



Probing the “global Reformed Christ” of Nico Koopman: An African-Kairos perspective

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Abstract

This study seeks to probe Nico Koopman’s Christological approach through the lens of the theological framework spelled out in the *Kairos Document* (1985), and in particular its understandings of church theology and prophetic theology, critically re-appropriated in the current socioeconomic context of South Africa. Four essential aspects of Koopman’s Christological perspective are examined: (1) the Reformed view of the lordship of Christ as the basis for the *public vocation* of theology; (2) Trinitarian and Christological foundations of human dignity; (3) Jesus as the epitome of divine and human vulnerability, and (4) the organic connection between the threefold office of Christ and the public calling of the church. In conclusion, I argue that Koopman’s Christ, albeit displaying *an African veneer*, upon scrutiny, appears to be unfamiliar with and unconcerned about the problems faced by most South Africans today, and thereby fails to constructively engage with African (especially black African) contexts of our day. This is due to four major factors, namely (a) Koopman’s choices regarding theological references; (b) his cursory and un-nuanced treatment of African theological notions; (c) his *a-pathetic* mode of theologising; and (d) his inability (or lack of willingness) to engage with structural (especially macro-economic) issues. I further suggest that my conclusions concerning Koopman’s “global Reformed Christ” may be (at least tentatively) extrapolated into a number of approaches developed by

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South African theologians under the umbrella of “public theology”. I also point to some promising (*prophetically-loaded*) insights coming from the chosen public theologians, including Koopman himself, as a way of illustrating the tension between *civic spirit* and *public anger*, inherent in this mode of theologising.

Key words

Public theology; Nico Koopman; African Kairos perspective; Prophetic theology; Christology

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades or so, Nico Koopman has made an impressive and substantial contribution to theological reflection in South Africa and beyond its borders. Situated within a “confessing” church trajectory, Koopman belongs to a strand of Reformed thought that offered forthright public witness as to the sinful nature of apartheid and emphasised the need for active theological resistance by the churches from within (epitomised inter alia by Beyers Naudé, the Christian Institute and the Belhar Confession). Koopman was also the main driving force behind an interdisciplinary human dignity programme set up at the theological faculty at Stellenbosch in 2008, while he was the Dean (Palm 2016:212). As a pioneer of public theology within South Africa, alongside Dirkie Smit and others, in his scholarly activities Koopman strives to embody theology with a liberational agenda that aims to transform reality (Koopman 2007c; 2009a; 2009b).² Practicing such a critical public theology is tantamount, for him, to bringing about a redemptive, constructive, humanising and dignifying presence of Christian faith in public life (Koopman 2009b). Christological issues find a prominent place in Koopman’s reflection. Among them, four deserve special attention, namely (1) Koopman’s reflection on the implications of the comprehensive lordship of Christ for theology’s engagement in and responsibility for the public sphere; (2) Trinitarian and Christological foundations of human dignity; (3) Jesus as the utmost expression of divine and human vulnerability; and (4) the threefold office of Christ as the key to understanding the public calling of the church.

2 Public theology can be broadly defined as a mode of doing theology that is intended to address matters of public importance (de Gruchy 2007:26).

This article seeks to probe Koopman's Christological approach through the lens of the theological framework spelled out in the *Kairos Document* (1985), and in particular its understandings of church theology and prophetic theology, critically re-appropriated in the current socioeconomic context of South Africa. Based on my analysis, I argue that Koopman's Christ, albeit displaying *an African veneer*, upon scrutiny, appears to be unfamiliar with and unconcerned about the problems faced by most South Africans today, and thereby fails to constructively engage with African (especially black African) contexts of our day. I also suggest four major factors that, in my view, account for this failure, both in Koopman's Christological approach and in much of academic theologising carried out today in South Africa under the umbrella of "public theology". At the same time, I briefly refer to some promising (*prophetically-loaded*) insights coming from the chosen public theologians, including Koopman himself, as a way of illustrating the tension between *civic spirit* and *public anger*, a tension inherent in this mode of theologising.

2. A global Reformed Christ with an *African veneer*

Koopman deals with Christological questions explicitly and comprehensively in several of his publications. The four aspects of his Christological approach discussed in this analytical part of my study neither cover nor exhaust the profusion and variety of Koopman's references to Jesus Christ spread over his published texts. Nonetheless, I consider them representative of his public theological approach at large.

2.1. The Reformed view of the lordship of Christ and the public vocation of theology

In one of his articles, Koopman shares a personal memory about how the notion of the lordship of Christ, especially as taught by Allan Boesak, enabled his generation of Reformed ministers and theologians to overcome the theological dualisms that *some strands of Reformed preaching* wanted them to adhere to.

[The] notion of the comprehensive lordship of Christ broadened our understanding of Christian salvation; it opened our eyes to see that God is at work in all walks of life, and it challenged us to develop broader understandings of obedience, faithfulness, social ethics,

public theology, and public witness. Political life, economic life, ecological life, life in civil society, and participation in the formation of public opinion – all of these were included in a life of discipleship. Although there are important distinctions between discipleship and citizenship, they no longer stood in an antagonistic relationship (Koopman 2007b:297).

This implicit criticism of certain strands within Reformed praxis under apartheid does not undermine, however, Koopman's fundamental trust in the Reformed tradition. It is important to note that even though he is aware of some limitations inherent in it, it is "the *Reformed* conviction about the supreme sovereignty of Jesus Christ our Lord" (Koopman 2007b:306; my italics) that, in his view, "informs a black social ethic or black theology" (Koopman 2007b:306). Here he follows Boesak to acknowledge that black theology which is faithful to this Reformed conviction about the supreme sovereignty of Jesus Christ "takes the situation of oppression and dehumanisation of black people and all other oppressed people seriously" (Koopman 2007b:296). Thus, in the end, it is the Reformed view of the universal lordship of Christ that grants theology its utterly public character.

In this context, Koopman makes an interesting distinction between the meaning and the implications of Christ's lordship before and after the fall of apartheid.

During the apartheid years, it was important to see that Jesus Christ is Lord, rather than the apartheid regime. Now that former comrades in the struggle are in government, the temptation is real that this vision of the reign of Christ is blurred and that absolute, uncritical loyalty is bestowed to the new democratically elected government (Koopman 2007b:298).

At this point, Koopman refers to Boesak's critique of the notion of critical solidarity to the government (see Boesak 2005:166-167). Once again he is emphatic about Boesak's analysis being informed by the Reformed, and specifically the Calvinist notion of Jesus Christ as the universal Lord. "From a Reformed perspective" – he observes – "the basis for public involvement is the lordship of Jesus Christ. This basic presupposition has important implications for doing theology in contemporary South Africa"

(Koopman 2007b:298; my italics). What follows is the list of the practical ramifications of Boesak's Black Reformed Christology which are perfectly in tune with the core principles of public theology as fostered by Koopman; three of them are especially worth mentioning here:

(1) the highest loyalty is paid to God and not to earthly powers, not even to democratically elected governments and former struggle comrades and their agendas...; (2) the church does not accept a form of democratic centralism which implies that the masses of people, including churches, are marginalised within a democracy and that a select group of the political elite and intellectuals plan and execute the process of political transformation...; (3) the church is not a junior partner of government with the role of praise singer, but the church speaks out critically and cooperates with government on the formation of public opinion through inclusive public debate, and also the formulation and implementation of public policy on behalf of the silenced, most wronged and vulnerable in society (Koopman 2007b:298-299).

Thus what Koopman calls “comprehensive salvation” is achieved through *God's humanising activities in the world* in which humankind is called to participate. Public theologians reflect on particular aspects of Christian/human response to that call, i.e., on various aspects of their salvific/liberative presence in the world. But the ultimate source of this call is found precisely in Christ's universal lordship as taught and interpreted by Reformed theology.

2.2. Trinitarian and Christological foundations of human dignity

According to Koopman's *anthropology of vulnerability and dependence*, human dignity is always inalienable, for it resides in one's total dependency on the divine Other from whom one receives it. Thus it is grounded not in human competencies and capabilities, nor in the human power, strength, performance, autonomy or merit of whatever kind, “but in the *gift of triune love*” (Koopman 2010a:241; my italics; see also Koopman 2007a:184).³ Here Koopman refers to a fairly traditional exposition of the Trinitarian basis

3 This insight recurs and is reiterated throughout Koopman's works (see Koopman 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005a, 2005c, 2006, 2007a, 2008b).

of human dignity by John Webster (2007:6-20) for whom dignity resides at once in God the creator, God the reconciler and God the perfecter. In Koopman's own words:

We have dignity because we are created in God's image; we have dignity because God became human in Jesus Christ and redeems us; we have dignity because the Holy Spirit, as God at work in the world, is actualising in and through us the new humanity that is a reality in Jesus Christ (Koopman 2007a:180).

Koopman further highlights the pneumatological and eschatological dimension of human dignity and, as a consequence, its *teleological* rather than *ontological* nature: Human dignity "resides in the wonderful purposes, the life of quality, for which God has created humans" (Koopman 2007a:180). Following Thielicke (in Lebacqz 1998:190), he calls it an "alien dignity", where *alienness* seems to refer to its giftedness on the one hand and its incompleteness (in an eschatological perspective) on the other. Koopman does not explain how the teleological character of dignity (and thus the fact that it is *yet-to-be-fully-realised*) is to be reconciled with its absolute inalienability and indelibility (Koopman 2007a:181). Put simply, if the ultimate source of our dignity lies not in who we already are, but in who we are created to be, according to God's *telos*, our dignity is one in the making and can hardly be given any absolute dimension.

If my reading of Koopman is correct, then the implicit solution to that difficulty can be found in his Trinitarian interpretation of the *imago Dei* as a relationship of love.

It is a dignity that is imputed to us by the love of God for us as expressed in our being created in God's image. Through sin this image was violated but, through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, God remembers us and draws us back into a relationship of love. This relationship of love with God constitutes the image of God. Christ embodies this image perfectly and through his work of redemption we are again image of God, i.e., we are living in a relationship of love with Him and other humans and even with the rest of creation (Koopman 2007a:180).

Seen as a foundation of human dignity, such a dynamic concept of *imago Dei* allows for a more comprehensive and dialectical view of dignity. On the one hand, human dignity is *completely given* through God's mysteries of creation and reconciliation, in which humanity as *imago Dei* has been established and restored once for all. On the other hand, however, both those mysteries are being carried out by the Spirit who, in and through the church, actualises the new humanity, and indeed a new creation, that is a reality in Jesus Christ. This process is open-ended and here the *imago Dei* remains somehow *incomplete*. What is more, eschatological beliefs implicate concrete moral actions towards other human beings and responsible living in the world (Koopman 2010a:241), since "alien dignity not only has to do with the vertical relationship with God. Other humans realise our dignity by the acting out of *agape*, out of a perspective of who we are before God" (Koopman 2007a:180).

Of particular interest to us is of course Koopman's Christological definition of the *imago Dei* as the foundation of human dignity. Koopman considers the giving of Jesus Christ as our crucified and broken saviour to be the culminating point of God's attachment to humans (Koopman 2010a:240).⁴ Interpreting the *imago Dei* Christologically ensures that it is not used repressively to reflect only the perfection of humanity. Like Moltmann, Koopman applies this insight to issues of disability where relatedness, communicative action and interdependence become key (Palm 2016:216; see also Koopman 2008a).⁵ This Christological interpretation of the *imago Dei* which eliminates all attempts at identifying divine image and likeness with the concept of a perfect human being resonates perfectly with Koopman's *anthropology of vulnerability and dependence* (Koopman 2010a:241). This leads me to the next point.

4 In his attempt to describe divine love that is the foundation of human dignity, Koopman follows Wolterstorff (2008) who utilises Augustine's identification of three types of love. He accepts Wolterstorff's proposal that the love of God is not affection or benevolence, but is an expression of God's attachment to humans (Koopman 2010a:240).

5 In this context, van den Bosch (2014:835-857) notes both Koopman and Moltmann as exponents of an emerging 'theology of vulnerability'.

2.3. Jesus: The epitome of divine and human vulnerability

Due to its Christological dimension, the notion of alien dignity, as explained above, “protects and enhances the dignity of the most vulnerable in society” (Koopman 2007a:177). For Koopman, the Christian call to “identify with the most vulnerable in the world and take up their cause” (Koopman 2010a:241) not only constitutes the very core of the mission of Public Theology, but is also “one of the deepest motivations for building a human rights culture” (Koopman 2010a:241). As he stresses, “vulnerability language reminds us that the best of our efforts do not guarantee the actualisation, operationalisation and fulfilment of human dignity” (Koopman 2010a:241). Though it excludes neither resilience in hopeless and threatening situations nor responsible and courageous action, a theological anthropology of vulnerability points to the fact that human worth resides not only in our capacity to act and give, but first and foremost in “our total dependency and in our receiving from the other and especially the Other” (Koopman 2010a:241).⁶

For Koopman, “faith in the triune God is faith in the vulnerable God” (Koopman 2008a:241). Like many ecumenical theologians today, Koopman refers to the three Cappadocians and their emphasis on the interdependence of the three Persons in the Trinity. Describing the relationships between the divine Persons in terms of origin rather than identity, the ecumenical Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas speaks of the “ecstatic” character of God. In Koopman’s words:

Ecstasis means that God’s being is determined by his (sic) radical search for communion with the other. In fact, God is communion. In Jesus Christ, who became human, we are part of this communion. In this communion God finds his (sic) true being. This choice for *ecstasis*, for communion with his creatures, expresses the vulnerability of God (Koopman 2008a:243).

6 In contrast to theological anthropologies of autonomy and power, which suggest that God is not involved in human lives, specifically in human vulnerabilities and suffering (Koopman 2007a:180), a Christologically-grounded anthropology of vulnerability and dependency has a potential to denounce our own, often deeply hidden violent inclinations. For instance, our ‘attempt to eliminate the suffering of sick and disabled people – instead of being present to them, being available for them and personally caring for them – merely demonstrates our quest to affirm our own significance through power’ (Koopman 2007a:183). This subversive power of the Cross is rooted in God’s vulnerability, voluntarily accepted for our sake in Jesus Christ, the vulnerable saviour.

However, in another article Koopman distances himself from Reinders' reliance on the immanent Trinity deeming his use of Zizioulas' ecstatic concept of God (*God as communion*) too speculative. Instead he develops his theological anthropology of relationality, vulnerability and dependency by drawing inferences from the economic Trinity (Koopman 2007a:182-183). This more biblically grounded approach allows him to conceive of crucified and risen Christ, the culmination point of God's self-revealing love, as an epitome of divine and human vulnerability.⁷ These two trajectories are not necessarily exclusive. God's vulnerability, "manifested in the relations of interdependence between Father, Son and Spirit... reaches its culminating point in the cross of Jesus Christ" (Koopman 2008a:243), through which the triune God expresses the ultimate compassion, sympathy, concern, and solidarity towards a suffering world.

In the death and suffering of Jesus Christ, we see, as Barth says, the fatherly sympathy (*vaderlike medelye*) of the triune God; or in the words of Moltmann, the compassion of the Father (*patricompassianisme*); or as Berkouwer states, the compassion (*bewoënhed*) and sympathy of God... The suffering of Jesus Christ also reflects the vulnerability of the Spirit, who can be hurt (Isa 63:10 and Eph 4:30) (Koopman 2008a:241-242).

What is really essential from the perspective of Koopman's Public Theology is an "ecclesiology of vulnerability" which emerges from these notions of God and Christ. As Koopman puts it, "from this vulnerable God... the church receives her essence, identity, and mission" (Koopman 2008a:243-244). If divine and human vulnerability is to define the vocation, mission ethos, public theology and relevance of the church (Koopman 2008a:246), then Christians must simply stand where God stands, that is under the cross, with the most vulnerable (Palm 2016:217; see also Koopman 2008a:243-244). Therefore, Koopman's view of Jesus as the epitome of divine and human vulnerability informs and translates into his reconceptualization of the church as the vulnerable community "called to model vulnerable ways of being in the world" (Palm 2016:217).

7 This is in tune with Hauerwas' view of God who draws people to Godself not by coercive power but by sacrificial love. Such powerless God of sacrifice, weakness and suffering can be found in the works of many 20th-century theologians like Berkhof, Kitamori, Sölle, Moltmann, etc. (Koopman 2007a:183).

2.4. The threefold office of Christ and the public calling of the church

Koopman's take on the church and its public calling – that of vulnerability, humility and servanthood – brings us back to his Christology, for he describes the public role of the church in terms of its priestly, prophetic and royal tasks (Koopman 2008a:250-251). As *vulnerable prophets, priests and royals*, Christians participate in God's mission in the world following their master Jesus Christ – the ultimate prophet, priest and king – and witnessing to him in word and deed, teaching and concrete action (Koopman 2008a:251). Thus drawing upon John Calvin's notion of the threefold office of Christ Koopman articulates the threefold quest for the restoration of human dignity in Christological perspective and indicates the way along which this restoration might be operationalised (Koopman 2008a:266; see also Koopman 2010a). More traditional aspects of this Christological doctrine apart, there are two fairly original points in his exposition that deserve our attention.

Firstly, the organic connection between his Christology and ecclesiology results in a number of insightful reflections about the prophetic, priestly and royal modes of being in the world. Their common denominator is found in the dialectic of *dependence* and *agency* personified by Christ “the resurrected Lord who is also the vulnerable crucified Lord” (Koopman 2008a:254).

Koopman describes the prophetic task of the church in terms of “spelling out a luring, inviting vision of a good society and... offering courageous criticism where the status quo does not adhere to that vision” (Koopman 2008a:251). This entails “analysing situations technically, philosophically, and in an interdisciplinary way, and then suggesting solutions on basis of such thorough analysis [as well as] participating in policy discourses in society, where decisions have to be taken within the space of political limitations” (Koopman 2008a:251). Overcoming various forms of alienation and injustice is, in turn, the core of the church's priestly calling. Either through Christian ethics or public theology, as *vulnerable priests* Christians are called to cooperate with God's liberating, reconciliatory and healing grace by confronting all kinds of discrimination and abuse such as “racism and xenophobia, classism and sexism, “handicappism” and ageism, ecocide and global disaster” (Koopman 2008a:252).

Perhaps the most interesting is Koopman's vision of the royal calling of the church which consists in speaking and acting with confidence in the public domain, "a confidence that is based in the victory of the vulnerable and crucified Lord Jesus Christ" (Koopman 2008a:252). *How to speak truth to power in a vulnerable way?* – one could ask. For Koopman, "fulfilling our royal task in a vulnerable manner" (Koopman 2008a:253) has to do, it seems, with *embracing* and becoming the advocates of the vulnerable, wronged and marginalised, and thus it is not at odds with confident and, indeed, courageous attitudes towards complicated public issues such as the impact of global capitalism, HIV/aids and racism, or denouncing the abuses of power (Koopman 2008a:253). Thus, as vulnerable royals, Christians are to

protect especially the most vulnerable ones by being advocates of human rights, rights that resist the violation of dignity, and that help dignity to flourish by championing for values like equality, freedom, justice, and equity. Moreover, Christians strive for more than what human rights ask – among others, solidarity, love, and self-sacrifice. And this interconnectedness of vulnerability and human rights makes it clear that vulnerability discourses do not advocate passivity and apathy amid oppression. It does not romanticise suffering. To be royal servants entail that churches proclaim the message of hope and victory in Jesus Christ (Koopman 2008a:253).

In this context, the eschatological facet of Koopman's theological reflection also becomes visible. As in Moltmann, hope constitutes the deepest link between the *already-here* and *not-yet-fully-realised* dimensions of God's reign and, at the same time, the very heart of the royal task of the vulnerable church. As "the royal church awaits the dawning of the day when the reality of victory in Christ will be fully actualised, operationalised and fulfilled" (Koopman 2008a:253), hope in action "demonstrates that the vulnerability of the church, humans, and the triune God is not a surrender to the threatening powers of the world, but a victory in the midst of seeming defeats" (Koopman 2008a:253).

Secondly, Koopman suggests that Calvin's Christology, and his work on the threefold office of Christ in particular, may provide avenues for restoring human dignity *specifically* in Africa (Koopman 2010a:240). Most

of his views in this respect appear somewhat vague and far too broad to be deemed relevant to any particular African context. I will return to this criticism later. One of his insights, however, is worth taking note of. Koopman draws interesting parallels between the threefold office of Christ and the Confession of Belhar (1986) as he proposes that the former informs the latter.

The kingship of Christ can be compared to the confession of the unity of God's people in article 1. The priestly office resonates with the confession of the reconciliation between God and humans and reconciliation between humans themselves, in article 2 of Belhar. And the prophetic office resembles the confession regarding the compassionate justice of God in article 3. These Christological insights pave the way for the concrete involvement of churches in activities like the building of social cohesion and solidarity (kingly office, article 1 of Belhar on unity), embrace and participation (priestly office, article 2 on reconciliation), compassion and justice (prophetic office, article 3 on justice) (Koopman 2010a:247).⁸

3. Mapping prophetic and church theology: Between the *Kairos Document* and 2016⁹

This section aims to identify and tentatively delineate what I label here “an *African-Kairos* perspective”, that is, a perspective from which Koopman's Christological approach is to be evaluated. In essence, this amounts to the theological framework spelled out in the *Kairos Document* (1985), and in particular its understandings of church theology and prophetic theology, critically re-appropriated in the current socioeconomic context of South Africa.

What underlies the theological framework articulated in the *Kairos Document* (1985) is its distinction between state theology, church theology and prophetic theology (KD chapters 2-4). As Maluleke (2015:35) suggests,

8 Koopman elaborates on the meaning of these three articles of Belhar for the restoration of dignity in public life in several many of his texts, see 2002a; 2002b; 2007d; 2008c.

9 This section of my study is based on the article titled ‘Faith of an angry people: Mapping a renewed prophetic theology in South Africa’, which has been submitted to *JTSA* and will be considered for publication in 2017 [Urbaniak 2017].

after twenty-two years of democracy this three-tier distinction remains a useful tool of analysis. The prophetic voice of the *Kairos Document: Challenge to the church* (1985) inspired three decades of Kairos movements in many different contexts around the globe (West n.d.). Recent calls for a “renewed Kairos” or a “Kairos consciousness” in South Africa also indicate the great potential of this theological trajectory (see Boesak 2013; Le Bruyns 2012; Vellem 2010).¹⁰ In 2015 a multi-generational, international group of theologians gathered in Johannesburg to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the *Kairos Document*, but also to recognise and respond to a new Kairos moment while contextualising and, where necessary, updating the approach of the original Kairos Theologians (Kairos30 Conference 2015). Provided such an *aggiornamento* is being offered, I believe that the theological framework inherent in the *Kairos Document*, and in particular its distinction between church theology and prophetic theology, may prove relevant to theological currents in our day and specifically to Koopman’s Christological approach.

In terms of its method and overall objective, the *Kairos Document* remains, in my view, an appropriate and topical model for any contextual theologising. The Kairos Theologians start with a social analysis; then the Scriptures and Tradition are reinterpreted to find a new understanding of how social relations should be constructed; and finally the “challenge to action” is offered alongside a message of hope to the oppressed and marginalised (Buttelli 2012:95). In this sense, prophetic theology – which the *Kairos Document* not only encourages, but also exemplifies – has the ability to spell out an alluring vision of an alternative community based on the principles of the reign of God and to offer courageous criticism where the status quo does not adhere to that vision, in particular where power is abused (Vellem 2010:5; see also Koopman 2008:251; Maluleke 2000:30). Regarding its content, prophetic theology could be described as the body of “insurrectionist, counter-hegemonic [and] subversive beliefs about God”

10 It is worth noting that a number of contemporary local theologians have written recently about prophetic theology (Kumalo 2005; 2007; 2008; 2009; Koopman 2009a; De Villiers 2010; Masango 2010; Nyiawung 2010; Vellem 2010; Verhoef & Rathbone 2013; West 2013; Boesak 2015; de Gruchy 2016); references to the *Kairos Document* also abound (Vellem 2010; Boesak 2011; Buttelli 2012; Le Bruyns 2012; West 2012; Swart 2013; Boesak 2015; Denis & Nolan 2015; Le Bruyns 2015; de Gruchy 2016). Perhaps this can be seen as a sign of the times in itself.

(Maluleke 2015:35) together with the resulting understanding of all earthly realities. But perhaps what characterises it more essentially is the role it is poised to play in relation to both religious and secular powers. Such a prophetic theology boldly engages the authorities, ecclesial and political alike, and when needed it challenges them, calls them into question – indeed, it speaks truth to power regardless of the consequences (Urbaniak 2016:144).

Explaining what motivated the participants of the Kairos process to speak up, Nolan points to two major factors (1) the seriousness of the crisis and (2) the anger and frustration of the people (Nolan 1994:213). This is something worth emphasising: the anger of the people as a *locus theologicus*, as a theological site – indeed, the source par excellence of prophetic theologising. It will not be an exaggeration to say that one of the reasons why church theology failed to discern the signs of the times was its inability to draw from that source, to listen to and be shaped by people's anger. Apart from any particular content of the *Kairos Document*, it was following this *process* – i.e., starting with people's theology which was then *transposed into* prophetic theology without compromising the justified rage of the people (West 2012:8) – that allowed Kairos Theologians to formulate the relevant and effective challenge to the church in their time.

The *Kairos Document* challenged, first and foremost, the churches. Church theology, according to its authors, did not engage in the struggle deeply enough. Its neutrality *de facto* enabled the status quo of oppression (and therefore violence) to continue. It was a way of giving tacit support to the oppressor (*KD* ch.3). Of course some churches were more critical of apartheid than others. But according to the *Kairos Document*, all of them failed to speak in a radically prophetic manner. Even their criticism of the structures of oppression and exploitation became in the end counter-productive, for it was a superficial criticism (*KD* ch.3). Instead of engaging in an in-depth analysis of the signs of the times, church theology relied upon “a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then it uncritically and repeatedly applied them to our situation”; among these, the authors discuss three, namely reconciliation, justice and non-violence (*KD* ch.3; see also Urbaniak 2017).

One may wonder if the same ideas are not being used in an analogical way by some politicians (mainly those of the ruling party) in the democratic South Africa, and to what extent churches are complicit in this practice. Today political references to reconciliation, justice and non-violence often serve, I want to argue, as a sort of anaesthetic, and more specifically as a means to divert people's attention and thus stifle their anger. When the recipients of such a state propaganda happen to be Christian believers (roughly 80% of the population), the message falls onto a very fertile ground, i.e., a ground regularly fertilised by the theologies of many churches. In general, from the perspective of the *Kairos Document*, *theological fixation* on values such as reconciliation, justice and non-violence may be interpreted as an expression of the church's complicity in oppression insofar as it one-sidedly emphasises the significance of reconciliation at the expense of seeking truth, justice at the expense of calling for the reform of the system (be it political, economic or justice system), and non-violence at the expense of recognising *charismatic acts*, to refer to James Scott's *infrapolitics of subordinate groups* (Scott 1990:19). Scott writes about rare historical moments when the subordinate take courage to declare their "hidden transcript that no one had yet had the courage to declare in the teeth of power" (Scott 1990:20).

Such *charismatic acts* often emerge from what we could describe theologically as the *prophetic rage* of those sinned against. Despite the calls like the one by Maluleke to "meet tyranny with rage, not violence" (2015b), where there is anger, violence usually erupts too. One can easily imagine how a Christian rhetoric of non-violence, which "make[s] a virtue of neutrality and sitting on the sidelines" (*KD* ch.3.4), lends itself to the political agenda of the ruling party. How many of those who hear on Sunday the "Christian message of non-violence", especially if they are fed by the SABC propaganda for the rest of the week, will not be inclined to identify violence exclusively with the angry miners or the protesting students who burn libraries and schools? How many of them will be alerted by the violent actions of police and, more fundamentally, those of the corrupted politicians who neglect their responsibilities?

As Gerald West points out in his most recent book,

By sustaining the rhetoric of [“The RDP of the Soul”], with its people-centred and utopian project, but abandoning its socialist macro-economic policies, the ANC “started to put into the heads of ordinary South Africans the idea of “empty promises”, which resounded so loudly in the delivery protests of 2004 onwards” (West 2016:452-453; quote comes from Legassick 2007:457).

To realise that today these issues are no less relevant than in 1980sa and in 2004, suffice it to listen to the voices of the youth, mainly black students who since 2015 have been at the forefront of the social campaigns #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. Writing about the “politics of impatience”, Mbembe observes that “South Africa is fast approaching its *Fanonian moment*” as “the mass of structurally disenfranchised people have the feeling of being treated as ‘foreigners’ on their own land” (Mbembe 2015). Hence the growing anger and the often resulting violence – something that today’s church theology, as its foremother three decades ago, fails to listen to and deal with *constructively*.

One of the deep-seated reasons for that failure can be found in church theology’s inability to engage the ultimate causes of people’s anger. Since 1994, the ANC has been implanting in people’s mind the idea that while Christianity (and religion in general) has something to say about the morals, it is the state’s exclusive prerogative to deal with macro-economic issues (West 2013:1-12).

As West observes, since the mid-1990s most churches have withdrawn into what the *Kairos Document* referred to as “church theology”.

The church in [a democratic] South Africa has by-and-large settled back into various forms of... church theology. The prophetic strand continues to strive to read the signs of our times, but once again we are in the minority (West 2005).

However, today’s church theology differs significantly from that identified by the Kairos Theologians. Whereas in the 1980s the characterisation was in terms of political engagement, church theology in the current context would have to be framed in economic terms, and in respect of denialism rather than engagement (West 2013:12). Focused on the personal, and thus

reluctant to engage the government on structural matters such as economic systems, church theology forms of Christianity are attractive alliance partners from the perspective of the state (West 2013:12). West rightly concludes that such a domesticated Christianity may take on diverse public roles, but it fails “to provide a serious challenge to the economic and political realm” (West 2013:12; see also Urbaniak 2017).

Koopman himself is also critical about private religion which not only implies withdrawal from society, but “often also entails destructive forms of religion and morality, e.g., fundamentalism, intolerance, moral absolutism and judgementalism” (Koopman 2005b:135). But does his own theology reflect the principles of prophetic theologising, as encapsulated by the *Kairos Document*, and does it avoid the pitfalls of (a new) church theology? To these questions I now turn.

4. Probing Koopman’s Christological approach from an African-Kairos perspective

As shown above, Koopman’s Christ has *something to do* with Africa and Africans. However, in essence, Koopman’s is a global, indeed, cosmopolitan Christ, deeply rooted in the Reformed tradition, who has merely an *African veneer*. The Christ of Koopman appears to be unfamiliar with and unconcerned about the problems faced by most South Africans today. As a consequence, he fails to constructively engage with African (especially black African) contexts of our day.

This is due, in my view, to four major factors, namely (a) Koopman’s choices regarding theological references wherein *Reformed* and *Western/Northern* dominates far and away over *African Christian*, and *postmodern* over *postcolonial*; (b) his cursory and un-nuanced treatment of African theological notions and insights whereby *the local* is seen as a mere expression of *the global* and measured by its standards; (c) an *a-pathetic* mode of theologising, detached from people’s emotions and thus unable to resonate with and be informed by their anger, which results in a theological reflection that lacks potential for articulating resistance and fostering a transformative agenda; and, (partly) as a result of the latter, (d) inability (or lack of willingness) to engage with structural matters, such as the macro-economic policy of the ruling party since 1994, and to constructively deal

with issues such as economic injustice, land redistribution and structural racism. In this section, each of these factors is briefly discussed. Lastly, I suggest that my conclusions concerning Koopman's "global Reformed Christ" may be (at least tentatively) extrapolated into a number of approaches developed by the contemporary South African authors who identify themselves as "public theologians".

4.1. Theological references: Hegemonic discourse(s) and absent/marginalised interlocutors

In terms of theological resources from which Koopman draws, it would be fair to say he situates his reflection in a *glocal* context, i.e., he acknowledges impact of global developments on local life as well as the importance of local initiatives for the transformation of global perspectives. However, his focus is definitely on *the global*, not *the local*; and this impacts his theologising to the extent that those speaking from within the hegemonic discourses appear as his interlocutors *par excellence*, while the voices of those traditionally marginalised remain *at the margins* of his theological reflection. In practice, this means that *African Christianity* is dominated far and away by the *Reformed* and the *Western/Northern* theological references and the *postcolonial* by the *postmodern* theoretical framework. Let me substantiate these claims with some illustrations.

For Koopman, practicing a critical public theology is to be understood as "a redemptive, constructive, humanising and dignifying presence of Christian faith in public life" (Palm 2016:212). While fulfilling that vision public theologians, allegedly, do not aim to "replace the various contextual and liberation theologies but rather drink from their rich wells" (Koopman 2009b:423). And in terms of principles, Koopman's Christological approach certainly follows this direction. Whether he talks about the need to take the situation of oppression and dehumanisation of black people seriously (Koopman 2007b:296), the church's calling to speak on behalf of the silenced, most wronged and vulnerable in society (Koopman 2007b:299) or avenues for restoring human dignity in Africa (Koopman 2010a:240) – all these themes are in tune with liberation and contextual theological agendas. What is more, they show his concern for an African context out of which he theologises.

However, when one moves from the level of abstract principles to that of actual theological ideas, Koopman's capacity (or willingness) to "drink from the wells of the various contextual and liberation theologies" is not that obvious anymore. In fact, different "wells" come to the fore. When Koopman speaks of "the wells of the Christian tradition" (Koopman 2008b:266), he means first and foremost the theological resources inherent in the Reformed tradition, for it is faithfulness to this tradition that "enables us to be faithful to public life in a sustainable, constructive and redemptive manner" (Koopman 2007b:295).

Theological references found in his texts reflect this trend. His most natural "interlocutors" include Calvin and his contemporary commentators such as Cornelis van der Kooi, Stephen Edmondson, Geoffrey Wainwright and Douglas Hall;¹¹ and theologians of disability like Stanley Hauerwas, Hans Reinders and Christine Smith.¹² Among his broader ecumenical and other references one finds, *inter alia*, John Zizioulas,¹³ Sallie McFague,¹⁴ John Webster,¹⁵ Helmut Thielicke,¹⁶ James Gustafson¹⁷ and the British philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.¹⁸

Regarding local theologians, Koopman acknowledges that he is indebted particularly to Allan Boesak, John de Gruchy and Dirkie Smit. And indeed, references to Boesak and Smit abound in his reflection.¹⁹ He refers to Boesak and de Gruchy as those who have helped him to "appreciate the public nature of Reformed theology" (Koopman 2007b:301) by, respectively, drawing far-reaching implications from the universal reign of Christ, and by insisting on God's special identification with the poor and the vulnerable. In his attempt to develop a contemporary ecumenical public

11 See Koopman 2010a.

12 See Koopman 2007a.

13 See Koopman 2008a.

14 See Koopman 2007c.

15 See Koopman 2010a.

16 See Koopman 2007a.

17 See Koopman 2004a; 2005b:131-132.

18 See Koopman 2007a.

19 See, respectively, Koopman 2007b; 2008b; 2009a; 2010b; 2014b and Koopman 2005b; 2007b; 2007c; 2008a; 2008b; 2009a; 2009b; 2010c, etc.

theology from Reformed perspective, Koopman also draws from Dirkie Smit; in particular, he relies on his presupposition regarding the twofold hermeneutical undertaking of biblical/theological and social analysis. Besides exegesis of the Christian tradition, Smit calls theologians to embark on the task of sociological, cultural, philosophical, and economic exegesis and analysis of contemporary society (Koopman 2007b:301;306). One can hear Smit's ideas resonating when Koopman argues that reading the signs of our times theologically and participating in a variety of struggles is the only way in which theologians may offer a public, inclusive and cosmopolitan hermeneutic in glocal contexts (Koopman 2012a:132-138; see also Palm 2016:216). However, these Reformed voices from South Africa (especially de Gruchy and Smit) are themselves, at least to an extent, falling under the category of a "globalising" and "universalising" theological discourse.²⁰

Only in passing would Koopman refer to the father of the Black Consciousness Movement Steve Biko²¹ or to Black theologians such as Mosala,²² Tutu²³ or Maluleke.²⁴ In fact, Boesak seems to provide the most solid – if not the only – bridge between Koopman's (otherwise *cosmopolitan*) public theology and the contextual and prophetic heritage of South African theological traditions (see Buttelli 2012:106). But even here one could call into question Koopman's creativity and originality in referring to Boesak. Rather than appropriating his views constructively, he rather quotes the well-established views of his Reformed colleague without really engaging with them (see, for example, Koopman 2007b:297-299; 2014b:989-990).

In his theology, Koopman tends to be critical about the meta-narratives of modernity. As we have seen, it is the vulnerability and dependence, rather than autonomy and power of the individual that constitute, for him, the foundation of human dignity; the interdependence and care, rather than absolute freedom that define our place within society and the natural environment (Koopman 2007a:181-182). A deeply relational notion of God as communion, *à la* Zizioulas (Koopman 2007a:182), instead of God

20 See de Gruchy's *Confessions of a Christian humanist* (2006) and Smit's *Essays in public theology* (2007).

21 See 2005b.

22 See Koopman 2008b.

23 See Koopman 2010a.

24 See Koopman 2010a:242ff.

conceived of as the immutable substance, is what underlies this *subversive* way of thinking. Koopman's references to the likes of MacIntyre,²⁵ Hauerwas²⁶ and Reinders²⁷ reflect this tendency and link his theological approach to the postmodern perspective. However, while these views may appear as *subversive* and *counter-hegemonic* with regard to the modern paradigm, paradoxically postmodernity itself does in many ways *behave* like any other hegemonic discourse: it simply excludes the voices from the margins or, alternatively, totalises them into one conglomerate, using the strategy that Hans Küng once described, in a different context, as “a kind of conquest by embracing” (Küng 1988:236). As Kim points out, commenting on a particular form of postmodernism,

Otherness postmodernism... is the hegemonic idea that, by describing the anti-hegemonic in a formal way as difference, recuperates it back into the hegemony. It fails, moreover, to explain *why* the hegemonic-versus-anti-hegemonic or sameness-versus-difference axes are articulated in particular ways; other than an anti-postmodern will to totalise, it offers no explanation for historical, political, aesthetic, social and other reasons for exclusion and sameness. Therefore, it fails to provide a concrete means to move beyond that sameness-difference binary... Without a means to evaluate between different social articulations and antagonisms, otherness postmodernism provides no “way out” other than itself; the only way to be truly progressive is to be postmodern (Kim 2009:22).

Thus by making postmodern thinkers his natural *conversation partners*, while at the same time pretty much neglecting the postcolonial perspectives, Koopman more or less consciously chooses *the global over the local* and *the dominant over the marginalised*. This very choice seems to be at odds with his *anthropology of dependence and vulnerability* which, as

25 MacIntyre's postmodern revision of Aristotelianism has influenced, among others, the versions of postmodernism elaborated by such authors as Murphy (2003) and Bielskis (2005).

26 Hauerwas is a chief advocate of postliberalism, a theological movement related to Radical Orthodoxy, which rejects liberal methods of hermeneutics and Enlightenment assumptions regarding epistemology (see, for example, Hauerwas 2000).

27 In his theology of disability, Reinders qualifies the postmodern ‘celebration of difference’ by grounding it in unconditional relationship (2008:284).

he claims, informs his public theologising (Koopman 2007a; 2008a). What is more, this tendency is consistent with the profile of public theology at large. Unlike Black theologians who gravitate towards the thinkers like Fanon, Du Bois, Said, Mbembe and Biko – that is, authors defining the specifically postcolonial context for the south (Maluleke 2011:88) – many public theologians find their natural conversation partners in the likes of Foucault, Ricoeur, Habermas, Hauerwas and Parker Palmer (see, for instance, Dreyer & Pieterse 2010; Dreyer 2011; De Beer & Swart 2014; Forster 2015). Needless to say, using postmodern, rather than postcolonial framework, South African public theologians open themselves *in a more obvious way* to dialogue with their Western / Northern counterparts. This, however, comes at a price. I shall return to this point in due course.

4.2. Epistemological bias: Africanness reduced to a form of exotica

Koopman's attempts at engaging with African realities *theologically* must be generally deemed unsuccessful. The first reason for that is that he often seems to operate from a perspective in which Western theological tradition (if not civilisation at large) is considered as the paradigmatic reference for all other traditions and points of view, including African. For example, he suggests that there is a parallel between the “dawning of comprehensive salvation” and “what the African tradition, according to Boesak, calls wholeness of life” (Koopman 2007b:297). Elsewhere he proceeds in a very similar way with regard to the so often used (and abused) concept of *ubuntu*. He identifies, or at least he believes so, the very idea underlying *ubuntu* in western theology and he simply links it with *ubuntu* as a specifically African expression of this idea (see Koopman 2005a; 2014b). Thus bringing “the African” into the picture aims not at making a novel and original contribution, but merely at showing the existing connections and parallels, perhaps somewhat in the spirit of a traditional theology of inculturation. One could add to that another objection, namely that “Africa” and “South Africa” usually appear in Koopman's reflection as somewhat abstract concepts, “entities” (see, for instance, Koopman 2010a; 2009b; 2010b; 2010c); seldom does he refer to specific African contexts, ethnic / social groups or communities.

Most references to African culture and religion found in Koopman's writings are very shallow. He does not seem to see the need to elaborate on them. Three examples, taken from the same article, follow.

Africa, with its various forms of brokenness and alienation needs the dignifying work of Jesus Christ the priest... Rescue theory with its emphasis on the delivery from evil powers that exist in personal and structural forms might have relevance for Africa's quest for the restoration of dignity... On a continent with so many injustices and abuses the confession about the kingship of Christ serves towards the restoration and actualisation of dignity in Africa (Koopman 2010a:246).

These are promising Christological insights, but unfortunately they are merely signalled and remain undeveloped in Koopman's work.

Another illustration of Koopman's "shallow appropriation" of Christological resources can be found in his reflection on the public-theological potential inherent in both prophetic and sacramental Christological models as elaborated upon by Sally McFague (see Koopman 2007c:206-209; see also McFague 2001:167-170). McFague's ideas definitely have theological potential and could be creatively appropriated and contextualised. But instead of that, all that Koopman has to offer – after giving a summary of her views – is a well-rounded conclusion, which is as valid for the unemployed mother of eight in Thembisa as it is, at least in principle, for Bill Gates:

Christians are called upon to help people, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to see differently. Where people see differently, where they see the world as hidden in Christ and where they see with the lenses of cruciform and sacrificial living, their hearts, minds and wills and eventually laws, policies and social practices are transformed; this renewal and transformation is worked out by the Spirit (Koopman 2007c:209).

One's hopes get kindled when in the next paragraph "African people" are mentioned explicitly. But again we only learn that "in the midst of our crises and challenges, African people can believe in a God who has created us for lives of dignity and flourishing" (Koopman 2007c:209). Despite the

seemingly persistent presence of “evil” in the world, Africans – like all people and all of creation – are liberated by God from every enslavement, nurtured and embraced by Christ’s salvific sacrifice so that they may flourish; this entails not only spirituality, but also their earthly, material, economic, political and cultural life (Koopman 2007c:209). This somewhat benign vision may resonate well with McFague’s prophetic and sacramental Christologies, but it fails to engage with the daily reality of most African people. And even more importantly, I believe, the shortcomings of Koopman’s reflection are evident, once again, in his failure to identify and articulate a link between theological resources that he draws upon and the social-cultural reality that he aspires to address. This is what I call an “African veneer” in Koopman’s Christological approach.

At a few occasions, we find in Koopman a fairly thorough analysis of social and political situation in South Africa – which should be a departure point of any prophetic theology (Le Bruyns 2012:92-93). One of the best examples is found in his article on “Human dignity in Africa: A Christological approach” whose first part is devoted to the discussion about the various forms of “the violation of human dignity in Africa” (Koopman 2010a:241-246). In the second part of his article titled “Restoring human dignity in Africa: Insights from christology”, Koopman draws upon John Calvin’s notion of the threefold office of Christ to suggest the avenues for the needed restoration of dignity. Unfortunately, apart from the reference to the Belhar Confession (1986), African contexts are virtually absent. Thus what is missing in this case is an explicit and constructive link between social analysis and theological ideas.

4.3. An a-pathetic mode of theologising: No rage, no resistance

Postmodernity lacks a theory of resistance and generally fails to cultivate a transformative agenda due to its detached attitudes. Hence, public theology’s overwhelmingly positive notion of “public” which results in a somewhat romantic, if not naïve, vision of revolution (Maluleke 2011:88). As Maluleke (2011:88) reminds us, many angry southerners live not in a postmodern world described by some public theologians as a benign global village, but in a harsh post-colony.

The un-problematised, narrow and at times somewhat idealistic manner in which Koopman speaks about reconciliation,²⁸ justice²⁹ and (non-)violence³⁰ reflects what I mean here by “an *a-pathetic* mode of theologising”.³¹ Such an existentially disengaged discourse does not take into account the whole range of contexts and variations wherein these values are tested. It amounts to relying upon “a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition” (KD ch.3) and then uncritically and repeatedly applying them to the contemporary situation – what the *Kairos Document* described as one of the strategies typical for church theology.

To substantiate my claim with an illustration, in his article on “Public Theology in (South) Africa: A Trinitarian Approach”, Koopman conceives of systemic violence as something rooted in apartheid and colonialism on the one hand, and in selfishness, greed and pride characteristic of growing consumerism on the other hand. But then he essentially reduces the expressions of this systemic violence in South Africa today to “criminal violence” or “violent crime” (Koopman 2007c:194-195). In his 2008 article “On violence, the Belhar Confession and human dignity”, in turn, he starts with an interesting account of a number of his personal experiences of violence under apartheid; the types of violence distinguished by Reinders help him classify them (Koopman 2008b:160-161). However, once again, his analysis falls short of articulating any meaning of *violent resistance*, which has played a significant role in the struggle against apartheid, not to mention other dimensions of violence in the current social contexts, which could be seen as expressions of a *prophetic rage* of the structurally disenfranchised majority of South African people.

Such a thin engagement with socio-cultural realities cannot guarantee practical solutions – a “challenge to action”, to use the terminology of the Kairos Theologians – that contribute to a life-giving transition towards a just and all-inclusive society. Seeking and enabling prophetic voices in South Africa today entails naming both the immediate and the ultimate

28 See, for instance, Koopman 2008b; 2010a:246-247; 2010b:46.

29 See, for instance, Koopman 2005b:134-135; 2008a:249-250; 2008b; 2010a:247; 2010b:50.

30 See, for instance, Koopman 2002:239; 2007c:194-195.2008b:160-161.

31 I am using the term “a-pathetic” in its etymological sense to signify “not drawing from and not affecting the feelings, the emotions”.

objects of people's rage, i.e., the actual oppressors and the imperial mechanisms of their oppression and exploitation (Urbaniak 2017). Once those are denounced, a truly transformative agenda – what Mitri Raheb labels a “creative resistance” (Raheb 2014:120-122) – must be developed in order to “displace the imperial claims of the centre” (Cochrane 1999:157), still so pervasive in our postcolonial context (Rieger 2007:269-312; Compier *et al.* 2007:10-12).

On a more theological level, one could question whether Koopman's global, cosmopolitan Christ, for whom *all life matters* and who always seems to have the benign ideals of reconciliation and non-violence on his lips, can meet today's South Africans where they are, in their own experiences and struggles, in their anger and indignation, in their “enough is enough”. How different is this *anaemic* saving figure from *African Jesus* whom “Africans are taking... by the hand, teaching... a few African ‘moves’ and sensitising... to local issues and conditions” (Maluleke 1997:27)?

4.4. No engagement with the macro-economic and other structural issues

The direct implication of the detachment from people's emotions, is the failure of Koopman's theology to adequately address the *ultimate causes* of people's rage.

To put it bluntly, and cursorily, despite the end of statutory apartheid, the achievement of political freedom and what most would consider a just constitution, the majority of people in South Africa believe that their [socio-economic] conditions of life during the last two decades, have become worse. Patrick Bond speaks in this context about the shift from “racial to class apartheid” (Bond 2000:253-308)... The political powers that be are profoundly corrupted, with the President of the country leading the way. And, not least, persistent racism, sexism, gender-exclusion, homophobia and other forms of discrimination regularly surface through scandals painstakingly captured by media (Urbaniak 2017).³²

32 Needless to say, identifying the causes of South African people's anger is not the primary object of this study. These are merely some arbitrarily chosen factors. For an in-depth cultural-social analysis of anger and its roots in South African society, see

In the chapter on “Theology and the fulfilment of social and economic rights” (Koopman 2005b:128-140), Koopman investigates the “potential contribution of theology to the process of theology building that serves the fulfilment of social and economic rights... with reference to the dialogue and cooperation of theology with three environments, namely broader society, the academy and religious organisations, specifically *churches*” (Koopman 2005b:130). In a spirit of prophetic theology, Koopman points out that, in its pursuit of an all-embracing cooperation, theology must not be co-opted by the agenda of the state (Koopman 2005b:133), and that “the acid test for our social and economic discourses, policies and priorities is the question on how they impact on the most vulnerable in society” (Koopman 2005b:133). Against the voices that tend to limit theology’s role to providing a meaning-giving framework for addressing social-ethical and economic-ethical challenges, Koopman opines that theology “can make a unique contribution to the contents of the debate” (Koopman 2005b:134), especially with regard to the implementation of human rights and thicker descriptions of justice (Koopman 2005b:134-135).³³

But what may not be immediately apparent to the reader of his text is that, in all these instances, the driving force behind Koopman’s *public theologising* is his willingness to *constructively contribute* to the status quo, not to *challenge* it. According to de Gruchy, prophetic theology aims not “to predict the future, but to challenge the politics of the present. To say “no” when we must, but also to know when and how to say “yes”” (de Gruchy 2015:221). As he strives to “build theories that will hopefully assist South African policy makers in different public spheres as well as individual South Africans in all walks of life to see what is going on around them, to pay attention and to address the immense challenges with creativity and innovation” (Koopman 2005b:140), Koopman shows his ability to *approve* and *offer constructive comments*, but he usually fails when it comes to *contesting* and *challenging the system*.

Masango 2004; Crush 2008; Pillay 2008; Aliber 2011; Charman & Piper 2012; Biko 2013; Bundy 2014; Chakravarti 2014; Crush, Chikanda, Skinner 2015; Aucoin & Cilliers 2016; Donoghue *et al.* 2016.

33 Thus, in spite of the focus of the chapter in question, Koopman is far from reducing the role of theology in respect of socioeconomic issues to that of a contributor to the process of theory-formation (Koopman 2005b:128).

For instance, when Koopman speaks about *compassionate justice*, wherein “legal justice and the ethos of compassion and sacrifice cooperate to bring forth a life of justice and dignity for all humans and the environment” (Koopman 2005b:135), one is left wondering *how* those two ideals can be brought about and reconciled in a harsh postcolonial reality of contemporary South Africa without serious structural reforms of both political and economic system. While it is agreeable that “the implications of the notion of sacrifice for... political, economic and legal measures of reparation for the higher levels of equilibrium, might be an important part of the discourse on social and economic justice” (Koopman 2005b:135), many South Africans today seem to believe that even the *sacrifices of the privileged few* will not be enough, either in economic or in moral sense, to purge the oppressive remnants of apartheid in pursuit of a truly equitable society; instead they demand a radical overturn of the socioeconomic status quo.

Koopman is certainly not a *theological revolutionary*. Without doubt South African society, academy and ecclesia need balanced and (at least allegedly) constructive voices such as his. In principle, there’s nothing wrong with *not being a rebel*. From a social-theological perspective, one has to ask, however, if the time (*kairos*) has not come for South African theologians to listen more carefully to, and allow themselves to be informed by, the angry voices of those who feel that the post-apartheid socioeconomic system has failed and betrayed them. Some of those voices resonate in the corridors of Stellenbosch University, the institution at which Prof Nico Koopman is responsible for social impact, transformation & personnel.

“Basically it goes as deep as having to die as a black person to survive in Stellenbosch” (in Boshomane 2015).

A collective of students and staff working to purge the oppressive remnants of apartheid in pursuit of a truly African university...

“We revolt simply because, for a variety of reasons, we can no longer breathe” (Open Stellenbosch 2015).

These voices cannot be easily dismissed.

5. Public theologising: Between *civic spirit* and *public anger*

It would be fair to say that public theologians are currently the most prolific among “theological species” in South Africa. The “school” has its well established headquarters at the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology in Stellenbosch, with Dirkie Smit and Nico Koopman as its main protagonists. It is practiced around the country mainly, if not exclusively, at Dutch Reformed institutions, even though some liberal English theologians like John de Gruchy and Jim Cochrane also publish under its auspices. Public theology in South Africa is underwritten by the Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT), an academic research partnership founded in 2007 in Princeton, New Jersey.

Koopman’s Christological approach, which has been critiqued in this article, is representative, in my view, in many regards of the *mode of theologising* characteristic of public theology in South Africa. Of course, this claim cannot be substantiated unless a similar analysis is being conducted regarding other public theologians active in our local context. This tentative extrapolation of my conclusions concerning Koopman’s take on Jesus Christ into public theology at large, revolves around my central claim that, due to a number of factors discussed in my study, this mode of theologising lends itself all too easily to a new type of church theology which fails “to provide a serious challenge to the economic and political realm” (West 2013:12), and thus falls short of its prophetic calling.

This article focused on the critique of Koopman’s “global Reformed Christ”, and more broadly the critique of the mode of theologising characteristic of public theology, from an *African-Kairos* perspective. In this sense, my engagement with Koopman’s reflection was largely deconstructive in character, and my take on it was mainly negative. *Why spend so much time and effort on deconstruction and critiquing?* – one may ask. To this I reply that public theology in South Africa is not only strong enough and well-established at several academic institutions, but indeed, it is currently thriving, and therefore a dose of (hopefully) relevant criticism will do it good. This is, at least, my hope.

To close the loop, I would like to briefly refer to a number of positive (*prophetically-loaded*) and thus promising insights coming from public theologians themselves, and Nico Koopman in particular. Let me start

with some valid self-criticism, or at least a critical self-reflection, on the part of the chosen public theologians who take seriously an *African-Kairos* perspective, as described above.

In the conclusion of his article, Buttelli states that

a public theology that does not take seriously the contextual and prophetic heritage of our theological traditions cannot contribute to the further development of theological discussion, and can easily be used as a new state theology or an office theology (i.e., theology in office) (Buttelli 2012:106).

How real is the threat to which Buttelli alludes, can be epitomised by those interpretation of public theology which are based on the assumption that in a democratic society there are no demands for liberation and thus there is no need for a prophetic discourse anymore (Buttelli 2012:91). Seeing public theology as either a successor or a fulfilment of liberation theology is a logical implication of such an idealistic view of democracy; and it is rightly opposed by contextual and liberation theologians, including black theologians such as Maluleke (2011:82). Buttelli (2012:92) suggests that specifically in the South African context, the *Kairos Document* can act as a bridge between liberation theology and public theology. While aligning itself with the contextual theological tradition in the region, such a *prophetic public theology* will continuously learn to take sides in the world and challenge the status quo whenever it does not adhere to the vision of an alternative reality informed by the principles of God's reign (Buttelli 2012:105).

Cochrane emphasises, in turn, the significance of the postcolonial framework in Christian theologising as a major “corrective to the project of modernity”,

A postcolonial Christianity cannot allow itself to be marginalised from the general discourse of the church by declining to challenge naturalised hegemonies... [Talking about postcolonial Christianity] is one corrective to the project of modernity. It remaps the territory of our action and reflection and changes our interpretative standpoint. It displaces the imperial claims of the centre (Cochrane 1999:156-157).

In the same vein, Cochrane asserts that “it is not constructive to conceptualise a public theology in the southern hemisphere in a way that separates it from the “anger” of the suffering people” (in Buttelli 2012:101; see also Cochrane 2011:49;61-62). Public theology that always says “yes” in the reconstruction of a democratic society and which fails to take the cry of the poor into account and say a clear “no” to injustice, “easily turns into precisely the kind of conservative enterprise” – Cochrane argues – “that many critique using the tools of a sociology of power and knowledge (as Foucault does) or subaltern theory (employed by Gayatri Spivak, for example)” (Cochrane 2011:49). Commenting on Cochrane’s views, de Villiers points out that,

the split between public anger and public spirit that lies within Storrar’s distinction between oppositional and public theologies is problematic... both these moments necessarily belong together and both are forms of public theology... in such a way that the critical, excluded moment of public anger is not opposed to the reconstructive, included moment of civic spirit (de Villiers 2011:16).

Not least, Koopman himself has more recently made a statement that may be indicative of his growing awareness of the importance of *resistance* in public theologising. At the winter school of the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, he remarked that to be Christian is *to be involved in protest* (Koopman 2014d). The Latin word from which the English term is derived is *protestari*, and it means to *declare publicly*. Christians are called to *bear witness* wherever they see God’s hope, but also to *protest* wherever God’s hope is absent – indeed, where despair or anger reign (Koopman 2014d; see also Forster 2015:5).

Perhaps even more significantly, in his recent text titled “In search of a transforming public theology: Drinking from the wells of black theology” (Koopman 2015:211-225), Koopman develops the notion of an “ethic of hybridity” which he links with contemporary social scientific discourses in the context of post-colonisation and globalisation (Koopman 2015:218). He confesses that his own involvement with public theology was nurtured by decades of drinking from the wells of black theology (even though the names he mentions in this context, apart from Boesak, make one realise that what has shaped him was far from the mainstream black theology, be it

South African or North American). To respond faithfully to the challenges of public life in the contemporary social context, “a transforming public theology of hybridity” (Koopman 2015:213) needs to be developed, and the way to do that, according to Koopman, is to “drink from the wells of black theology *afresh*” (Koopman 2015:213; my italics).

In this chapter, he described three central notions of black theology, namely God’s bias for the wronged, the lordship of Jesus Christ, and an ethic of hybridity.

To be a transforming public theology, the vision and aim, methodology and approaches, agenda and priorities, interlocutors and language of public theology need to be informed and transformed by the central convictions of God’s bias for the wronged, the lordship of Jesus Christ, and an ethic of hybridity. To fulfil a transforming and humanising role in contemporary society, public theology needs to stand where God stands – namely, with the wronged and against dehumanisation, injustice and oppression. To fulfil a transformative and liberating role in a world fraught with the pervasive spirit and structures of empire, the lordship of Christ is the central conviction of those engaged in public theology. And to address the complexities of contemporary society faithfully, public theology is in urgent need of an ethic of hybridity (Koopman 2015:23).

The first two notions are mere repetitions of Koopman’s earlier reflections (see, inter alia, Koopman 2007b; 2007c; 2008a). Besides, as mentioned earlier, elsewhere he insisted that it was the *Reformed* conviction about the supreme sovereignty of Jesus Christ that informed black theology and not the other way round (Koopman 2007b:306). But this inconsistency apart, what deserves more attention is the notion of *hybridity* itself. Koopman admits that it is not explicitly spelled out in black theological discourse, but he reckons it can legitimately be inferred from this discourse (Koopman 2015:213).³⁴ Using the concept of hybridity equips Koopman with a framework to speak about various forms of identity alongside blackness,

34 It is a pity that Koopman does not invest more energy into showing possible correlations between “race” and “hybridity” within the context of black theology and Black Consciousness Movement. This could give his claim more weight.

and allows him to relate different forms of oppression and marginalisation to each other and thus to see them through the lens of intersectionality (Koopman 2015:2017). Unlike many of his earlier considerations, Koopman's reflection on hybridity is both contextually grounded and socially relevant:

In apartheid South Africa, the work of the historian Hans Heese, which traced the roots of some extremist white apartheid ideologists to the Khoi-San indigenous groups, amongst others, caused quite a stir, and paved the way for a revaluation of the notion of hybridity... Hybridity challenges certainties and essentialisms. It resists monophony and promotes the idea of polyphony. It carries the notion of liminality, which refers to an in-between state during which old, certain, clearly defined identities are re-negotiated, and the door is opened for the new, the imaginative, and the surprising. Hybridity acknowledges complexity and ambiguity... Owing to participation in each other's lives, it becomes increasingly difficult to talk about yourself as merely coloured or South African. Participation in the lives of my black, white and Indian brothers, and in the lives of my brothers and sisters from other countries, has not left me unchanged... Through sharing in the lives of my Dutch Reformed brothers and sisters, my ecclesial identity has become more complex. I am still Uniting Reformed, but I am also more than that. And through exposure and hospitality to other confessional traditions, I have become something other, something richer than just a reformed Christian. I am still reformed, but I am simultaneously something more (Koopman 2015:218-219).

Koopman then proceeds to identify seven aspects of an ethic of hybridity and, at the same time, seven ways in which it can serve processes of inclusion, reconciliation and justice (Koopman 2015:219-223). These include: plurality, ambiguity, complexity, duality, paradoxality, proximity and absurdity. As he discusses each of them, he resorts now and then into his *a-pathetic* mode of theologising. But all in all, against the backdrop of Koopman's entire work, his reflection in this chapter is one of the most felicitous expressions of the *prophetic mode of public discourse*. One may only hope that this kind of approach will be soon found *also* in Koopman's theology of Jesus Christ.

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