

The Promises and Dangers of Public Theology¹

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Abstract

In this article, I examine how public theology developed during the last several decades and point out several pitfalls in it. During this examination, I also draw out several ways in which Reformed public theology could be presented to avoid the dangers of public theology. That is, it must be based on Trinitarian theology and must be orthodox in the sense that it should not hold to a pluralistic view of salvation and not be panentheistic in its understanding of the relationship between God and the world.

Keywords:

Public theology, Reformed theology, religious pluralism, panentheism, Trinity, doing theology

Public theology in the broad sense of the word relates to discourse about the public arena of our lives. Theology in the past understood itself to have public relevance. In recent years, however, the term public theology refers to *a new way of doing theology* that seeks to reflect on problems of public significance with a

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view to impacting society as a whole. This new way of doing theology I call *public theology proper*: “a growing perception of the need for theology to interact with public issues of contemporary society,”² a “systematic reflection on issues relating to public life, carried out in the light of theological conviction and with the aid of the theological disciplines.”³ Such theology is “a mode of doing theology that is intended to address matters of public importance.”⁴ Kevin Vanhoozer states that public theology in this form is “first and foremost a reaction against the tendency to privatize the faith, restricting it to the question of an individual’s salvation.”⁵ As such it “is an engagement of living religious traditions with their public environment—the economic, political, and cultural spheres of common life.”⁶ Victor Anderson affirms that public theology is “the deliberate use of religious language and commitments to influence substantive public discourse, including public debates on moral.”⁷ A problem lies in the fact that even though we use “public theology” *in sensu stricto*, the meanings that people give to it vary. Everybody uses the term in his or her own way: “When one starts to read on the topic of public theology a wide range of overlapping opinions and contrasting viewpoints are found.”⁸

In this article, I will first examine various public theologies, from the classic model to some recent attempts. Then I will discuss the elements or factors of public theology that make theological discussion truly *public*. Subsequently, I will reflect on the dangers of public theology and present some pitfalls that make theological discussion about the public arena less than Christian theology. Ultimately, we aim for a public theology to be *truly Christian* theology.

² Sebastian Kim, “Editorial,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 1.1 (2007): 1.

³ “Public Theology in the Canadian Context,” <http://publictheology.org/>, Centre for Public Theology at Huron University College, at the University of Western Ontario.

⁴ John W. de Gruchy, “Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 1.1 (2007): 40.

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer with Owen Strahan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 17.

⁶ Kim, “Editorial,” 2.

⁷ Victor Anderson, “Contour of an African American Public Theology,” *Journal of Theology* 104 (Summer 2000): 50.

⁸ Cf. Ronell M. Bezuidenhout, “Re-imaging Life: A Reflection on ‘Public Theology’ in the Work of Linell Cady, Dense Ackermann and Ethinne de Villers” (PhD diss., Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, 2007), 5, cited in Cobus van Wyngaard, “David Bosch as Public Theologian,” 10, SCRIBD, <https://www.scribd.com/document/19661433/David-Bosch-as-Public-Theologian>.

I. Various Past Public Theologies

It is a common opinion that there are various public theologies. For example, in a conference at Edinburgh in 2001, John de Gruchy began his discussion of public theology with the observation that there is no “universal public theology” but only various public theologies concerned with political problems in various areas.⁹

1. Traditional Theologies with Public Orientation

First of all, we may think of several traditional theologies that had a strong sense of the public nature of theology. Even those who want to develop a *new* public theology admit that public theology is *in fact* not a totally new concept, since theology has always sought to have a contextual or social relevance. John Calvin’s and Abraham Kuyper’s theologies reflect public concern.¹⁰ Martin Luther also recognized ordinary people’s work as *vocatio* (*Beruf*), and Lutheran theologies related to the creation order can also be mentioned as forerunners of public theology. The two-kingdom theology developed by Lutherans may be presented as a true vision of public theology in contrast with Calvinism, which tries to build the kingdom of God on earth.¹¹ On the other hand, others consider the Calvinistic vision as a better approximation of public theology than the Lutheran. Calvin was actively involved in public life in Geneva, and John Knox applied what he had learned from Calvin in a “national reformation” in Scotland. Jonathan Edwards is a case in point in the eighteenth century.¹² Kuyper, who promoted a renaissance of Calvinism in the Netherlands, renewed discussion of public theology.¹³ It is natural that the center for public theology founded in

⁹ John W. de Gruchy, “From Political to Public Theologies: The Role of Theology in Public Life in South Africa,” in *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, ed. William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 45.

¹⁰ David W. Hall, *Calvin in the Public Square: Liberal Democracies, Rights, and Civil Liberties* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009); Matthew J. Tuininga, *Calvin’s Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ’s Two Kingdoms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper’s American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Vincent E. Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

¹¹ See, e.g., Robert Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 26–52.

¹² Cf. Gerald McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

¹³ Cf. Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*; Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology*; Vincent E. Bacote, “Abraham Kuyper’s Rhetorical Public Theology with Implication for Faith and Learning,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 37.4 (Summer 2008): 407–25.

2002 at Princeton Theological Seminary be named The Abraham Kuyper Center for Public Theology.¹⁴

2. Neo-Orthodox Theologies as Forerunners of Public Theology

The opinion that Karl Barth's theology had the features of public theology is quite current.¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans Frei, under the influence of Barth, also have characteristics of public theology.¹⁶ It is generally thought that Martin Marty of Chicago University coined the term public theology in the line of Barth. Duncan Forrester, a recognized Scottish public theologian, judges the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr important for the formation of public theology.¹⁷

3. The Irony of Anabaptist Theology

It is ironic that Anabaptist theology, which tended to avoid the public area in the past, is now regarded as one of the important influences on public theology. This is partly due to the efforts of some Anabaptist theologians who tried to present their case to the wider world and partly due to its reception in the theological world. For example, John Howard Yoder (1929–1997) made a great contribution in making the Anabaptist voice heard with his major works.¹⁸ Equally important was the contribution of Stanley Hauerwas and

¹⁴ Cf. <http://kcpt.ptsem.edu/>. The Kuyper conference, which started in 1998 at Princeton Theological Seminary, has been hosted at the Prince Conference Center on the Calvin University campus in Grand Rapids, Michigan, since 2018. Cf. <https://calvin.edu/events/kuyper-conference/>.

¹⁵ Cf. Martin Laubscher, "A Search for Karl Barth's Public Theology: Looking into Some Defining Areas of His Work in the post-World War II Years," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 1.3 (2007): 231–46.

¹⁶ Frits de Labge, "Against Escapism: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Contribution to Public Theology," in *Christian in Public Aims, Methodologies and Issues in Public Theology*, ed. Len Handsen (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2007), 141–52; Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History: Hans Frei's Public Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

¹⁷ Duncan B. Forrester, "The Scope of Public Theology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17.2 (August 2004): 9–10. See also Victor Anderson, "The Wrestle of Christ and Culture in Pragmatic Public Theology," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 19.2 (May 1998): 135, 138–39; Raimundo Barreto Jr., "Christian Realism and Latin American Liberation Theology: Expanding the Dialogue," *Koinonia* 15.1 (2003): 95–122.

¹⁸ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); *Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992); Yoder with M. Cartwright, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998); *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001); *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, trans. T. Geddert (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003); *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, ed. Glen Harold Stassen and Mark Thiessen Nation (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009); *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, ed. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009).

W. H. Willimon, who embraced this perspective and presented its insights, even though they are not themselves Anabaptists.¹⁹ They sought to show an alternative social perspective.²⁰ William Storrar described their approach as *ecclesial*, offering “an alternative model of human society rather than seeking to manage its problems.”²¹ In his view, this vision of an alternative community does not itself make for “public” theology.

4. *Liberation Theologies as Forerunners of Public Theology*

Jürgen Moltmann once used the term public theology to depict the direction of the way in which all his theological concerns can be expressed.²² His political theology, eco-theology, and theology of nature—all have an orientation toward public theology. Moreover, he says that Christian theology is public theology because it is the theology of the kingdom of God.²³ As Professor Hyung-Gi Lee has well pointed out, “Moltmann regards that not only his own theology, but also the liberation theology of the Latin America, Feminist theology and Black theology belong to public theology.”²⁴ It cannot be denied that every theology that seeks to liberate people from either political and economic oppression, sexism, or racism is a kind of public theology. Forrester believes that public theology today

¹⁹ See Stanley Hauerwas and W. H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), esp. 44–46; Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1992); Stanley Hauerwas and W. H. Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).

²⁰ William F. Storrar criticizes Stanley Hauerwas for wanting to make the church an alternative community, “A Kairos Moment for Public Theology,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 1.1 (2007): 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

²² Jürgen Moltmann, “Theology for Christ’s Church and the Kingdom of God in Modern Society,” in *A Passion for God’s Reign: Theology, Christian Learning, and the Christian Self*, ed. Miroslav Volf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 51–52.

²³ Jürgen Moltmann, cited in Christopher D. Marshall, “What Language Shall I Borrow? The Bilingual Dilemma of Public Theology,” *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 13.3 (2005): 11.

²⁴ Hyung-Gi Lee, “The Horizon of Public Theology: The Kingdom of God,” unpublished paper, 1. Lee is thinking especially of Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); see also, Scott R. Paeth, “Jürgen Moltmann’s Public Theology,” *Political Theology* 6.2 (2005): 215–34, which is adapted from his dissertation “From the Church to the World: Public Theology and Civil Society in Dialogue with the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann” (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2004).

comes from the political theologies of the sixties and Latin American liberation theology.²⁵

5. Roman Catholic Public Theology

John Courtney Murray, S.J. (1904–67) is the most significant figure to bring together Roman Catholic theology and the American tradition from the 1940s to the 1960s. After studying classics and philosophy at Boston College and at Woodstock Theological Center, Maryland, he completed his PhD on the Trinity and grace at the Gregorian University in Rome in 1937. He taught at his *alma mater*, Woodstock Theological Center, until his death. He presented his public theology by asserting the compatibility of American constitutionalism and Roman Catholicism.²⁶ In his words, “The American thesis is that government is not juridically omniscient. Its powers are limited, and one of the principles of limitation is the distinction between state and church, in their purposes, methods, and manner of organization.” Further, he “asserts the theory of a free people under limited government, a theory that is recognizably part of the Christian political tradition, and altogether defensible in the manner of its realization under American circumstances.”²⁷

David Tracy, another Roman Catholic theologian, states that since “all theology is public discourse,”²⁸ theologians should be aware of their audience, the theologians’ “public.” He continues that nowadays there are “three publics of theology: Society, academy, and the Church.”²⁹ In a pluralistic world the theologian does not speak merely to the church, that is, the congregation, but also to the academy and to society as a whole. Hence, according to Tracy, we have to develop language to speak to society as a whole.

²⁵ Forrester, “The Scope of Public Theology,” 14. For a discussion of the public theological characteristics of liberation theology, see Raimundo C. Barreto, “Christian Realism and Latin American Liberation Theology,” *Koinonia* 15.1 (2003): 95–122.

²⁶ “John Courtney Murray,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Courtney_Murray.

²⁷ As cited in “John Courtney Murray,” <http://johncourtneymurray.blogspot.kr/>. For good discussions of his public theology, see Robert W. McElroy, *The Search for an American Public Theology: The Contribution of John Courtney Murray* (New York: Paulist, 1989); Robert P. Hunt and Kenneth L. Grasso, eds., *John Courtney Murray and the American Civil Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); Thomas P. Ferguson, *Catholic and American: The Political Theology of John Courtney Murray* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1993).

²⁸ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 3.

²⁹ Ibid.

II. *The Rise of Public Theology Proper*

Recent attempts to do public theology proper come from an awareness of the fact that society is a major audience of theology, even though it might not be attentive to what theologians are saying. It looks like a one-sided love situation. Since the secular world does not listen to discourse that does not meet its own criteria, something based on reason and with a pattern that is accessible to the public must be offered. This is the justification offered by Tracy and others for a new style of public theology that is different from traditional theology and entails a public orientation. As George van Wyngaard states, “if Christian theology, after the demise of Christendom and the shift in consensus still claims to have public relevance, a new approach towards the public conversation needed to be found.”³⁰

Those who seek to develop public theology in this sense understand “public” in Tracy’s third sense, as society, public life, in the world.³¹ What is important is how to influence public opinion. Those who are influential in forming public opinion are the main audience of the new public theology. According to this restricted sense, theologies that take the church and the academy as their audience are not regarded as doing public theology. They are not public enough. So public theology proper considers that a new way that engages with public discourse is needed in the public domain and that we have to go beyond doing theology merely for church or academy while accepting them as co-workers in public theology.³² It is an act of engaging in public discourse “to help in the building of a decent society by offering distinctive and constructive insights from its treasury of faith”³³ by developing a “theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church.”³⁴

Several representative centers of public theology in Scotland, England, and the United States were founded in recent years to develop public theology.³⁵ The late professor Max Stackhouse (1935–2016) made an

³⁰ George J. van Wyngaard, “David Bosch as Public Theologian,” *Missionalia* 39.1/2 (2011): 13.

³¹ According to van Wyngaard, Dirkie Smit made exactly this point in his lecture at the Center for Public Theology of Pretoria University. Cf. Diekie Smit, “Wat beteken publiek?,” Unpublished lecture at the Center for Public Theology, University of Pretoria, August 2008, cited in van Wyngaard, “David Bosch as Public Theologian,” 15.

³² Cf. Storrar, “A Kairos Moment for Public Theology,” 12.

³³ Van Wyngaard, “David Bosch as Public Theologian,” 21.

³⁴ Forrester, “The Scope of Public Theology,” 6.

³⁵ Cf. John Atherton, *Public Theology for Changing Times* (London: SPCK, 2000).

important contribution, developing a Kuyperian perspective.³⁶ He was concerned with globalization and identified it as a major theological concern in 1988.³⁷ While taking a positive approach, he pointed out several misunderstandings, including that of reducing it to merely an economic problem: “The inquiry into why globalization is taking its present shape, and organizing the economic forces the way it does convinces me that an economic view is too limited—so limited, in fact, that to treat it as such is to obscure the scope, structure, force and meaning of the phenomenon.”³⁸ Globalization is

*a worldwide set of social, political, cultural, technological and ethical dynamics, influenced and legitimated by certain theological, ethical and ideological motifs, that are creating a worldwide civil society that stands beyond the capacity of any nation-state to control. It is influencing every local context, all peoples, all social institutions and the ecology of the earth itself. It is forming an alternative postmodernism, one that has elements of the fragmentation and the relativization of all previous securities, but that also is demanding the rediscovery of universalistic principles of anthropology, spirituality, morality and law, refining distinctive purposes and forming new institutions that require common recognition.*³⁹

Stackhouse sought to engage with the new world situation and thought theology could “play a critical role in reforming the ‘powers’ that are becoming more diverse and autonomous.”⁴⁰ His concern was “how God wants us to live in the global civilization, to respond to it, and to shape it.”⁴¹

Another attempt to do public theology from a somewhat different perspective is that of Ronald Thiemann, who envisages a cosmic Christology and the shape of the church in a pluralistic culture.⁴² Christian public

³⁶ Cf. Max L. Stackhouse, *Public Theology and Political Economy: Christian Stewardship in Modern Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); *Creeds, Society, and Human Rights* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

³⁷ Max L. Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); *Christian Social Ethics and the Globalization of Economic Life* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1996); Max L. Stackhouse and Peter J. Paris, eds., *God and Globalization 1: Religion and the Powers of the Common Life* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000); Max L. Stackhouse and Peter J. Paris, eds., *God and Globalization 2: The Spirit and Modern Authorities* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001); Max L. Stackhouse and Peter J. Paris, eds., *God and Globalization 3: Christ and the Dominions of Civilization* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002); Max L. Stackhouse, *God and Globalization 4: Globalization and Grace* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2007). See also Scott R. Paeth, E. Harold Breitenberg Jr., and Hank Joon Lee, eds., *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

³⁸ Stackhouse, *God and Globalization 4*, 1–2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁰ “Max Lynn Stackhouse,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Lynn_Stackhouse.

⁴¹ Stackhouse, “General Introduction,” in *God and Globalization 1*, 7.

⁴² Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

theology has two purposes: “to understand the relation between Christian convictions and the broad social and cultural context within which the Christian community lives” and “to identify the particular places where Christian convictions intersect with the practices that characterize contemporary public life.”⁴³

A further representative of American public theology is Victor Anderson at the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University. From an “African American” perspective,⁴⁴ he develops “an American public theology capable of criticizing our public culture driven by economic growth, multinational expansion, a burgeoning American middle class, and moral decay, violence, prison over population and privatization, and the like.”⁴⁵

There exists a global network for public theology founded in Princeton in 2007 and an *International Journal for Public Theology* published by Brill.⁴⁶

III. *The Promise of Public Theology Proper*

Unlike traditional theology with public orientation, public theology proper has several distinguishing features.

First of all, theologians “engage the secular world in terms of its issues while at the same time digging deeply into the Christian tradition for the resources necessary for doing so.”⁴⁷ Doing public theology requires not losing sight of Christian insights and uniqueness, and also learning the secular language to communicate with the world. Public theology implies “a deliberate use of common language in a commitment to influence public decision-making.” A “substantive public discourse” appreciates the insights of scholarship other than theology *in sensu stricto*.⁴⁸ It tries to dialogue with other disciplines, like politics, economics, cultural studies, and social

⁴³ Ibid., 21–22.

⁴⁴ Cf. Victor Anderson, *Pragmatic Theology: Negotiating the Intersections of an American Philosophy of Religion and Public Theology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998); “The Search for Public Theology in the United States,” in *Preaching as a Theological Task: Festschrift for David Buttrick*, ed. Thomas Long and Edward Farley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 19–31; “The Wrestle of Christ and Culture in Pragmatic Public Theology,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 19.2 (May 1998): 135–50; and “An American Public Theology in the Absence of Giants: Creative Conflict and Democratic Longings,” in *Ethics that Matters: African, Caribbean, and African American Sources*, ed. Marcia Y. Riggs and James Samuel Logan (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 195–214.

⁴⁵ Anderson, “Contour of an African American Public Theology,” 50.

⁴⁶ Cf. <http://www.chester.ac.uk/node/15316>.

⁴⁷ Duncan B. Forrester, “Working in the Quarry: A Response to the Colloquium,” in *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, ed. Storrar and Morton, 431.

⁴⁸ Kim, “Editorial,” 1.

studies. To be accepted by other disciplines, public theology develops “a methodology which is acceptable to, and understandable by, both the general public and special academic disciplines.”⁴⁹

Secondly, theology done in this way is “a modest but truthful, constructive and challenging contribution to public debate [and] human flourishing.”⁵⁰ That is, public theology has the potential and power to change the world in which we live and to have change as one of its purposes. Academic theologians should be “developing categories that are capable of affecting the ethical conscience of the political community.”⁵¹ Therefore, public theology must be “healing, reconciling, helping and challenging.”⁵²

Thirdly, public theology hopes for a better world and seeks solutions for real problems. It is “utopian” theology in the sense in which Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) used the term.⁵³ The task of public theology, therefore, cannot be maintaining or confirming the *status quo*, but always “[seeking] its ongoing transformation.”⁵⁴ Public theology tries to make this world a better place to live in.

IV. How to Avoid Pitfalls in Doing Public Theology Proper

Almost all those engaged in the task of public theology affirm that it must be Christian witness. De Gruchy says that public theology is Christian witness that includes social action and social debates.⁵⁵ Van Wyngaard also says that “public theology moves away from an approach that limits the language of theology only to the private sphere, and argues that the language of faith does have public truth.”⁵⁶ But how can it be Christian witness? To answer this question, I will point out several elements without which our theology is not Christian anymore and argue that a public theology that misses these elements is not *Christian* public theology and no longer Christian witness.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁰ Forrester, “Working in the Quarry,” 432.

⁵¹ Kim, “Editorial,” 2.

⁵² Forrester, “Working in the Quarry,” 436.

⁵³ Ibid., 433–38; Forrester, “Scope of Public Theology,” 14; cf. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1936).

⁵⁴ De Gruchy, “From Political to Public Theology,” 59.

⁵⁵ De Gruchy, “Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre,” 40.

⁵⁶ Van Wyngaard, “David Bosch as Public Theologian,” 18.

Fundamentally, public theology must be *Christian* witness in the secular world. Sometimes we may lose our peculiar Christian voice in the process of reflecting upon and doing social activity relating to specific problems of our society. One of the most important criteria for judging public theology, therefore, is how much power it has for being Christian witness in our society. Just adding to the world another voice that echoes many voices out there is not a reason for Christian theologians to speak out. What is needed is a Christian voice about specific problems. If we tell the same story the world can hear from others, why should it listen? The task of public theology is to find specific Christian insights about a particular problem and present them in an understandable way to the secular world.

There are five pits into which public theology can fall.

Firstly, we should not abandon Christian theism in the process of doing public theology. Just as in the nineteenth century people abandoned the Trinity in their thinking about God, if we are not careful, we can give the impression that Trinitarian thinking can be placed on the back burner or even forgotten. It is easy to use the term *God* in a way that Jews or Muslims can accept in public theology dialogues. In this context Stackhouse's attempt to see the civilizations of the world attaining "a diversity that can be mutually elated" based on the doctrine of the Trinity is interesting and meaningful.⁵⁷ According to Storrar, David Bosch provided a "paradigm of mission that seeks to hold together all aspects of the triune God's mission to the world in creative tension."⁵⁸ Just mentioning the Trinity in a formal way is also problematic.

Secondly, public theology should not imply universal salvation in the discussion of public matters. It is easy to focus only on social concerns, since we are not discussing soteriological issues, particularly when "the welfare of the city" is the agenda rather than "the welfare of the church."

Thirdly, a kind of panentheistic thinking may be implied in the discussion of public matters. Like many theologies which imply that God is influenced by the processes of the world, public theology with a keen concern for social process should avoid panentheistic presuppositions.

Fourthly, discussions about the transformation of society and culture may imply that the world can be changed by the united efforts of human beings. So it is necessary to be careful not to adopt an anthropocentric or synergistic view in public theology.

⁵⁷ Max L. Stackhouse, "Public Theology and Political Economy in a Global Era," in *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, ed. Storrar and Morton, 190–91.

⁵⁸ Storrar, "A Kairos Moment for Public Theology," 11.

Fifthly, public theology should be a theology that bears witness to the kingdom of God not yet consummated, but inaugurated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So public theology should be a part of kingdom theology.⁵⁹ The philosophy of Jürgen Habermas illustrates the difference between Christian kingdom theology and humanistic ideas about the human future.⁶⁰

Conclusion

While the problem of being “public” in public theology is related to being accessible and heard in the world, it is crucial to have specifically Christian content to communicate. So, we have to make the content clear in the church. Otherwise, we might err in discussing public problems on the basis of natural law (the classic Roman Catholic approach as well as that of some Protestants), common reason (Habermas and his followers), or sentiment or morality (the approach of the cultural Protestantism in the nineteenth century). The inner church language of public theology should have the characteristics of biblical, theological, and church historical reflections that contribute to making the message clear. Thus, its message must be decisively Christian, biblical, and theological, refined through the lens of unfolding church history.

Then the same contents that we have shared with the church can be translated into the language of secular society, the second-order language of public theology. So there must be a sameness of contents and an otherness of language. This is one of the main problems in public theology: How can we translate Christian contents into “publicly accessible language”?⁶¹ How can we not lose the Christian contents and uniqueness in the process of translation into secular language? At the same time, we have to know when to use “the language of faith in the public square” and to attempt “to speak of God in the public square neither too early nor too late.”⁶²

After hearing what we are saying, then, the public (people outside the church) should recognize what they are hearing, so they may compare and distinguish what they are saying on this specific problem and what we are

⁵⁹ Cf. Seung-Goo Lee, “Towards a Kingdom Theology,” *Studies in Reformed Theology*, Korean Edition (Seoul: Hana Publishing Company, 1999), chapter 1.

⁶⁰ For Habermas’s understanding of the public square, see Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere (1964),” in *The Idea of the Public Sphere: A Reader*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud, Hallvard Moe, Anders Molander, and Graham Murdock (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2010), 114ff.; Craig J. Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and Public Square* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

⁶¹ Cf. van Wyngaard, “David Bosch as Public Theologian,” 18.

⁶² Marshall, “What Language Shall I Borrow?,” 16–17.

saying. This is why our message must be both accessible to the public and unique. If they cannot understand the language because it is communicated in an obscure way, then doing public theology is meaningless. At the same time, if they hear from us what they are already saying and hearing in perhaps a better way, then public theology is void. The public must understand what we are saying to them at the very least. Moreover, it ought to be more persuasive to them than other options.

To have persuasive power we must use insights from other disciplines as well. In this sense, public theology is an interdisciplinary enterprise. There are, however, limits to using insights from other disciplines, set by the goal of not losing the specific Christian perspective in the discussion of public problems. If we are open minded, everything that can explain and transform the world can contribute to our message on specific social problems.