Mbembe 2016:35).

Thus, in relation to the project of the Africanisation of our theological contributions, our aim is not merely to reject and replace what currently exists. Rather, we are refocusing the centre of our theological reflection upon (South) African persons, African contexts and (South) African concerns. In doing so, we recognise that different perspectives exist, and that some perspectives (particularly African perspectives, which have been disregarded) should have more appropriate value for the work of theology in our contexts. An aim of this project is to explicate and dismantle worldviews that seek to uncritically impose ideas or approaches to the tasks of theology upon persons and communities in our contexts. Emphasising our positionality sets a foundation from which we can transcend oppressive and imperial theological perspectives and work towards embracing understandings of ourselves, our contexts and our religious beliefs in ways that are representative of who we are and how we operate in relation to others and, of course, also how they operate in relation to us.

However, as with the highlighted critiques of Public Theology that were raised earlier, it also means that we must remain critically engaged in a robust and authentic conversation amongst ourselves. Andreotti de Oliveira et al. (2015:22) suggest that at times 'decolonisation is a messy, dynamic, and contradictory process'. Not only because of the historic and ongoing violence of colonisation that impact just about all dimensions of being, 'but also because decolonisation has multiple meanings, and the desires and investments that animate it are diverse, contested, and at times, at odds with one another' (Andreotti et al. 2015:22). Any theological contribution that seeks to be authentic to Africans and the varied contexts of Africa, must thus take into 'consideration how indigenous people lost their freedom to exist as indigenous people in almost every single sphere of existence' (Andreotti et al. 2015:24). Maluleke (2021:313) suggests that one of the tasks of contemporary African theology is to recognise that we, 'cannot proceed without taking seriously the continued and historic influence of African religions and traditions as past and present hosts of Christianity in Africa'. Nokuzula Mndende (2019:158) observes that, when Christian missionaries came to Southern Africa, 'Religion, Christianity, and Western culture were incorrectly implied to be synonymous with one another'. A result was that:

[*T*]he new imposed religion brought by missionaries displaced the indigenous forms of [*African*] spirituality and relegated them to exclusive and supposedly outdated cultural practices of the Black population of South Africa. (Mndende 2019:158)

As Frantz Fanon pointed out: Some attempts at Africanisation and decolonisation succumbed to the post-liberation pitfalls of 'retrogression', which does not entail true liberation, but rather a new form of subjugation under the power of a familiar social grouping (Dübgen & Skupien 2018:130; Mbembe 2016:33). Maluleke (2021) thus cautions:

… Christian theology is not and has never been a neutral observer in Africa. The starting point of Black and African theologies is to look for and to expose the 'inside job' in the continuing theological, spiritual, and physical burglary of Africa. Global public theology may be one of such contemporary burglaries. (p. 313)

If those who do theology in (South) Africa or from (South) Africa with a focus on issues of public concern wish to avoid being party to the plundering of our identity and heritage, we will have to give serious attention to what it means to be African, indeed South African, and what it means to do theology authentically within the various contexts of Africa.

What might Public Theology mean? Two approaches considered

A second major concern that is present in the three critiques we discussed earlier, is the ways in which public theology is seen to have imperial or universalising ambitions. Maluleke (2021) states this concern clearly when he writes:

[… *G*]lobal public theology should at least become conscious of its imperial ambitions that set it not merely in competition but in opposition with local theologies. It should become conscious of its unspoken or even unconscious desire to efface and trivialize local agency and of its desire to become the one and only representative of all voices, in all places and all times. (p. 303)

Maluleke's critique highlighted for me, once again, the dangers of naming things. Of course, a name will always only be a type of representation of the thing that it represents, but that does not mean that it does not have power. Semiology teaches us that names are doomed to be imperfect signifiers of those things they seek to signify (Hussy 1998:297–298). The well-known example from Chinese Buddhist thought about how the signifier is related to the signified, serves as a good example. When we see a finger pointing to the moon, we have to realise that the finger is not the moon; it merely points the way (Ho 2008:159–160). It is the imperfection and inadequacies of naming things that often creates uneasiness, misunderstanding or misrecognition. The same can be said for the signifier, Public Theology, and particularly when the qualifier 'African' is added to it.

For this reason, like some others, I have sought to apply a 'generous' terminology in my naming of theologies that engage public life and issues of public concern. By this I mean that I tend to speak with some measure of fluidity, and

deliberately choose to speak of Public Theologies (in the plural). This is simply to show that there are a variety of ways of understanding what some refer to as public theology:

Different theologians, and theologians in different regions of the world, have very different approaches to the subject. They also focus on different issues. This is not surprising given the diversity of those who contribute to public theology and the unique issues faced in each region. Even within Africa, different regions may take different approaches to public theology. However, in the midst of this diversity, it is possible to identify some common characteristics of contemporary public theology. (Forster 2020a:15)

Yet, as with all systems of knowledge, some terms, characteristics, approaches, terminologies and even 'methods' have become more widely used and accepted in contemporary academic theological debates. Dirk J. Smit's article, *The paradigm of public theology* (2013:11–23), is very helpful in outlining six historical or paradigmatic narratives in the development of understandings and usages of the term *public theology*. It would not be unreasonable, however, to argue that the six historical narratives that he relates in his article, point to how the term *public theology* entered into common usage and some measure of common understanding within a specific community. This community centres around the GNPT and the *International Journal for Public Theology* (IJPT). According to Sebastian Kim, both the GNPT and the IJPT were founded at meetings of theologians in 2006 and 2007 respectively. They shared an interest in the fast-developing scholarship around the term *Public Theology*, and so initiated a network to study it as well as a journal in which to publish research findings (Kim 2011:6). What is clear, at present, is that while there is a community that has emerged around notions of Public Theology, there is not yet agreement on what the term *Public Theology* refers to. Smit (2017) writes:

Those who claim to pursue public theology have widely different views on what they are doing. Many who seemingly engage in doing public theology never use the term at all – and some deliberately choose not to. Those who critique the notion hardly share any consensus on what they are rejecting. Opinions differ. What should be included as public theology? What does not qualify as public theology? Who is actually doing public theology – where, and how? Confusion seems to abound. But does it matter? Does it matter that this growing field, already widespread and popular, has not (yet) developed a definite and normative methodology? (p. 67)

He goes on to suggest that perhaps it does not matter too much that we do not have a normative definition for what constitutes 'public theology'. The fluidity and generosity of this approach is helpful. Smit rightly notes that Public Theology exists. People speak about it, speak of engaging in it, and seek to study and understand aspects of it. It is a 'growing field', in contemporary academic theological study; it is 'already widespread and popular' (Smit 2017:67).

However, the claim above is rightly framed within an understanding that there is not yet consensus on what constitutes 'public theology'. Hence, Public Theology

should not be considered as a normative concept in this understanding of it. Rather, it is rich in diversity; at times there are even differences and contentions between approaches, core commitments and primary concerns that are diverse; yet all called by the same name, Public Theology.

A descriptive approach to public theology

In relation to the above, we can identify a language that constitutes a descriptive approach to public theology. In this instance, we are not using capital letters to refer to public theology, as it is being used as an adjective rather than a noun. The descriptive approach seeks to acknowledge and account for the many diverse approaches to faith and public life that exist and describe the ways in which individual or collective contributions operate. At times they expressly claim the identity of a public theologian or to be related to some characteristics of public theology. At other times they do not. However, such public theologians and public theologies can be observed and described. A descriptive approach displays a sensitivity to the notion that public theologies are not and should not be totalising or all encompassing. They seek to point out what is observed in relation to internal claims, or generally agreed upon characteristics rather than stake a claim on behalf of a normative discipline.

In this sense, it is possible to make some descriptive claims about public theology. Nico Koopman (2011:94), a well-known South African theologian, notes that the 'church [*and the Christian faith*] exists in public, is a part of it and impacts upon it both knowingly and unknowingly'. In an earlier article, he expanded his descriptive understanding of public theology by indicating that public theology frequently wishes to answer the following questions: First, what is the inherent public nature of God's love for the world? Second, how can we understand and articulate the rationality of God's love for the world? Third, what are the meaning and implications of God's love for every facet of life (Koopman 2010:124)?

This is clearly not a prescriptive understanding of public theology. Rather, it seeks to offer some insights into the ways in which theologians (and our theologies) engage with faith at the intersection of public life. In this descriptive sense, we could understand that the qualifier 'public' (in relation to theology) seeks to show the ways in which faith has a public dimension. Maluleke (2021:307) also seems to point to such a description when he writes of Black Theology and African Theology that they are, 'theologies of lament in situations where the states are so weak and sometimes so despotic that there is no public/private binary to speak about'. This does not mean that Maluleke is doing public theology, or that Black Theology and African Theology are being 'claimed' as public theologies; rather, it is simply pointing out that these theological contributions operate in and in relation to public life and issues of public concern.

Thus, the descriptive use of 'public theology' neither wish to claim other theological contributions as public theologies, nor should it claim all theologians as public theologians. Instead, it aims to describe, understand and consider the diverse ways in which various theologies operate between faith and public life. In this regard, Sebastian Kim (2011:viii) notes that public theology (in a descriptive sense) existed long before the formation of the GNPT and IJPT, it is 'not a new concept; Christian theology has always tried to be relevant to the context and society'.

Furthermore, as noted in the quote from Maluleke above, we should also challenge overly simplistic representations of a private or public dualism. This is particularly important in African contexts where religion plays a very different role in life than it does in many Western secularising societies (Forster 2019:18–39, 2022:469–488). Historical religiosity in Africa, and the challenging and ambivalent role of Christianity in African history, are clear examples of why we cannot simply adopt a westernised understanding of the religion and public life, or a westernised conceptualisation of the public sphere in African contexts.

A prescriptive approach to public theology

The discussion up to now has dealt with a descriptive approach to public theology (public theology as an adjective). However, there is another approach to public theology which is more prescriptive or prescribed in nature (public theology as a noun).

In a prescriptive approach, the term *Public Theology* is often used by persons who relate informally or formally to the community of scholars who associate with the growing field of Public Theology across the globe. As noted earlier, the founding of the GNPT in Edinburgh in 2006 and the launch of the IJPT at Princeton in May 2007, marked a paradigm shift in thinking about faith and public life (Kim 2011:6). Sebastian Kim (2011) notes that the founding of the IJPT, and the launching of the GNPT, intended to create a community and a platform within which theologians could:

> [*C*]onduct interdisciplinary research in theology and public issues in global and local contexts … in dialogue with different academic disciplines such as politics, economics, cultural studies and religious studies, as well as with spirituality, globalization and society in general. (p. 6)

This explanation points to a more delimited or prescribed approach to Public Theology. The GNPT and the IJPT were intended to be 'spaces' within which academics with specific interests in Public Theology, as a growing field in academic theology, could interact and share their research with one another. Of course, not all persons who attend the GNPT meetings or publish in the IJPT would consider themselves Public Theologians or as doing Public Theology. Yet, the majority of those who do, are intentional about engaging with certain ideas, communities and concepts that have become associated with the term *Public Theology*.

Harold Breitenberg notes that such an approach to Public Theology includes or addresses three types of academic public theological research. First, there is research which intends to clarify how certain persons, communities or schools of thought have spoken of or engaged in what they call 'public theology'. It researches and presents their self-understanding of their theological engagement with public life, or theological engagement with issues of public concern. Such research seeks to understand how these persons, communities or schools of thought think about what they call Public Theology. Second, there is research with a more expressly methodological focus. Such research aims to understand how persons or communities undertake the work of a public theologian or engage in public theological reflection. As stated, it focusses on methodological and epistemological concerns within the prescribed field of Public Theology. Third, Breitenberg (2003:64) refers to a kind of 'constructive public theology'. These public theological contributions emerge from an expressly theological position seeking to address concerns outside the church through addressing policies, beliefs, values and actions in society at large. Kim (2011) comments on Breitenberg's three categories of public theological research noting that the:

> [F]irst two are more to do with developing public theology as a discourse, whereas the last category is to do with the practical application of theology in the public square. (p. ix)

As we can see, this is a more deliberately prescribed approach to Public Theology than the more 'generous' descriptive approach that was considered earlier. The persons who align with a more prescriptive public theological approach (knowingly or unknowingly) will speak of being engaged in Public Theology or doing research in Public Theology. What is important to note here, is that there is some measure of coherence amongst such persons about what the qualifier 'public' means in relation to Public Theology. A more technical usage of the word *public* is preferred, although the exact understanding of the 'public sphere' is also a contested issue within these circles. Dirk J. Smit's traces much of the critique and history of these debates in his articles, *The paradigm of public theology*, and, *Notions of the Public and Doing Theology* (Smit 2007:431–454, 2013:11–23). In the prescriptive sense, the term *public*, as understood in relation to 'public theology', is a kind of shorthand for the more technical term, the *public sphere* (Smit 2007:431). The notion of the 'public sphere' can be traced to Jürgen Habermas' book, *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (1991). Much of contemporary public theological research critically engages the Habermassian notion of the 'public sphere' (Butler et al. 2011; Habermas 1991; Habermas in Calhoun 1992:421–480). Smit (2007) explains that, in this sense, the use of 'public':

> [… R]epresents a strong argument for a fairly technical and normative use of 'public', referring to the sphere, often represented by specific public spaces and practices, where an informed public opinion is formed and maintained, able to resist the powers of politics and market, and characterized by critical discussion between equal participants, free of constraint, threat and self-interest. (pp. 432–433)

Smit (2007:432–433, 435) further notes that Habermas contended that democracies need spaces in which 'the discursive formation and maintenance of informed and democratic public opinion respectful of difference and otherness', could ensure more just ways 'of living together in mixed companies'. Of course, as we saw earlier, there are important critiques of Western (Habermassian) notions of the public sphere, particularly from those who are often excluded from the public sphere or have to operate within it under oppressive prescriptive conditions (e.g. women, racial minorities, the sub-altern, sexual minorities, religious minorities, etc.).

David Tracy is another frequently engaged theologian among those who operate within a more prescribed understanding of Public Theology. He (Tracy 1981:5) argued that all theological discourse is public in some senses, as it addresses specific 'publics' (audiences) in society. Tracy posited that theologians are always engaging in dialogue with a range of structures of rationality and their constituent questions, meanings, competing truths and lived experiences. From a theological perspective, these structures of rationality can be related to three typological 'publics' (Tracy 1981:6–13, 2014:330–334). He suggests that because of the nature of theological reflection in contemporary societies, the theologian engages 'three distinct and related social realities: the wider society, the academy, and the church' (Tracy 1981:5). In order to do so meaningfully, she or he has to use approaches, methods and language that are understandable and relevant to each 'public', thereby allowing for sensible and effective communication within each respective public (Tracy 1981:5). Of course, it is important to remember that Tracy is writing from within a particular context in history, within a particular culture, and from a specific religious tradition. We have a responsibility to recognise the different ways in which Christianity and the church in its varied expressions (denominations, congregations, individual believers, ecumenical bodies, and even theologians) is present in African public life. Of course, such reflection is taking place in and from South Africa. However, as Maluleke, Urbaniak, and Van Wyngaard noted, it is still largely the enterprise of privileged persons in the academy. Yet, we cannot deny that the work of many South African theologians, including many of those already cited in this article, are attempting to critically engage issues of individual and social identity within the prescribed field of Public Theology. In doing so they are expressly or inadvertently engaged in this more prescriptive understanding of public theological research. What is important to recognise here, is that this kind of research is intended to be open to the common categories of public reasoning. In other words, they should be critically engaged and tested, they should generate debate, further research, and hopefully contribute towards the development of more relevant contextual knowledge for those expressly engaged with what is known as 'Public Theology'.

Of course, the two broad explanations of Public Theology discussed above have undergone many changes and developments over the years (Berinyuu 2005:147–156; Forster 2020b:107–134; Koopman 2010:123–128; Laubscher 2021:19–25). No doubt, in the years ahead they will still change even further. Yet, it is hoped that these two categories help us to develop our understanding of what persons may mean when they speak of public theologies, but also what we should be careful of when doing so.

A tentative conclusion: Keeping the conversation alive

Public Theology exists. It is garnering growing interest amongst Africans and in Africa. The rich and lively debates amongst some South African theologians is a testament to this. However, this article sought to consider a range of important critiques of public theologies in South Africa or from the South African context. The aim of this engagement was to attempt to interrogate and more carefully understand what it might mean to be a South African theologian who is working at the intersections of faith and public life. We began by outlining three important critiques of Public Theology that centre around recent developments in Public Theologies in South Africa and the broader African contexts. These critiques highlighted the contested nature of specific concepts and terms. First, we asked what we might mean when we speak of an 'African' public theology? It was argued that there is an important need for the ongoing decolonisation and Africanisation of theologies that seek to engage faith and life in African contexts. Second, we asked what 'Public Theology' might mean in our South African context with some relation to African and other debates on the subject? It was shown that there are at least two ways in which the signifier 'public' is used. First, public theology can be used as a *descriptive* term (a sort of adjective) to identify and consider the ways in which South Africans are making sense of their faith in public life, including in a contested African understanding of the public sphere. Second, the term Public Theology signifies a more *prescribed* understanding (as a noun) of ways in which the work of theology is undertaken within particular communities, theological traditions and 'generously' shared understandings. These relate specifically to the emerging academic interest in the field of Public Theology that has developed around the IJPT, and the GNPT. While there are South African and other African theologians participating in these conversations, they are not without critique. This is significant, as it is understood that critical engagement with research is part of what constitutes academic theological engagement. In conclusion, the purpose of this article was to add a few further insights that may help to keep an important conversation alive. As Denise Ackermann (2005:69; also see Smit 2017:89) said, if public theology exists at all, it should 'in its broadest sense [*be*] concerned with the common struggle for justice and the general welfare of people and their quality of life in a society'.

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Disclaimer

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