

For God so loved the world ... Some contours for Public Theology in South Africa¹

ABSTRACT

After a brief autobiographical outline of the author's involvement in public theology, this article argues in favour of a critical and constructive public theology, which reflects upon the role of Christian faith in public life in the young South African democracy and in other democratic societies. It offers some crucial contours for the development of public theology. It firstly calls attention to different approaches to and emphases in public theology. With different emphases and methodologies the three central questions of public theology regarding the inherent public nature of God's love for the world, the public rationality of this love, and the public implications of God's love for the world, are addressed. Public theology is secondly described as an intra-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and transdisciplinary scholarly practice. In the formulation of a third contour the possibilities of what Public theology might become are discussed, namely a theological discipline, subdiscipline, research field, curriculum organiser, catalyst or a new contextual theology. In two final sections the publics of public theology and the contemporary agenda of public theology are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

A professorial inaugural address speaks to colleagues, family and friends outside the field of technical, formal, scientific theology. One is supposed to tell these brothers and sisters in academic life, church life and broader society what you are doing as theologian. You specifically need to tell them what your professorial chair entails, how you understand your task and what your vision is for your research, teaching and community interaction. In my case I should to speak about the field of public theology as it is practised by a systematic theologian, specifically by a Christian ethicist, by what the doyen of Christian ethicists, James Gustafson of the University of Chicago, calls a systematic theological ethicist.²

I will embark on this task in a narrative and biographical manner, from childhood to where I currently find myself.

1. A STORY OF INFORMAL PUBLIC THEOLOGY

It may not be pretentious to state that right through my life I have been exposed to and engaged in what has since 1974 been called public theology.³ During my childhood and youth I was

1 This article is the professorial inaugural lecture that was delivered by the author at Stellenbosch University on the 10th of March 2009 after his appointment as full professor in 2007.

2 Gustafson uses the notion of systematic theological ethics to describe the task of a systematic theologian who specialises in ethics. See J Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic ethics: Prospects for rapprochement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p.139.

3 Renowned Princeton public theologian, Max Stackhouse, states that theologians such as Ernst Troeltsch,

exposed to the so-called informal public theological discourse of my parents, family, friends, local church communities and local neighbourhoods. In informal and sometimes in structured non-formal ways, these people reflected on the contents of God's love for the world, and they continuously strove to discern what God's love meant for their daily problems and challenges, sorrows and plights, dreams and joys. These people lived with faith in the triune God of perfect love for the whole cosmos. And they reflected on the meaning of that faith for all facets of their lives, from the intimately personal to the broadest public spheres of life.

They practised public theology when they dealt with the public challenge of illness, suffering and death. They would then pose the question what faith in the triune God of perfect love entails when you lose your grandma just when you have completed your teacher education programme and just when you have looked forward to repay her in some small way for the sacrificial investments that she has made in your life; and when you lose your husband in the first year of your marriage and when you lose the son born out of this marriage just when he has completed his training as an artisan and just when he has embarked on a promising career.

These people of my childhood and youth practised public theology when they dealt with the dehumanising impact of the apartheid system on their daily lives. They then reflected on the meaning of faith in a loving God when macro-apartheid measures determined their population group, areas of residence and the neighbourhood in which they were allowed to live and what colour people they could and could not marry or have a love relationship with. What does faith in the God who loves the world so much mean when various micro-apartheid measures dehumanise you, such as the notice boards at beautiful Strand Beach that have read *Whites only* and *No dogs allowed*, respectively?

And these people reflected on the meaning of faith in the triune God when Nelson Mandela was released and when we then faced the challenge to move from the old South Africa of diverse and apart to the new South Africa of diverse and together, from the old of enmity to the new of friendship, from the old of injustice to the new of justice for all, from the old of dehumanisation to the new of dignity, from the old of racism to the new of nonracialism, from the old of classism to the new of equity and equilibrium, from the old of sexism to the new of gender justice and partnership, from the old of homophobia to the new of embracement of the other, from the old of ageism, handicappism, xenophobia and ecocide to the new of hospitality to all age groups, to abled and differently abled people and to other nationalities, and from the old of ecocide to the new of communion and solidarity between the human and nonhuman parts of creation.

These people reflected on the meaning of faith in the triune God when they realised that

Abraham Kuyper, Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Martin Luther King junior, James Luther Adams and Paul Ramsey contributed to the contemporary development of public theology but that they did not use the concept public theology. This concept was used for the first time by North American theologian Martin Marty in an article that analysed the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, titled *Reinhold Niebuhr: Public theology and the American experience*. Hereafter various theologians started to use this term. See M Stackhouse, *Public theology and ethical judgment*, in: *Theology Today* 54, 1996, p.165, 167. Today the notion of public theology is used worldwide. The formation of the Global Network for Public Theology in Princeton, New Jersey, USA, in May 2007, and the establishment of its journal, titled *International Journal of Public Theology*, bear witness to the growth of explicit public theological discourse on all continents of the world. Twenty-five research centres for public theology at institutions of higher education from all parts of the world collaborate within this network, which was already envisaged in 2002 during an informal consultation at the oldest centre for public theology, namely the Centre for Theology and Public issues at Edinburgh University. The Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at Stellenbosch University is a founder member of this network. In South Africa various theologians focus on public theological discourse explicitly. Many do public theological work without using the concept explicitly. Some of them may even be sceptical of the concept and may make room for it only in a qualified way.

in a pluralistic, democratic society the old ethos of uniformity at every cost and nontolerance of alternative views does not suffice but that new ways of dealing with plurality and ambiguity need to be explored. These people did public theology when they realised that the meaning of God's love for this world cannot merely be described in theological language of vision and criticism but that new ways to engage with public life from the perspective of faith in the triune God of love need to be formulated. New ways of engaging with a complex public in the context of democratisation, Africanisation and globalisation have to be found.

2. A STORY OF FORMAL PUBLIC THEOLOGY

The agenda of my formal, academic and scholarly labour in public theology was informed by the informal public theological discourse that I have just sketched briefly. These informal and nonformal modes of public theology impact on my formal, scholarly reflection on the contents, rationality and public implications of God's love for the world.

My master's studies investigated the theme of God and suffering. In conversation with the work of Dutch theologian A van de Beek, a Trinitarian approach to suffering was constructed. It argued that in Jesus Christ the loving Father makes a choice against suffering. The Holy Spirit is the One who actualises this choice of the Father. Humans are called to participate, through prayers (of lament and protest) and through concrete public action, in the work of the Spirit to actualise the redemptive choice of the Father.⁴

My doctoral research reflected on two major approaches to Christian ethics, namely the so-called modern (in the sense of liberal) and post-modern (in the sense of postliberal). The study concluded that both approaches are required and complement each other, since Christian ethics does not only reflect on right and appropriate behaviour, conduct, choices and policies in a pluralistic, democratic society (an emphasis of the liberal approach to ethics) but it firstly contributes to the creation and sustenance of the vision of a good society and the embodiment of that vision in persons of virtue and character (an emphasis of the postliberal approach to morality). My doctoral study verified and confirmed the hypothesis that a society of dignity is enhanced through an inclusive ethics of vision, virtue and choices.⁵

My research since the completion of the doctoral project has been built around the insights of my master's and doctoral work and around the development of three research projects, namely Theological Anthropology and Public Morality, Public Theology as Prophetic Theology, and Christology and Public Life in South Africa.

The anthropology project constructed a theological anthropology of relationality, vulnerability and interdependence that is mainly based on so-called economic Trinitarian thinking. This does not mean that the potential of immanent Trinitarian thinking for theological anthropology is underestimated. Its emphasis on relationality, vulnerability and interdependence within the Trinity is of lasting significance for anthropological thinking. The finding was, however, that economic Trinitarian thinking is less susceptible to speculative thinking than immanent Trinitarian thinking. Moreover, an anthropology that is based on economic Trinitarian thinking can draw insights from the *magnalia Dei*, in other words from God's work of perfect love among humans and the rest of creation and from the rich tradition of theological reflection on this work. The meaning of this theological anthropology of relationality, vulnerability, interdependence and

4 N Koopman, *God en die lyding? 'n Kritiese ontleding van A van de Beek se paradigmatiese oor die lyding. /God and suffering. A critical discussion of A van de Beek's paradigm theories about suffering.* Bellville: University of the Western Cape (Unpublished master's thesis).

5 *Dade of deugde? Implikasies vir Suid-Afrikaanse kerke van 'n modern-postmoderne debat oor moraliteit./Acts or virtues? Implications for South African churches of a modern postmodern debate about morality.* Bellville: University of the Western Cape (unpublished doctoral dissertation).

resilient hope was discussed with regard to concrete public challenges, like differently abled persons, gender relations, ubuntu discourses, social identity, human dignity and violence.⁶

The Public Theology as Prophetic Theology project argued that the prophetic mode is one of the ways in which Christian theology can engage with public life. In the context of a democracy, however, prophetic speaking needs to be redefined. While prophetic speaking is normally associated mainly with the offering of public criticism and to a lesser extent with offering a vision for public life, this research project argued that prophetic speaking should be broadened to include the sharing of stories of suffering and hope, the technical analysis of public challenges and the participation of churches and theologians in policy-making, policy-implementation and policy-monitoring processes. This broadened understanding of prophetic engagement entails that churches and theology contribute to a larger extent to the formation of public opinion as well. Appropriate interdisciplinary work constitutes an indispensable part of this broadened understanding of prophetic discourse. Over many years this broadened understanding of public theology as prophetic theology has led to engagement with many specific public issues, including reconciliation, justice, human dignity, poverty, violence and others.⁷

- 6 Various publications focused on these concrete public theme: differently abled persons (The dis-(otherly) abled and public morality, in: *Scriptura. International Journal for Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa*, 2003 no 82, p.72–81); gender relations (Theological anthropology and gender relations, in: *Scriptura. International Journal for Bible, Religion and Theology* 2004, no 86, p.190–200); Christian anthropology and the ubuntu discourse (Bonhoeffer's anthropology and the African anthropology of ubuntu, in *Nederlandse Theologische Tijdschrift*, July 2005, p.195–206); social identity, human dignity, diversity and violence (Ubuntu is not enough. In search of an anthropology for peaceful living, in: Van Keulen, D and Brinkman, M (eds) Christian faith and violence. *Studies in Reformed Theology*, vol. 10. Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2005; Who am I or whose am I? Christian baptism and identity, in: *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 2005, 46, June, p.448–457; From diverse and apart to diverse and together. A challenge of rehumanization, in: Van der Borgh, E (ed) Affirming and living with differences. *Studies in Reformed Theology*, 2006, vol. 12. Zoetermeer: Meinema; On violence, the Belhar Confession and human dignity, in: *NGTT* 2008, 49/3 and 4, p.159–166; Christian Baptism and an identity of inclusivity, dignity and holiness, in: Van der Borgh, E *et al* (eds) Christian identity. *Studies in Reformed Theology*, 2008, vol. 16. Leiden: Brill); illness and public health (Curing or caring? Some theological comments about healing, in: *Religion and Theology* 2006, 13, p.38–53); human dignity and human rights (Trinitarian anthropology, ubuntu and human rights, in: Botman, HR en Spörre, K (eds.) Building a human rights culture. South African and Swedish perspectives. Falun:Stralins, 2003, p.194–206; Some theological and anthropological perspectives on human dignity and human rights, in: *Scriptura. International Journal for Bible, Theology and Religion in Southern Africa* 2007, 2 (95), p.177–185); human dignity in educational institutions (Churches, public life and development: Restoration of dignity in the context of education, in S De Gruchy, N Koopman and S Stribjos, (eds) *From our side: Emerging perspectives on development and ethics*. Amsterdam: Rozenberg, 2008); being church in Africa as vulnerable continent (Vulnerable church in a vulnerable world? Towards an ecclesiology of vulnerability, in: *Journal of Reformed Theology*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, no 3, 2008, p.240–254); the humanisation of globalisation (with Dirkie Smit Human dignity and human rights as guiding principles for the economy?, in: Le Bruyns, S and Ulshoeffer, G (eds) *The humanization of globalization: South African and German perspectives*, Haag & Herchen Verlag, Frankfurt, Germany, 2008, p.59–70; Globalization and rehumanization?, in: Le Bruyns, C and Ulshoeffer, G (eds) *The humanization of globalization: South African and German perspectives*. Haag & Herchen Verlag, Frankfurt, Germany, 2008, p.235–246. Various publications that resort under this theme have been accepted for publication in 2009: Ultimate curing? Penultimate curing? Caring? On Christian hope and illness, in G. Thomas & I. Karle (Hrsg.), *Krankheitsdeutung in der postsäkularen Gesellschaft. Theologische Erkundungen und Orientierungen*. 2 Bde. Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln: W. Kohlhammer Verlag; an essay on human dignity and the public challenges of Africa that was read at a Humboldt consultation in 2008 and that will be published in 2009.
- 7 The insights of this research are disseminated through various publications. The methodological task is undertaken of constructing a broadened understanding of public theology, mainly as prophetic theology (Tussen die duiwel van Konstantinisme en die diep blou see van sektarisme. Kerk en staat verhoudinge

The Christology and Public Life project is the most recent project that I have embarked on. In line with my basic quest to reflect on the meaning of Trinitarian faith for public life, I intend to focus consecutively over the coming years on the construction of a public Christology, a public pneumatology and thereafter a public theology (in the sense of a doctrine of God).

Various postgraduate students have completed related research and others are working on theses relating to these research projects.⁸

in postapartheid Suid-Afrika in: *NGTT* 2001, 42, March/June, p.135–146; Freedom of religion and the prophetic role of the church, in: *NGTT*, 2002, 43, March and June, p.237–247; With Robert Vosloo, *Die ligtheid van die lig. Morele oriëntasie in 'n postmoderne tyd*. Wellington: Lux Verbi-BM, 2002; In a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged ?? A basic and neglected conviction of (Reformed) theology? in: Coertzen, P (ed.) *350 years Reformed: 1652–2002*. Bloemfontein: CLF, 2002, p. 252–260; Some comments on public theology, in: *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, December 2003, no 117, p.1–19; The role of tradition in moral decision making and moral consensus, in: *NGTT* 2004, 45, December, p.838–848; Offentliche Theologie im Postapartheid Südafrika, in: *Salzburger Theologische Zeitschrift* 2005, Heft 1, p.32–55; After ten years. Public theology in postapartheid South Africa. Some lessons from a debate in the USA, in: *NGTT* 2005, 46, June, p.149–164; Contemporary public theology in the United States and South Africa. A dialogue, in: Smith, R Drew (ed) *Freedom's distant shores. American Protestants and Post-colonial alliances with America*. Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006, p. 209–222; Doing ethics in communion. Some lessons from the theology of Dirk Smit, in: *NGTT* 48, 2007, p.366–375; Public theology in South Africa. A trinitarian approach, in: *International Journal for Public Theology* 2007, vol 1 no 2. Leiden/Boston: Brill, p.188–209; Confessing and embodying the catholicity of the church in the context of globality, in: *Scriptura. International Journal for Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa*, 2007, 1 (95), p.29–39; Reformed theology in South Africa. Black? Liberative? Public? in: *Journal of Reformed Theology* 2007, no 3. Leiden/Boston: Brill, p.294–306; The Lord's Prayer – An agenda for Christian living, in: *Journal for Reformed Theology*, 2007. Leiden/Boston: Brill, p.4–5; Introduction (as guest editor), in: *Journal of Reformed Theology*, 2007. Leiden/Boston: Brill, p.224–230; Religion, public life and public policy in South Africa, in: Le Bruyns, C and Ulshoefer, G (eds) *The humanization of globalization: South African and German perspectives*, Haag & Herchen Verlag, Frankfurt, Germany, 2008, p.73–86). Besides this methodological work the prophetic engagement with specific public issues is also dealt with: poverty (Let the plight of the poor be heard, in: *NGTT*, June 2004, no 45, p.440–451); reconciliation, justice and unity (Reconciliation and the Confession of Belhar 1986. Some challenges for the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, in: *NGTT* 2007, 48, p.96–106; Towards reconciliation and justice in South Africa. Can church unity make a difference? in: Kim, S, Kollontai, P and Hoyland, G (eds) *Peace and reconciliation. In search of shared identity*. Hampshire/Burlington: Ashgate, 2008, p.95–108); the international arms trade (Defence in a democracy. A church perspective on the postapartheid defence review process, in: *NGTT* 2004, 45, December, p.609–619); holiness (Holiness and public life in South Africa: The quest for wholeness, embrace and justice, in: *Colloquium* 2008, 40/2, p.166–181); public character and virtue (This is who he is! Beyers Naudé: A man of virtue and character, in: Hansen, L (ed) *The legacy of Beyers Naudé*. Beyers Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology. Stellenbosch: Sunmedia, 2005, p.153–168); the fulfilment of human rights (Theology and the fulfilment of social and economic rights, in: Van der Walt, A (ed) *Theories of social and economic justice*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2005, p.128–140; Toward a human rights culture in South Africa. The role of moral formation, in: *NGTT* 2007, 48, p.107–118); work (Work as vocation, in: Botha, JG (red.) *Work as calling and worship*. Wellington: Lux Verbi-Bm, 2001, p. 81–85). Various publications in the framework of this research project have been accepted for publication and are currently in press: one article on a broader understanding of prophetic speaking and one on prophetic speaking in the technical and policy modes (accepted by the *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*); a paper titled Land Reform and Justice that was read at a 2005 conference in the Netherlands will be published by Studies in Reformed Theology in the Netherlands in 2009; lastly the following essay will also be published in 2009: Global civil society, church unity and world unity, in: Metzger, P *et al* (eds) *Trinity, church and civil society*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. The Ecumenical Review of the World Council of Churches will publish an article of mine that describes public theology as prophetic theology, specifically as confessional theology. The title of this article is The Reception of the Barmen Declaration in South Africa.

8 The following doctoral projects have been completed under my supervision: D Katts, *Op weg na*

This brief overview of my research in the field of public theology hopefully reveals the central and consistent questions, hypotheses, themes, categories and aims of my research vision and work, which entail the following: Trinitarian faith establishes, confirms and actualises a life of dignity for all in all walks of life (overarching vision); Trinitarian faith facilitates a constructive engagement with suffering (master's studies); Trinitarian faith enhances the construction of a comprehensive public ethic that entails a vision of the good society of worth and dignity and the fulfilment of that vision through people of public virtue and character who make and live out good choices and policies (doctoral studies); Trinitarian faith paves the way for the construction of an anthropology of relationality, vulnerability and interdependence that fosters the actualisation of dignity in all walks of life, amongst others through the building of a human rights culture (Theological Anthropology and Public Morality project); and Trinitarian faith, through the church in its various forms and with its various partnerships, engages with public life in a prophetic manner, which includes envisioning, criticism, story-telling, technical analysis of public challenges, policy making and also formation of public opinion (Public Theology as Prophetic Theology project). To develop a richer understanding of the meaning of Trinitarian faith for the actualisation of dignity in public life, the doctrines of Christ, of the Spirit and of God are all full of potential. My immediate research vision mainly sets two aims: firstly to investigate the significance of Christian convictions, specifically of Trinitarian faith, for the building of a good society, in other words for the establishment, confirmation and actualisation of dignity in all walks of life in a context of various forms of the violation of human dignity and the dignity of the rest of creation, and secondly to investigate appropriate modes of Christian engagement with public life in the context of a pluralistic, democratic society, in other words to find appropriate ways to engage with various violations of dignity in pluralistic public life from the perspective of dignifying, humanising Christian faith. A crucial part of this engagement entails dialogue and

'menswaardige samelewing'. 'n Teologies-etiese ondersoek na die korrelasie tussen 'n handves van menseregte en morele verantwoordelikheid, 2007; H Jack, Dissipline as modus van morele vorming. 'n Sistematies-teologiese ondersoek, 2007; N Philander, Sosialisering as modus van morele vorming in die kerk, 2008; O Ndukwe, Yoder's social ethics as lens for revisioning the ecclesiological identity of the South Central Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, 2008. The following doctoral projects have been completed under co-supervision with Dirkie Smit: G Akper, Contemporary African perspectives on Jesus' cross and human suffering: A critical comparison of African Christologies, 2004; R Tshaka, Confessional theology? A critical analysis of the theology of Karl Barth and its significance for the Belhar Confession, 2005; J Kamiruka, A Luo Christian perspective on the Holy Spirit in sanctification according to John Calvin, 2007; V Nakah, Evangelical Christianity and African Culture? A critical assessment of the salvific significance of the cross of Christ in Shona Culture, 2007; Z Rashe, Family violence in African communities in the Western Cape. A theological-ethical assessment, 2008; J Klaasen, The interplay between Christian story and public story: In search of commonalities for moral formation under democratic rule, 2008. The following doctoral work is in progress under my supervision: L Mokobake, Military activities and the environment? A theological evaluation of the responses of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa (ACSA); H Heilbron, Christians and religious diversity: A theological evaluation of the role of an ethic of embrace in the context of religious diversity; S Mahokoto, Church unity and social context. The ecumenical debate on 'Ecclesiology and Ethics'; N Tenai, The poor and the public. A critical evaluation of public theology from a black theological perspective. The following doctoral work is in progress under co-supervision with Dirkie Smit: J Bezuidenhout, Liturgy and spirituality in the ecumenical movement: A systematic-theological evaluation; J Thipa, Atonement and human rights? Implications of the classic reformed doctrine of atonement for the building of a human rights culture in contemporary Malawi. Besides these doctoral studies I supervise various master's projects on themes relating to my research. My research, which is throughout done in communion with local and international peers and students, hopefully impacts positively on my undergraduate teaching and community interaction as well as on my involvement in various types of university work, in other words service in the Senate and Council.

collaboration with other academic disciplines. These two aims constitute the thread, parameters and coherency for all my research endeavours.

3. SOME CONTOURS FOR PUBLIC THEOLOGY

My ongoing reflection on the triune God who loves the world so much has offered some concrete contours for the development of theories and models of public theology. I briefly mention five of them.

3.1 Public theology. More than one approach?

Public theology reflects on the love of the triune God for the world. This love is expressed in the *magnalia Dei*, in other words in the acts of creation, sustenance, care, election and calling of God the Father/Mother/Parent, in the acts of reconciliation, salvation and liberation of God the Son and in the acts of renewal, fulfilment and perfection of God the Spirit. This triune work establishes, confirms and actualises the dignity and worth of all humans and of the rest of creation. God's love for the world, which comes to expression in the *magnalia Dei*, does have meaning, significance and implications for all dimensions and terrains of life, from the most private, personal and intimate to the most public, open, social and cosmic. At its heart, therefore, Christian theology is public theology. It reflects on the love of the God who is at work in all spheres of life. And the caring, liberating and renewing work of the triune God does have dignifying implications for the whole of creation, for all of reality.

It may be helpful to identify three basic questions in the field of public theology. These three questions investigate, firstly, the inherent public nature of God's love, secondly, the rationality of God's love for the world and, thirdly, the meaning and implications of God's love for every facet of life. These three questions are a specification and concretisation of the three questions that Christian theology address, namely the questions regarding the contents of Christian faith, the rationality of Christian faith and the meaning and implications of Christian faith for all facets of life.

Different approaches to or types of theology address these three questions in different ways and with different emphases. Some years ago an influential theologian from Yale, Hans Frei, identified five types of theology. He argues that these theologies differ with regard to how they describe the theological task. But although these types of theology differ, they do have one thing in common: They reflect on Christian faith. According to Frei some theologians, such as Harvard scholar Gordon Kaufman, reflect on Christian faith from an external scholarly, academic and philosophical perspective with no room for the self-description that the Christian community offers regarding its faith. In this perspective Christian faith is one of the many religious traditions that help to constitute the public cultural heritage. Theology in this mode adheres to scientific criteria of meaningfulness, coherency, logic and universality.⁹

At the other extreme theology is done solely from the perspective of internal self-description by the community of faith. Here there is no room for the external scientific perspective on faith. External scientific criteria are not adhered to. Religious concepts should be examined in the contexts from which they derive their meaning. Frei cites DZ Phillips, philosopher of religion of the University of Wales, as a representative of this position.¹⁰

The other three positions are located between these two extremes. They give attention to both the external and internal descriptions of faith. Chicago scholar David Tracy attends to both

9 See H Frei (G Hunsinger and W Placher eds.), *Types of Christian theology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p.28–30.

10 See H Frei *Types*, p.46–55.

but emphasises the external, academic description.¹¹ The famous Swiss theologian Karl Barth, perhaps the most influential Protestant theologian of the 20th century, also attends to both approaches but gives priority to the internal self-description.¹² The very influential Protestant theologian of Berlin, Friedrich Schleiermacher, is portrayed as occupying the central position, which entails a correlation of theology as both academic scientific enterprise and Christian self-description.¹³

So, although these approaches to theology¹⁴ differ and in some instances even contradict each other, they share the quest to address the three main sets of questions regarding Christian faith. Although different questions might be emphasised and prioritised these scholars indeed do give attention to the two questions that they do not address explicitly. Some of them give priority to the question regarding the contents of Christian faith (Barth). Others would emphasise the rationality of Christian faith (Tracy). The third question regarding the implications of Christian faith might be the priority for others. Since the 1960's various Political and Liberation theologies enhanced the attention to the third set of questions regarding the meaning and implications of Christian faith for all walks of life.

Various theologians who emphasise any of these three questions describe their work as public theology. The emphasis of Princeton theologian and South African, Wentzel van Huyssteen, for instance, is on the second set of questions regarding the rationality of Christian faith. This work he describes as public theology. Van Huyssteen states, "... these essays also reflect my deepest conviction that only a truly accessible and philosophically credible notion of interdisciplinarity will be able to pave the way for a plausible public theology that wishes to play an important intellectual role in our fragmented culture today."¹⁵ Other theologians, such as Dan Migliore¹⁶, also of Princeton Theological Seminary, focus on the first set of questions regarding the contents of Christian faith. They strive to illuminate the inherent public nature of that faith. They are also doing public theology.

3.2 Public theology: An intradisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach?

Public theology is practised in an intradisciplinary way. All theological disciplines address the three questions regarding the contents, rationality and implications of Christian faith or, in the words of this article, the contents, rationality and implications of the Trinitarian love of God. In addressing the three sets of questions different theological disciplines emphasise some of these questions more than others, employ different methodologies, are guided by different outcomes and goals and use different languages. Yet, despite these differences they have all of these questions in focus.

All theological disciplines focus on Christian faith, specifically on the threefold question

11 See H Frei *Types*, p.30-34.

12 See H Frei *Types*, p.38-46.

13 See H Frei *Types*, p.34-38.

14 Besides the typology of Frei other illuminating typologies do exist, for instance the one of George Lindbeck. He distinguishes among three types of theology, namely the cultural-linguistic, propositional-cognitive and experiential-expressive approaches. A more recent distinction is Robert Greer's realism-antirealism typology. He identifies four approaches, namely foundational realism (Schaeffer), postfoundational realism (Barth), postfoundational middle-distance realism (Lindbeck) and postfoundational antirealism (Hick). See RC Greer, *Mapping postmodernism. A survey of Christian options* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2003).

15 See W van Huyssteen, *Essays in postfoundationalist theology* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p.1.

16 See the book of D Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding. An introduction to Christian theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991). This is a very helpful example of an attempt to illuminate the inherent public nature and character of the central contents of Christian faith.

regarding this faith in the triune God of love proposed here. Though various theological disciplines reflect the diversity, richness and even complexity of the broader theological endeavour, there is throughout no doubt that theology is one united, integrated undertaking. This unity is witnessed to in the long historical development of theology into different disciplines. The historic and contemporary descriptions of the task of the various theological disciplines also affirm the unity of theology. The common sources that the various types of theology as well as the various theological disciplines use also witness to the unity in diversity of theology and specifically to its task of reflecting on Christian faith. This is more so the case if one assumes that all theologians of all the theological disciplines are at a deeper level engaged with the contents of faith and not only with reflection on the body of literature within their disciplines.

In his widely acclaimed book on the philosophy of theology Wolfhart Pannenberg, one of the most influential German and Lutheran theologians of the twentieth century,¹⁷ argues in favour of the unity and integrity of the theological disciplines. His point is that a thorough orientation regarding the historical development of the disciplines and the tasks ascribed to them and consideration of the contexts in which and reasons why these disciplines have developed would help contemporary theologians to develop fresh and creative understandings of these disciplines today. By investigating the development of the theological disciplines in different historical periods he demonstrates the unity and integrity of the theological disciplines.

Theology in the early church, according to Pannenberg, focused on the interpretation of Scripture. Systematic theology and biblical scholarship were not separated. Theologians such as Origen viewed themselves as biblical theologians.¹⁸

In the Middle Ages biblical scholarship and systematic theology, in other words biblical theology, were complemented with commentaries, didactic and occasional writings as well as collections of the sayings of the Church Fathers. Since the period of scholasticism in the 12th century, these writings, *sententiae*, of the Fathers have lost their connection with Scripture and have been investigated systematically by means of the new dialectic approach of scholasticism. This shift to the systematic relevance of the material in Scripture and the patristic tradition paved the way for the growth of systematic theology as an autonomous discipline.¹⁹

During the Reformation attempts were made to bring systematic and biblical theology closer again, but the thrust towards separation was strong. Not only did systematic theology and biblical theology become more independent, but under the influence of Enlightenment thinking biblical theology separated into Old and New Testament studies.

Under influence of Schleiermacher practical theology was recognised as a separate academic discipline at the end of the 18th century at the Humboldt University in Berlin.²⁰ Schleiermacher divided theology into three disciplines: Philosophical theology reflects the scientific character of theology by setting out the essence of Christianity as a particular form of belief and as the corresponding form of the Christian community. Practical theology deals with the technique of church and community leadership and is divided into various subdisciplines. Between these two is historical theology, which consists of exegetical theology, dogmatics and 'ecclesial statistics'. The latter is a description of the present state of Christianity in so far as this is a result of its history.²¹ The distinctions of Schleiermacher are employed and revisited and amended and subdivided and extended in contemporary theological discourses and education programmes.

Pannenberg argues in favour of the unity of these theological disciplines. The unity of theology resides primarily in the internal continuity between the disciplines, which rests in the nature of

17 W Pannenberg, *Theology and the philosophy of science* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

18 W Pannenberg, *Theology*, p.35–52.

19 W Pannenberg, *Theology*, p.352–353.

20 W Pannenberg, *Theology*, p.355–357.

21 W Pannenberg, *Theology*, p.252–253.

Christian faith as a historic whole. The unified, holistic nature of Christian faith constitutes the unity of theology.²² In a very important study on the nature of theology a scholar of Vanderbilt Divinity School, Edward Farley, supports this second notion of material unity. He also reminds us of Schleiermacher's second motivation of the unity of theology, namely its teleological unity, in other words its purpose to train people for ministry. Farley pleads that the unity in diversity of theology be acknowledged consistently. The notion of discipline should not be employed to fragmentise theology. He suggests that the concept of catalogue rather be employed to signify the uses of various theological disciplines and subdisciplines for educational purposes.²³

This brief overview of the historical development of theological disciplines illumines the character of theology as a field that is united in its diversity.

A cursory survey of the task of the theological disciplines demonstrates how all theological disciplines in a variety of ways, with different emphases and methodologies, address the three questions regarding the contents, rationality and public implications of God's Trinitarian love for the world.

Old and New Testament scholarship studies Scripture as one of the sources of the Christian faith tradition and uses appropriate methodological rules.²⁴ The Old and New Testament that is studied by biblical scholars is the primary witness to the work and word of God.²⁵ Biblical scholarship helps Christian theology in its wrestling with the identity and significance of Jesus Christ by wrestling with the text that transmits knowledge of Him and that indicates that Christianity has its historical grounding in both the histories of Israel and the living, crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ.²⁶

Systematic theology, including dogmatics, ethics and philosophy of religion, investigates the contents of Christian faith as it is articulated in Scripture and in the Christian tradition.²⁷ Systematic theology aims to map out the salvation of God in a well-rounded system. This system is, however, eschatological in nature. The best that fallible humans can do is to practise *theologia viatorum* (wayfarers' theology), in other words to clarify in part, to live with vacuums, break-offs and inconsistencies but also to reach for the unattainable, namely the unity of knowledge, the unity of God's work, which mirrors the unity of God. To do systematic work is to analyse, to take elements apart and also to synthesise, to put together in an orderly, systematic way. From this work of analysing and synthesising, in other words scientific work, intellectual clarity arises.²⁸

On the basis of the methods of the historical sciences Church history describes the development of the Christian faith tradition since its inception until today and also illumines its development in the framework of broader historical developments.²⁹ It traces the many ways in which Christian faith and life have come to expression in different times and places.³⁰ Church history, or historical theology, illumines the historical contexts within which theological formulations were made. By emphasising this historical situatedness of theological formulations, historical theology teaches us that theology is not a static discipline but that it is alive and dynamic. Mistakes can be made, which implies that theological formulations call for critical scrutiny, amendment and transformation.³¹

22 W Pannenberg, *Theology*, p.250–2535.

23 E Farley, *Theologia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p.84–94.

24 H Kuitert, *Filosofie van de theologie* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1988), p.23.

25 D Migliore, *Faith seeking understandin*, p.9.

26 A McGrath, *Christian theology. An introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), p.142.

27 H Kuitert, *Filosofie*, p.23.

28 H Berkhof, *Introduction to the study of dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p.10–11.

29 H Kuitert, *Filosofie*, p. 23.

30 D Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding*, p.9

31 A McGrath, *Christian theology*, p.144–145.

Practical theology, which is subdivided into various subdisciplines, reflects on the practices that facilitate reception of and sharing in the extensive salvation that Christians proclaim.³² These practices are, amongst others, preaching, educating, pastoral counselling, caring for the poor the sick, dying and bereaved.³³ Mission and evangelism could also be included under these practices.

Some scholars offer more distinctions with regard to various theological disciplines, for example philosophical theology and mystical theology/spirituality.³⁴

This brief description of the task of the theological disciplines demonstrates that all these disciplines in various ways address the three sets of questions regarding Christian faith.³⁵

Public theology is not only done in an intradisciplinary way but it is also an interdisciplinary endeavour. David Tracy³⁶ describes the academy as that public or social location of theology where serious, critical scientific enquiry takes place with other academic disciplines. In its engagement with the academy theology is challenged to provide arguments that all reasonable people from diverse religious and secular traditions can recognise as reasonable. In this discourse appeals are made to universal faculties such as experience, intelligence, rationality and responsibility. Claims are stated with appropriate warrants, backings and rebuttal procedures. Tracy also pleads that although theologians confess allegiance to a specific religious tradition or to a praxis movement bearing religious significance, they abstract themselves from these faith commitments for the sake of critical analysis of religious and theological claims by outsiders and by those who belong to the tradition. There are, of course, many theologians who would oppose Tracy on this point. They would namely argue that you need not abstract and distance yourself from your faith commitments in order to do critical and honest introspection into the cognitive claims of your tradition. Such a withdrawal for the sake of honest scientific enquiry is viewed as being dishonest.

With an appeal to Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theories, Dutch systematic theologian Gijsbert

32 H Kuitert, *Filosofie*, p. 23.

33 D Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding*, p.9

34 A McGrath, *Christian theology*, p.144–147, and D Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding*, p.9.

35 In addressing these three sets of questions all theological disciplines drink from the four sources of Christian theology. These sources are Scripture, the rich Christian tradition, reason and experience. See A McGrath, *Christian theology*, p.178–196. Scripture refers to the Old and New Testament of either the Roman Catholic or Protestant canons. Tradition refers to the various Christian faith traditions and denominations and also to the unified one Christian tradition. See G Wainwright, *For our salvation. Two approaches to the work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p.102–103. Tradition in the latter sense has a narrower meaning. In that sense it refers to a limited number of generally accepted texts, in other words the classical creeds and confessions. Tradition also has a broader meaning that refers to the various writings and practices by which faith is transmitted. These include liturgical and catechetical documents and also cultural products such as literature and art. See C Marsh, *Christ in focus. Radical Christocentrism in Christian theology* (London: SCM Press, 2005), p.5. A distinction is made between a single- and dual-source theory of tradition. The single-source theory refers to the traditional way in which Scripture is interpreted in the community of faith. The dual-source theory, which is more prominent in Roman Catholic circles, especially up to Vatican II, refers to a second source of revelation besides Scripture. According to this theory the unwritten tradition that has been transmitted since the apostles has the same authority as the Bible and illumines matters about which Scripture is quiet. See A McGrath, *Christian theology*, p.186–187. Experience has a narrower and broader meaning. The narrow meaning refers to the inner lives of individuals, to their subjective feelings and emotions. The broader perspective refers to the encounter with the outward world of everyday life. See A McGrath, *Christian theology*, p.189; C Marsh, *Christ in focus*, p.4–5. Reason refers to the rational, cognitive capacities of humans.

These capacities are a crucial source in doing theology. See A McGrath, *Christian theology*, p.178–183.

36 See Tracy *idem*. 56–59.

van den Brink,³⁷ for instance, supports the later developments in the philosophy of science discourse, which makes room for adherence to particularistic commitments in the scientific endeavour. Although he reckons that there is something to be learned from older important philosophies of science,³⁸ it remains his conviction that these approaches do not by far take the significant and determinative particularistic influences such as faith commitments of scientists seriously enough.

In the encounter with the academy public theology makes the choice for scientific reflection, for making faith convictions rationally accessible to all reasonable people as far as possible, for constructing arguments that pass the test of coherency, consistency and logic reasoning. Theology, however, does not have to distance itself from its faith commitments but takes care that such commitments do not exclude scientific scrutiny. The age-old Christian notion of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) that Anselm of Canterbury (1033 – 1109 AD) needs fresh application in this dialogue of theology with the academic public.

Transdisciplinarity discourse provides one more way of describing the manner in which public theological discourse can develop. Transdisciplinarity refers to the attempt to solve complex public problems from the local to global levels by drinking from the diversity of knowledge, insights and perspectives of various academic disciplines, practitioners and members of various sectors of public life. The expertise of every discipline and sector is respected, but disciplinary and sectorial boundaries are destabilised. Dualisms and even incommensurabilities between, for instance, the secular and religious, the human and the natural sciences are challenged. The goal of the joint reflection is not only to understand challenges better, but to transform society and to enhance justice and dignity for all. This discourse is not carried out in an impartial distanced, spectator-like manner, but asks for engagement, involvement and participation in the issues at stake. There is indeed immense potential in this approach for a theology that reflects upon the implications of God's love for the world with its complex challenges.³⁹

3.3 What will this rapidly growing Public theology become: a theological discipline, subdiscipline, research field, curriculum organiser, catalyst or new contextual theology?

Public theological discourse is growing all over the world. It is as yet not sure what status public theology will eventually enjoy. It is not certain whether it will become a new theological discipline, subdiscipline, research field, or a curriculum organiser, catalyst or new contextual theology.

Several reasons can be cited for the growing interest in what is called public theology. Sociologists of religion, such as the famous Boston scholar Peter Berger,⁴⁰ affirm that there is a growth in religiosity all over the world. Even in highly secularised countries such as those in Northern Europe, Berger argues, religiosity is growing. This religiosity is not necessarily Christian religion or, for that matter, any form of institutionalised religion. But there is indeed a new awareness of and appreciation for the transcendental, the metaphysical, the divine, albeit not in the form of faith in a personal god, such as the triune God of Christianity. This growth in

37 See G van den Brink *Een publieke zaak. Theologie tussen geloof en wetenschap* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2004).

38 Van den Brink reasons that despite their weaknesses older philosophies of science still pose some important challenges. Logical positivism challenges us to ensure that cognitive meaningful statements be verifiable as far as possible; confirmationism teaches us that it is much more difficult to confirm so-called nonexistence statements than existence statements; and the falsification theory of Karl Popper challenges us to open ourselves to criticism, to continuous disturbance and critical opposition by researchers who do not just take our positions for granted. See G van den Brink *idem*. p.219–221.

39 For an insightful discussion of interdisciplinarity see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transdisciplinarity_Studies

40 Peter Berger *et al* (eds), *The desecularization of the world. Resurgent religion and world politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

religion prompted Berger to replace his so-called secularisation thesis with what he now calls a desecularisation thesis. In various countries and on various continents religiosity in the form of institutionalised religion is growing, for example South America, Africa and Asia. In Africa Christianity experiences its highest growth. The forecast that the democratisation process in a country like South Africa would be accompanied by secularisation did not materialise. Thirteen Fifteen years after the dawning of democracy religion is alive and well in South Africa. In fact, Christianity is growing, especially in circles outside the so-called mainline churches. This growth in religiosity in a variety of forms paves the way for reflection on the place, form and role of religion in public life. Religion has the potential to play a constructive role in society. Therefore thorough reflection is required on how the redemptive, unifying, humanising and dignifying potential of religion can be explored. This is a task that public theology is called upon to embark on.

The growth in religiosity all over the world is unfortunately also accompanied by growth in local, regional and international conflicts that are fuelled by religion. Religion indeed has the potential to be destructive. It can foster doctrinal and moral absolutisms that leave no room for disagreement, debate and the recognition of ambiguity and uncertainty. In this context of absolutism moralism, judgementalism, stereotyping, generalisation, stigmatisation, demonisation and eventually more direct violence such as murder and bloodshed develop on personal and communal, local and global scales. This sad situation calls for thorough introspection by religious people and institutions, an introspection that is manifested in, as far as possible and appropriate, rational deliberation, intellectual inquiry and public justification of the plausibility of doctrinal and moral positions. For this crucial task public theology is required.

Another dangerous aspect of religion that needs to be redeemed by critical and communal rational discourse is the fact that some forms of religion justify positions of not only doctrinal relativism and nihilism but also of moral relativism and nihilism. This attitude has destructive outcomes, such as a spirit of greed and consumerism, a hedonistic and individualistic lifestyle, a lack of compassion and care for the other, the breakdown of social solidarity and cohesion, lawlessness and corruption, and so forth. The need for a theology that enables religious people and institutions to avoid both absolutism and also relativism and nihilism might be another reason for the growth in public theology discourses all over the world.

In various Western European countries immigration patterns lead to religious diversification, especially to increased interaction with Islam. These higher levels of religious diversity lead to higher levels of public debate about religious matters. The connectedness of some terrorist organisations with Islam increases this intense public focus on religion and specifically on Islam. To deal constructively with religious and related forms of diversity these societies need inputs from constructive public theological discourses.

Rapid and continuous social, cultural, political and economic changes and transformations all over the world on local, national, regional and global levels impact on religion and various types of theologies. In various countries the fall of communism, for instance, and the apparent victory of democracy and the global market economy challenge not necessarily the agenda but indeed the methodologies and epistemologies, the social analyses and theoretical presuppositions of different liberation theologies. Theologies in all countries of the world are challenged to think afresh about their agendas, priorities, methodologies and epistemologies in the light of processes such as political, cultural and economic globalisation as well as the global threat to the environment. In South Africa, specifically, the transformation from an apartheid to a democratic society poses special challenges to religion and theology. To embark faithfully on these tasks proper public theologies need to be developed.

The list of reasons for the interest in public theology can indeed be extended. Some would

add that the name sells well: It ensures a place for religion in public life; it confirms the inherent public nature of all theology; and the term *public* is appropriate and relevant in the context of democratic societies where notions such as public, publicity, public-ness, public discourse, public opinion, public policy and so forth are well-established categories. The term *public theology* puts theology at the heart of modern public life, in other words in political and economic life, in civil society and in public opinion-formation processes. Whatever the reason, the notion of public theology is growing, and whilst keeping in mind that this undertaking, as is the case with all human endeavours, might be destructive, the constructive and redemptive potential in this development should be acknowledged and intentionally explored.

In the rapidly growing international discourses on public theology there is as yet no consensus on whether public theology should develop as a new contextual theology, discipline, subdiscipline, research field, curriculum organiser or catalyst for the advancement of an explicit focus on the public contents, rationality and implications of Christian faith, of God's Trinitarian love for the world.

In a broader sense one could argue that all theology is indeed public theology. All theological disciplines and subdisciplines are engaged in public theology, some more directly and others more indirectly.⁴¹ In this broader understanding of public theology the current developing field of public theology can therefore be viewed as a catalyst. The use of this almost irritating tautology called public theology is crucial to remind all theological disciplines of the inherent public content, rationality and implications of Christian faith, the faith that teaches about the God who loves the world. This broader catalyst role of public theology is emphasised to such an extent by the Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia in the USA that it uses the notion of public theology as central category for the renewal of its theological curriculum.

There is, however, also room for a narrower understanding of public theology. In this sense public theology attends specifically to the third set of questions, that is the questions about the implications of God's love for the world. Public theology in a narrower sense investigates the significance, meaning and consequences of this Trinitarian love for a variety of specific contextual public challenges. Although it addresses the first two sets of questions regarding the contents and rationality of God's love for the world, public theology in a narrower sense emphasises the questions about the concrete public implications of God's love for specific concrete public challenges. In addressing this third set of questions public theology specifically attends to the engagement of Christian faith with the public policy and public opinion formation processes in democratic societies. In terms of contemporary thinking about the theological encyclopaedia,

41 I understand the work that the various theological disciplines and subdisciplines in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University is doing in terms of this public theological orientation. Old Testament, New Testament, systematic theology (ethics included) and historical theology (currently called ecclesiology) illuminate in surprising and challenging ways the Judaeo-Christian roots and wealth of this Trinitarian love of the God who creates, elects, calls and cares, who saves and reconciles, who renews, fulfills and perfects. Liturgy illuminates the celebratory character of this love. Homiletics enhances the proclamation and preaching of this love. Pastoral care teaches that this love is embodied in practices of compassion and care. The reflection of youth work and catechesis ensure that it is taught and embodied intergeneratively. Congregational ministry views it as a love that is nurturing community and that it is embodied in congregational practices. Theology and development teaches that this love serves life, life in abundance, life of dignity for all. Missiology teaches the missionary character of this love. It refers to the *missio Dei*, to God's loving acts in all cultural and religious contexts and to the participation of believers in the *missio Dei*, in this work of love. More specifically systematic theology illuminates the thinking about this love in the confessions, dogmas and historical and contemporary theological discussions of the church. Systematic theological ethics shows it is a love that affects formation, that is formation of societies that are safe habitats, of humans who live with virtue, character and good *habitus* and of people who make appropriate decisions and policies that reflect this *habitus* and build this habitat.

systematic theological ethics might be the best equipped theological discipline to take up this task.

In fulfilling its task in a broader or narrower sense public theology does not aim to replace the various contextual and liberation theologies but rather drink from their rich wells.

3.4 The public of public theology?

In my own thinking the concept public is used in an inclusive way, not in the modernistic way of dichotomising life into so-called private and public spheres and in even fragmenting the public into various autonomous, isolated compartments with their own central values and rules. The concept public rather refers to the whole of life and challenges us to have God's love for the whole world, for all of reality, in focus when we do theology in various theological disciplines and subdisciplines.

Dirkie Smit⁴² explains that notions such as public are used in a variety of ways. He also explains that these notions are filled with ambiguity and even contradictions. He identifies three main ways in which the concept public is used in contemporary societies. Related to these three different understandings of public, there are three corresponding understandings of public theology.

Public (*öffentlich*) is used, firstly,⁴³ under influence of especially Jürgen Habermas as that sphere of spaces and practices where an informed public opinion about the normative vision for society is formed and sustained. This sphere is characterised by critical discussion between equal partners and by being free of constraint, threat and self-interest and open to difference and otherness. Public in the sense of sphere of public discourse, public opinion formation, is able to resist and impact on the powers of politics and the market. The notion of public that has developed in modern democracies is used in diverse, even contradictory, ways. Some use public as in opposition to private; sometimes it is used in contrast to the state and even the market, therefore in the sense of public debate, public initiatives, public meetings, public polls and public organisations outside the state and market, for the sake of the so-called public interest; and sometimes public is used to refer to the state (and economy) that has the task to maintain the public sector, amongst others public services, public health, public transport, public roads, public social care, public education and public schools. Smit rightly also explains how the media that are by nature supposed to be public and in service of the normative public discussion and opinion formation are no longer viewed as public media per se. The term *public media* is reserved for the independent media that do not serve – whether openly or hidden, consciously or unconsciously – the ideological propaganda of the state and market.

Some approaches to public theology are based on this understanding of public as the sphere where a normative vision underlying contemporary democratic life in democratic societies is developed. This public theology takes on the form of public religion as civil religion, advocacy and struggle for specific goals, round-table forums that facilitate public dialogue and address tensions and conflicts in service of the common good and also participation in policy making and implementation.⁴⁴

A second understanding of public – perhaps the most common one in theological and church circles – is that public has to do with life in general, life in the world, the whole of creation, history, culture, social life, reality and humanity. Public theology that functions in the context of this broader, vaguer understanding of public focuses on three questions regarding the place, social form and role of the church in this broad public. Such a theology will acknowledge that

42 See Dirkie Smit, *Notions of the public – and doing theology?* Tentative theses for discussion,

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43 Smit, *Notions*, 1–2.

44 Smit, *Notions*, 5.

the church exists in this public, it is part of it and it impacts knowingly and unknowingly on this public, and vice versa. This form of public theology will be interested in historical, systematic and legal issues involved in the specific social forms and specific structures of specific churches in specific societies. This approach to public theology, which is perhaps the most famous one, deals also with questions regarding the role of the church in society; in issues of state, power and politics; in issues of law, justice and civic life; in issues of economic life; in issues of war and peace; and in issues that have to do with the diverse arrangements of life in society and community, in civil society.⁴⁵

The third understanding of public⁴⁶ is even more vague. It functions with the presupposition that all theological discourse is public in the sense that it addresses specific audiences or publics, like David Tracy's typology of the three publics of theology, namely society, academy and church. Theologians do their theology with specific publics in mind. In the process they internalise the claims, questions, themes, challenges, needs, rhetoric, nature of argumentation, understanding of truth, views on meaning and relevance, norms of communication, plausibility structures, criteria of adequacy and models of rationality from particular publics. In the framework of this notion of public, public theology is a value-free description of the audience that theologians have in mind in their theological labour.

I believe this diversity of approaches to and emphases in public theology is important. We need theologians who make a theological input in the discussion about the moral vision of society, in public opinion formation and implementation. We need theologians who deal with formal, methodological questions and also with material questions on the place, form and role of the church in broader public life. We need the skills to address different audiences or publics. Smit's description of the plurality, diversity and ambiguity in the notions of public, therefore, does not leave us with the feeling of being overwhelmed, of relativism, of blurring complicatedness. Neither does his analysis pacify us. On the contrary, it fosters an acknowledgement and appreciation of the variety of public theology initiatives in different contexts. And it fosters self-understanding of our own approaches to public and public theology. Moreover, as the title of his article suggests, it invites continued discussion in the development of the important notion of public theology. Peculiar sociological and theological factors determine our approaches to and emphases in public theology.⁴⁷

At the Beyers Naude Centre for Public Theology we distinguish among four public spheres in democratic societies, namely the political and economic spheres as well as the spheres of civil society and public opinion formation.⁴⁸

The political sphere focuses on the state, the government, political power and the control and regulation of public life.

The economic sphere entails aspects such as the so-called autonomous market economy, globalisation, ecology, science and technology.

Civil society focuses on themes relating to the relationship between theology and, amongst others, the institutions, organisations, associations and movements of civil society, which, independently from the state and economy, strive to enhance the quality of life, satisfy the needs and foster the interests of people, change the nature of society and build the common good, that is a life of quality for all. Schools, legal bodies, cultural and sports clubs and the neighbourhood are all institutions of civil society. Sociologically spoken churches are part of civil society.

45 Smit, *Notions*, 3–5.

46 Smit, *Notions*, 4–5.

47 Smit, *Notions*, 6–8.

48 See Dirkie Smit, Oor die unieke openbare rol van die kerk, *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* September (1996), p.190–198.

The area of public opinion formation focuses, as explained above, on themes such as the nature of society, the common foundational values for society, common challenges for society and common priorities for society. The ensuing public opinion paves the way for jointly striving towards the common good.

3.5 The agenda of public theology?

The agenda of a faithful public theology cannot be different than the one set decades ago by liberation theology, as articulated by Latin American Liberation theologian Jon Sobrino:

Poverty is increasing in the Third World (sic), the gap between the rich and the poor countries is widening, there are wars – more than a hundred since the last world war and all of them in the ‘Third World’. Cultures are being lost through the imposition of foreign commercial cultures. The cries of the oppressed keep rising to heaven ... more and more loudly. God goes on hearing these cries, condemning oppression and strengthening liberation ... What I ask myself is what a theology is going to do if it ignores this fundamental fact of God’s creation as it is. How can a theology call itself ‘Christian’ if it bypasses the crucifixion of whole people and their need for resurrection, even though its books have been talking about crucifixion and resurrection for twenty centuries? Therefore if those doing liberation theology are not doing it well, let others do it and do it better, but someone must keep on doing it.⁴⁹

Reflecting on the contents, rationality and implications of God’s love for the whole world, especially for those whose dignity is violated and who suffer exclusion, exploitation and expandability, and for a creation that is killed by greed and consumerism is the agenda of public theology. And this reflection on God’s love for the world, this growth in knowledge, does not only help us to understand reality better, it does not merely illuminate reality, but this reflection and knowledge indeed help to transform reality so that it can increasingly reflect the redemptive, renewing and dignifying impact of God’s love.

4. CONCLUSION

So I will humbly try to fulfil the responsibilities of this chair of Systematic Theological Ethics with a focus on public theology, by attending to, on the one hand faith in the triune loving God, and on the other hand the world, the *kosmos*, which is the object of this Trinitarian love. I will continuously reflect on the contents and rationality of this love, and I will faithfully endeavour to reflect on the dignifying implications that this Trinitarian love has for the world with all its joys and sorrows. I will strive to fulfil this calling in a South Africa that is part of Africa and the global family.

TREFWOORDE

Publieke teologie
Intra-dissiplinêre
Inter-dissiplinêre
Trans-dissiplinêre
Publiek
Rasionaliteit

KEY WORDS

Public theology
Intradisciplinary

⁴⁹ Quoted by C Rowland, Epilogue: The future of liberation theology, in: Rowland, C (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.248–251.

Interdisciplinary
Transdisciplinary
Publics
Rationality

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