

A Brief Genealogy of Public Theology, or, Doing Theology when it Seems Nobody is Listening

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This paper seeks to introduce the background to public theology, offering some reflections upon its origins, history, methodologies, as well as the recent state of public theology as a sub-discipline in its own right. After a brief discussion of the scope and definitions of public theology, the paper will offer a genealogical account of the origins and development of what is today termed 'public theology', throughout key periods of the history of the church. A discussion of the emergence of the sense of public theology as a sub-discipline in its own right in the later stages of the twentieth century will follow. Then, the paper will offer a tentative 'typology' of recent forms of public theology, before offering some suggestive conclusions concerning the most fruitful direction in which theological contributions to the wider public arena might progress.

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1. *Some comments on terminology*

The term 'public theology' is used a great deal these days. But when you think about the roots and origins of those various approaches that today

¹ This paper is concerned with public theology from Christian theologians but there are considerable analogous forms of theology practised within other faiths and also, importantly, emerging forms of inter-religious public theologising, as well as forms of what might be termed 'comparative public theology'.

go by the name of public theology, theology/religion, and public life and so on, one soon realises that in reality the term is a vast umbrella concept for a diverse array of methods, issues, challenges, and hermeneutical tools and approaches themselves. If we ask what public theology is, the answer to such a question might well take longer than the answer to what is not a theology of public relevance.

It is important to appreciate how the term can really be used in different ways. But let us at least try and narrow down the umbrella concept just a little or at least seek to determine whether the various different forms of public theology share enough in common to justify discourse concerning public theology as a genus in its own right.

In one sense, to my mind, public theology is shorthand for church 'in' the world, and it embraces the contributions of the different churches and theology to the wider social, political, economic and cultural life of the communities where Christianity is found. Noting that some recent forms of public theology would sharply resist such an emphasis on the implications of that word 'in', part of my main thesis in this paper is to stress that the term 'public' also has to be taken fully seriously. Thus the 'in the world' factor is one which cannot and should not really be extracted from any form of public theology worthy of the name.

In this sense, there has always been public theology or 'theology in the public square' as it is sometimes called. Of course, this relates very much to the mission of the church – particularly the understandings of that mission *ad extra*. Public theology is additionally concerned with arguing for the continued value and relevance of religion and theology in secular societies, particularly in the face of continued aggressive attacks on the perceived pernicious influence of religion in societies. So in a certain sense, it can function as a contemporary form of apologetics – or sometimes polemics, too. But, although some would stop here, public theology is about much more than that in many of its forms.

So, to chart briefly the scope and range of public theology, we can begin by saying that most contributors to such discourse would agree that public theology is theology that is social, political, and practical. But I would argue that at its best public theology involves theological hermeneutics in the service of moral, social, and political praxis. *Contra* the arguments of some of its leading theorists in recent times, public theology is and cannot really avoid being political theology (despite the fact that, all too often, the term 'public' is deliberately employed to avoid left-wing accusations/association). I also hope to help to illustrate that public theology is thoroughly ecumenical theology. Public theology is also, therefore, concerned with ecclesiological questions – the relevance, role, and contribution of the church today, particularly in wider secular and pluralist societies. Public theology is also necessarily contextual – different public contexts obviously require different responses and strategies. But, above all, I believe that public theology is theology concerned with *ethical* questions and challenges.

In many ways, the sub-discipline of public theology that has emerged in recent times is the heir – whether the legitimacy is acknowledged or not – of what used to be called the ‘theology of correlation’, between theology and all wider aspects of culture. P. Tillich’s legacy is important here but it would not be inaccurate to place people such as K. Rahner, B. Lonergan, J. Macquarrie, and the liberationist, feminist, and contextual theology movements within this category also. As David Tracy, himself a key theorist of correlationist theology, rightly noted in the 1970s, we must take seriously those criticisms of Tillich’s method of correlation which really offers only a correlation between questions from one source and answers from another.² While this criticism is still valid today for much of public theology, nonetheless, I think that Tillich and those influenced by him did much of the groundwork to make public theology possible.

Tillich, seeking to meet the challenge of relating theology and culture at the end of the modern era, confronted existential questions with theological answers, famously stating that humanity «is the question not the answer», but also following this up by stating (contra neo-orthodoxy) that the revelatory answers are themselves meaningless without the context of the questions to which they offer an answer.³ So Tillich did indeed find some of those answers outside of theology.

2. *Alternative definitions of public theology*

Other definitions have been proposed, and I would like to introduce a sample of just a few of them here. One of the most influential proponents of public theology, Duncan Forrester, has succinctly defined public theology as a theology which «attends to the Bible and the tradition of faith at the same time as it attempts to discern the signs of the times and understand what is going on in the light of the gospel».⁴ Drawing on the

² D. TRACY, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*, New York 1975, p. 46.

³ P. TILlich, *Systematic Theology*, II (Nisbet edition), Chicago (IL) 1973, p. 13. He continues, «The method of correlation explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence» (I, p. 60). For a brief introductory discussion which compares Tillich’s approach with others in the context of differing responses to the challenge of relating transcendence and immanence in the modern era, cfr. S. GRENZ - R. OLSEN, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age*, Downers Grove (IL) 1997, pp. 114-129.

⁴ W.F. STORRAR - A.R. MORTON (edd), *Public Theology for the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honour of Duncan B. Forrester*, London 2004, p. 1. Forrester’s own career might well serve as an exemplary illustration of the emergence and development of the sub-discipline of public theology itself. Duncan Forrester’s work has spanned several decades and has been at the forefront, often in a pioneering fashion, of Christian ethics – especially social and political ethics – as well as of ecclesiology and of moral, political, practical, contextual, ecumenical and, finally, of course, *public* theology. Forrester founded Edinburgh’s *Centre for Theology and Public Issues* in 1984 (a time, of course, when the churches and theologians would come into regular conflict with politicians on a variety of pressing issues and when Forrester proved to be a strong and unwavering voice in defence of those society was leaving behind). Forrester’s richly varied career has taken him from St Andrews to Chicago to Edinburgh (for studies, the latter also for ministry). Then onto Madras (ministry and as

pastoral cycle (Cardijn's see-judge-act) method from practical theology, Forrester's long-time collaborator, William Storrar, describes public theology as «a collaborative exercise in theological reflection on public issues which is prompted by disruptive social experiences that call for thoughtful and faithful response».⁵ Both have been profoundly shaped by ecumenical encounters, thereby hinting at some further aspects of the picture of public theology that will emerge in this paper.

From the United States, Max Stackhouse, also one of contemporary public theology's leading voices, has also sought to describe the evolution of public theology,⁶ suggesting that the term was first used by Martin Marty in a study of R. Niebuhr in 1974, but that it «appeared as the summary of a long tradition». Stackhouse writes:

«the term 'public' is used to stress the point that 'theology', while possibly related to intensely personal commitments or to particular communities of worship, is at its most profound levels neither merely private nor a matter of distinctive communal identity. Rather, it is an ongoing discipline that seeks to discern the way things are and ought to be, one that is decisive of public discourse and necessary to the guidance of individual souls, societies, and indeed the community of nations. It responds to the problems that human experiences do not interpret themselves, but require various modes of public discourse to discern their meanings».⁷

I think the term was probably used long before 1974 and that Stackhouse here, at least, partly reflects the 'parallel universes' syndrome that sometimes besets the world of theological discourse whether across ecclesial, methodological and/or geographical boundaries. Indeed, it appears

Professor of Politics), Sussex (Chaplain and Lecturer in Politics and Religious Studies) and, finally (though never exclusively) back to Edinburgh as Professor of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology, with a personal chair of Theology and Public Issues from 2000-2001.

⁵ W.F. STORRAR, 2007: *A Kairos Moment for Public Theology*, in «International Journal of Public Theology», 1 (2007), pp. 5-25, at p. 6.

⁶ Cfr. M. DOAK, *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology* (Religion and American Public Life Series), Albany (NY) 2004, who, again addressing primarily a US-centric agenda, expounds upon the discourse of public theology as pertaining to two key challenges «1) the difficulty of reconciling a public role for religion with the reality of our pluralistic society historically committed to the disestablishment of religion and, 2) a currently widespread suspicion (at least widespread in the national debates) of public projects and purposes, which are seen as less worthwhile than individual pursuits and less efficient than privately funded undertakings»; *ibidem*, p. 7.

⁷ M. STACKHOUSE, *Human Rights and Public Theology: the Basic Validation of Human Rights*, in C. GUSTAFSON - P.H. JULIVER (edd), *Religion and Human Rights: Competing Claims*, New York 1999, pp. 12-31, at p. 19. The phrase comes from M. MARTY, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience*, in «Journal of Religion», 54 (1974), 4, pp. 332-359. See, also, M. STACKHOUSE, *Public Theology and Ethical Judgment*, in «Theology Today», 54 (1997), pp. 165-179 upon which his 1999 account was based. Referring to Marty's article on Niebuhr, Stackhouse there states «The main point of the article was that this leader of American Protestant ethics represented a deep strand of intellectual history, one rooted in the close interaction of religious insight, philosophical reflection, and social analysis. Rightly grounded and formed, they could form a basic conceptual framework capable of providing an accurate analysis of historical experience and of guiding ethical judgment in our common life. The term was used to stress the point that theology, while related to intensely personal commitments and to a particular community of worship, is, at its most profound level, neither merely private nor a matter of distinctive communal identity. Rather, it is an argument regarding the way things are and ought to be, one decisive for public discourse and necessary to the guidance of individual souls, societies, and, indeed, the community of nations».

that Marty himself, was working in the context of those debates that arose in the post-war period and then the ebb and flow of the 1960s.⁸ In the USA, this preoccupied many theologians and churches in particularly acute ways. Here the contribution of the new methods and preoccupations of the social sciences played a crucial role.

The topic of secularisation and the notion of ‘civil religion’, as articulated by those such as R. Bellah, but building upon the work of earlier scholars such as W. Herberg,⁹ also posed new challenges to theological discourse. But, of course, on a much wider scale, the actual social, political, and wider moral challenges of the era influenced the emergence of public theology far more than methodological and academic debates.¹⁰ Changes in social and personal norms and values, tensions in international relations and campaigns for equality and human rights, as well as revolution, around the globe all posed significant challenges to theology and the churches.

Another notion of public theology comes from D. Tracy, himself. He addressed the ‘three audiences’ of theology in terms of the academy, the church, and the public realm – the wider society. Many have sought to try and integrate the discourse that goes on in these seemingly ‘parallel universes’ and such might often be viewed as the core challenge for the sub-discipline of public theology today.

Indeed, Tracy’s approach was forming in his mind and indeed in print long before the appearance of *The Analogical Imagination*, as his earlier study from the 1970s, *Blessed Rage for Order* clearly demonstrates. Stackhouse himself acknowledges the parallel development of public theology by Tracy and in the Roman Catholic tradition, stretching back to John Courtney Murray, and he is indebted to this part of the tradition, speaking of the ‘religious’ public, the ‘political’ public, the ‘academic’ public – mirroring Tracy’s divisions, to which he then adds, the ‘economic’ public and ‘legal’ public.¹¹ To these, one might reasonably, with the later Stackhouse’s

⁸ Several other sources credit another of Marty’s 1974 publications with being the first time the term was seen in print – i.e. M.E. MARTY, *Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion*, in R.E. RICHEY - D.G. JONES (edd), *American Civil Religion*, New York 1974, pp. 139-157, at p. 148. See, also Marty’s later works, *The Public Church*, New York 1981, and *The One and the Many*, Cambridge 2001. The broader US context of these debates is sketched by S.M. TIPTON, *Civil Religion*, in the section on ‘Public Theologies and Political Culture’ of G. LADEMANN - L. LEÓN (edd), *Religion and American Cultures: an Encyclopedia of Traditions, Diversity and Popular Expressions*, I, pp. 481-487.

⁹ E.g., W. HERBERG, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew – An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (1955), reviewed edition, Garden City (NY) 1960.

¹⁰ A brief yet useful bibliography, featuring a number of the pioneering figures in the emergence of public theology in the United States (from a variety of perspectives) appears in V. ANDERSON, *Pragmatic Theology: Negotiating the Intersections of an American Philosophy of Religion and Public Theology*, Albany (NY) 1998, pp. 150-151, note 1 and the bibliography to this volume in general. See, also, M. STACKHOUSE, *Globalization and Grace*, especially p. 79, n. 3, and pp. 86-95, and, in particular, pp. 86, n. 10, 92 and, also, 101, n. 33.

¹¹ M. STACKHOUSE, *Public Theology and Ethical Judgment*. See, also a collection of Murray’s writings, J.C. MURRAY, *Bridging the Sacred and the Secular: Selecting Writings of John Courtney Murray*, Georgetown (TX) 1994; R. MCELROY, *The Search for an American Public Theology: The Contribution of John Courtney Murray*, New York 1989; L. HOOPER, *The Ethics of Discourse: The Social Philosophy of John Courtney Murray*, Georgetown (TX) 1986; M. EASTHAM, *The Church and the Public Forum: John Courtney Murray’s Method*, in «Stimulus», XIII (November 2005), 4, pp. 2-6,

approval, append the notion of a 'global' public. Speaking of the first five publics, Stackhouse believes each is both «decisive for human rights' and 'shaped by theological influences».¹² Stackhouse sees the main task of public theology as resistance against the rejection of the role of religion and theology in civil society, particularly those posed by 'modernity' and the Enlightenment period – i.e., to my mind, a form of 'doing theology when it seems that nobody is listening'.

As we shall see, the United States context offered 'fertile soil' for the development of public theology, although this is not to say that forms of theology in relation to the public realm did not blossom elsewhere. An example from a European 'continental' perspective, comes from the Dutch scholar, Gerrit G. de Kruijf. He has noted that Europeans traditionally did not distinguish between the roles of the church and of confessional theology in public life, with the church's contributions on public issues attracting attention both *ad intra* and *ad extra*, with theologians contributing to wider public debates without recourse to explicitly religious arguments. However, in the United States, he continues, the focus on the church as institution is less pronounced, «individual contributions to public debate based on religious arguments are made there frequently, and frankly».¹³ But, whilst agreeing with the thrust of the last remark, de Kruijf might appear wide off the mark in other respects.

The sense of the church as institution is, of course, something more alien to the United States *per se* except in the Roman Catholic church. De Kruijf thus appears to have generalised from his own local experience and applied this to the rest of Europe. But the Scottish experience alone would prove him wide of the mark here, while the Italian and Irish contexts require further study still. De Kruijf is more illuminating in his following remark:

«The call for a public theology is a challenge to address the moral issues of society, with an explicit use of confessional principles, not primarily to demonstrate the relevance of faith, but precisely to make a meaningful contribution to public debate».¹⁴

De Kruijf continues with a somewhat paradoxical summary of the early arguments of another prominent US public theologian, D. Hollenbach:

«Without the input of religious ideas, it is thought, society would be left totally to its formal proceedings. So the picture is this: just as theologians can express their individual concepts of the doctrine of reconciliation through the death of Christ, so they can be asked to give their views on sending troops for peace-operations in foreign countries, *basing their arguments on theological grounds*».¹⁵

also published in «Australian E-Journal of Theology», 7, (2006), http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_7/Eastham.htm.

¹² M. STACKHOUSE, *Human Rights and Public Theology*, p. 20.

¹³ G.G. DE KRUIJF, *The Challenge of a Public Theology*, in M.E. BRINKMAN et al. (edd), *Theology between Church, University, and Society*, Assen 2003, pp. 139-148, at p. 139.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 139-40.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

The last point is fairly unproblematic vis-a-vis public theology. But the first point, as well as the choice of doctrine, seems not to fit with the sentiment of the latter argument. First, it overlooks that Christian faith and theology are not primarily about individual salvation at all but rather grounded in a social doctrine of God which gives rise to a social ethos for human living. Second, the juxtaposition of these statements implies that Christianity is only a latecomer adding to the corpus of social ethics and discernment concerning the societal and political challenges. This is something which the evidence disproves in abundance.

For now, I will leave aside the fact that this is not actually what Hollenbach argues in the essay in question and is certainly not what the development of his ideas since 1976 have demonstrated.¹⁶

Nonetheless, de Kruijf offers, instead, an alternative definition to add to our range of examples:

«the call for a public theology is a call to attempt to illuminate the relation between one's confession and one's stance regarding a moral problem in society. With this broader definition we are able to include more modest models of ethical argumentation than Hollenbach's 'thick' ones».¹⁷

Yet his eventual conclusion seems not altogether different from the approach of Hollenbach, itself, viz., «theological ethics in the contemporary Western context should always be engaged in two movements: it should concentrate on the identity of Christian life in the midst of a pluralistic society, and it should take initiatives to find and formulate consensus and compromise on the basis of the moral tradition of society expressed in its laws».¹⁸ Given that Hollenbach describes John Courtney Murray's public philosophy as «primarily a universe of moral discourse»,¹⁹ we know that, aside from the supplanting of the word 'philosophy' with that of 'theology' (one of the chief purposes of Hollenbach's own analysis), de Kruijf is not really stating anything especially new.

M. Stackhouse, himself, linked public theology to the «genealogy of modernity»,²⁰ although focusing more upon the genealogy of the epistemological tensions surrounding modernity.²¹ Elsewhere, I have myself charted the fortunes of ecclesiology in the era moving from modernity to postmodernity and beyond but I think enough time has now passed to justify spending some time reflecting upon the genealogy of public theology in its own right.

¹⁶ Even without recourse to D. HOLLENBACH's later and more recent works (such as *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge 2002), this is evident from this early article.

¹⁷ G.G. DE KRUIJF, *The Challenge of a Public Theology*, p. 140.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ D. HOLLENBACH, *Public Theology in America: Some Questions for Catholicism after John Courtney Murray*, in «Theological Studies», 37 (1976), pp. 290-303, at p. 296.

²⁰ M. STACKHOUSE, *Human Rights and Public Theology*, p. 19. Again, see Stackhouse's fuller account of the background of public theology in M. STACKHOUSE (ed), *Globalization and Grace*, New York - London 2007, especially pp. 77-116.

²¹ Although in *Globalization and Grace* we are also offered a 'genealogy of globalization'.

3. *A genealogical reflection on public theology*²²

a. Early forms

We can trace an engagement with the analogous forms of ‘public life’ to the New Testament itself. Jesus spoke in public places and addressed the public and social contexts and leaders of his day. Scholars of Christian origins have long charted the emergence of Christianity as a Jewish renewal movement, with this renewal being of the community and wider society as much as of the faith. The more obvious examples here would include the saying ‘render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and to God that which is God’s’ and, of course the ethical and social values and virtues laid down in the parable of the sheep and goats, and the Sermon on the Mount (or Plain).

The Acts contains many instances of such engagement, from the primitive communism of the earliest church to the beginnings of the diaconate and Paul’s speech on the Areopagus. And the Epistles and the Book of Revelation offer us similar evidence of Christianity and Christian theology’s engagement with and immersion in the wider public arena from the outset and this despite (or even because of) the eschatological context in which these texts were shaped. Both the gospels and the Epistles demonstrate just how frequently the *Sitz im Leben* of the texts lies in an encounter with the ‘public arena’.

In fact, while the early church did not quite posit itself right at the heart of the public square, i.e., the public meeting place of the agora (for various reasons – cultural, safety, and astuteness – as Paul’s letter to the Romans and especially the much misunderstood chapter 13, illustrates so well), the earliest Christians in fact went one stage further in adopting the term and concept (and related practices) from public discourse that would give the church its very name – *Ecclesia*. Thus the origins of the church itself owe much to what might be called a public theology or theology of public life. Thus ecclesiology obviously cannot be divorced from political implications pertaining to the commonwealth of the entire society, for the original ‘ecclesia’ was convened to address these very concerns. The choice of this term that signifies the ‘calling out’ of citizens to attend to public affairs means that the public dimensions of ecclesial being and theology are there from the earliest times. In the ancient world, discourse about the ‘polis’, the political, was synonymous with discourse about what

²² In what follows, one cannot hope to claim comprehensiveness in a historical and certainly not a geographical sense. The majority of this reflection concerns the Christian tradition in the ‘west’ and by the mid-late modern period, given the growth in population and communication, we cannot even seek to be comprehensive in the Anglophone world alone. Therefore representative examples are simply touched upon to offer a brief portrait of the type and range of engagements with the public realm from the ecclesial and theological perspectives. For those other parts of the world and church that have a still greater and longer story to tell, I hope others will help expand upon this genealogy in due course.

would later be termed the ‘social’ in a distinct sense. The notion of the church being understood as a ‘society’ would enter ecclesial discourse in a number of forms over the centuries (obviously in the modern era, the two-way influence would be somewhat accentuated here). That political philosophy and social philosophy are ultimately concerned with one and the same thing is often lost on some political theorists and indeed politicians.

This inescapable relation with and immersion in public life continued as the church grew and developed in various directions. One might say the particular politicisation that took place when Christianity became the religion of the Empire under Constantine was amongst the worst forms of negative developments in relations between the church and theology and public life. Theology was put to the service of much justification of public and political ways, and means thereafter. Augustine’s *City of God* – a text very much back in vogue in recent years²³ – is a classical text addressing the context of rapid decline in the fortunes of the public authorities and thus an attempt to try, and act as a corrective to the more positive theological celebrations of those same powers and institutions from previous years. Less constructive forms of public theology of course continued as a tradition in the church.

Let us not forget that the classical sources of Latin and Greek as well as Jewish thought shaped the formation, development, and consolidation of Christian theology and particularly ecclesiological and moral discourse from the earliest times, so we might say, public theology was inevitable from the very beginning, whatever strained exegesis or interpretations of later tradition might follow. Stackhouse has commented upon this analogous form of discourse and practice to public theology, from the Patristic period, and is worth citing here at length,

«In most current scholarship, it is recognized that although the term [public theology] is new, the basic effort to develop what the term implies is not. It is well known that Christians, Jews, and, later, Muslims in the Middle East and in the areas around the Mediterranean Sea combined the religious insight of the biblical traditions with the philosophical analysis of the Greeks and the legal theories of the Romans to form the basic assumptions on which the West developed. These assumptions became more important as it became clear that the ancient civilization was, for all its power and glory, beset by a metaphysical-moral disease. The classical, pagan world could not explain its own basis. For all the valid wisdom it contained in many areas, it could finally not hold thought or life together. It could not inspire the people to creative living, guide the leaders to the reasonable practice of justice, or explain why things were the way they were. For Christians, the ‘Fathers of the Church’ stand among the heroes of faith for their formation of a kind of thought, which we now call public theology, that saw in certain key religious insights the capacity to give new grounding and dimension to the most profound resources of philosophy and thereby also to the scientific, social, and legal reflection of their day. In short, they provided a moral and spiritual inner architecture to the emerging, complex civilization».²⁴

²³ E.g. E. GREGORY, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*, Chicago (IL) 2008, and C. MATHEWES, *A Theology of Public Life*, Cambridge 2007.

²⁴ M. STACKHOUSE, *Public Theology and Ethical Judgment*, p. 167.

Even the emergence of the monastic movement can be seen as both a negative and positive form of public theology. The former in the sense of a rejection of the public realm, a pessimistic assessment of the prospects for the redemption of the world and hence a world-renouncing approach. And yet, in its eventual forms of the social and political application of theology, offering education, healthcare, and political institutions and counsel, the monastic ways of life brought much to the wider social and public contexts.

And so we could go on – from Pope Gelasius I (d. 496, whose *Duo sunt* helped establish the ‘two powers’ doctrine) to Charlemagne (742-814), in whose reign the public authorities gained the upper hand over the church, to the Gregorian reforms where the fortunes were reversed.²⁵

The emergence of Canon law as a specific discipline and the further development of scholasticism and particularly the emergence of a distinctive theological discourse concerning natural law offered a whole new dimension to the theological and ecclesial engagements with the matters of what used to be called the *Res publica* before Rome’s decline and which continued to be called *politeia*. And the perennial debates about the right ordering of relations between the church and ‘state’ preoccupied much discourse in this period, once again bringing theology to the heart of the ‘public square’.

The greater the church’s power became in the secular realm, the more blurred the boundaries between the political and the theological – particularly ecclesiological – modes of discourse became. What today is called political philosophy was once really a form of political theology too as theologians, utilising the ‘queen of the sciences’, employed theological resources to address public questions and challenges. Notable examples from this period, of course, are Marsilius of Padua (c. 1275-c. 1342), author of the 1324 work *Defensor pacis*, and William of Ockham (c. 1288 - c. 1348), both linked to a movement which centred around issues at the heart of public theology – conciliarism. The struggles between the temporal and ecclesiastical powers came to a head perhaps with the raging debates concerning conciliarism, a controversy ignited anew by Philip the Fair’s (1268-1314) attempt to tax French clergy and Pope Boniface VIII’s (1235-1303) fierce opposition in *Unam Sanctum*, which asserted that without submission to the Roman Pontiff, salvation itself was impossible. During the fourteenth century, with the Papacy uprooted to Avignon, and the Great Schism that followed, one might say public theologians were forced to work overtime on all sides until the Council of Constance (1414-1418) and then the Council of Basel (1431-1449) sought to restore good order through the affirmation of conciliarism that lasted only until Pope Julius II’s refutation of the doctrine. While Cardinal de Torquemada (1388-1468) and, later,

²⁵ On the developments in the church vis-a-vis the ‘public’ realm in the Constantinian, Gregorian and later medieval (including Conciliarist) periods, see R. HAIGHT, *Christian Community in History*, I: *Historical Ecclesiology*, London - New York 2004.

Cardinal Cajetan (1469-1534) both sought to uphold the supremacy of the Papacy, Jean Gerson (1363-1429) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) sought to offer modified forms of conciliarism.²⁶

Stepping back in history a little, the prominent role played in the conciliarist debates by the Franciscans shows that we must include approaches and movements which began as more marginal approaches trying to put the gospel into practice in a worldly context and not least of all in a church gone seriously awry. Hence the emergence of movements of church renewal and social activism such as the Franciscans and the Poor Clares and also other radical movements with strongly 'political' and public messages, which have been with the Christian church from its earliest times also - this too is 'public theology'.

One might also consider lesser known figures such as Margery Kempe (c. 1373 - post 1438) to have been something of a public theologian, because of the issues she was concerned with and the influential people within the church and wider public life that she sought out to converse with. Perhaps above all else, she suffered for her attempts, as a woman, to bring, literally, faith and theology into the public square and to proclaim it. Her interlocutor, Julian of Norwich (1342-c. 1416), also offered a universalist and compassionate theology in the face of a tragic plague and public unrest, and also of unsophisticated 'public' theologies of divine retribution.

Ignatius Loyola, who formed the Society of Jesus, literally to exercise a profound influence in the wider societal and public realms. Jesuits are renowned for their numerous works in the public realm – educational, social, theological, philosophical, scientific, economical, and political, Equally the remarkable Mary Ward (1585-1645) of Yorkshire, England who, mirroring the Jesuit ideal and equally dedicated to the practical expression of faith and theology alike, established the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary/Loreto sisters (recently renamed the Congregatio Jesus). She is another great founder who showed remarkable courage in a time when certain forms of public theology (i.e. Roman Catholic) were punishable by death. That this order would remain active in wider public life as opposed to the Tridentine injunction that women's orders should be cloistered, was purely down to her own determination.

The founders of various religious orders and those who came to follow their call have played an especially important role in trying to ensure the gospel continues to have a positive influence upon events and affairs in the public realm. Often their efforts have been to counter the policies of ecclesiastical authorities at the time, right to the highest level. Or, in the case of the Dominican, Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), strongly urging courage on the part of a pope (Gregory XI) in the face of external 'public'

²⁶ On conciliarism, see the various works of F. OAKLEY, especially *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church 1300-1870*, Oxford 2003.

pressures. Indeed, Catherine received a vision ordering her to pursue the path of a more public and practical, as opposed to cloistered, theology. Catherine would thereafter play an important role in social and political affairs, fearlessly telling political leaders what they ought and ought not to do in her pursuit of peace and harmony.

Of course, some of these heroic religious orders have also played a less positive role in the public use and abuse of theology, as the Dominican enthusiasm for much of the work of the Inquisition illustrates. And being too bound up with the powers of the day has obviously led the public manifestations of theology astray in every age. For example, for several centuries, the Medici family would sponsor and its members themselves represent 'public theology' not only in some of its most developed and enlightening but also in its most ugly and negative forms.

Returning to the thirteenth-century, perhaps the figure of Ramon Llull (1232-1315) deserves some mention. His work crossed the boundaries of theology and philosophy, and also the boundaries of geography, cultures, and faiths, although the aim of his form of public theology was the conversion of Muslims. Other figures such as Erasmus (1466 or 1469-1536) traversed the various public spaces in Europe and the debates pertaining to them. His *Praise of Folly* is a text charged as much with political as ecclesiastical satire in effect. His thoughts on social and educational reform are less well debated, but no less significant for that, and obviously his perspectives on liberty and tolerance have wider implications beyond the ecclesiastical realm as well. Erasmus had as much advice for civil magistrates as for popes, bishops, priests and religious.

b. Public theology in the confessional age

The various waves of 'reformation' across Europe – from the figure of Jan Hus in Bohemia (c. 1372-1415) and the Hussites after him, to the later reformation movements – were charged with political tension and social implications from the outset and changed the political, social, and of course theological and ecclesiastical landscape forever. But Hus met his own fate, one might say, because of the triumph of a very negative and expedient form of political theology. Martin Luther (1483-1546) and others learned from these many important lessons. Each of the great Protestant reformers, from Luther to John Calvin (1509- 1564) to Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), sought to experiment with new forms of how religion and theology should relate to wider society and to the 'public' and civic realm in particular. R. Haight has argued that the situation following Luther demonstrated that there was now also a plurality of «conceptions of what an authentic church was»²⁷ – thus illustrating fundamental changes in the

²⁷ R. HAIGHT, *Christian Community in History, II: Comparative Ecclesiology*, London - New York 2005, p. 81.

conception of the nature of the church itself. Haight offers the observation that in such a pluralistic situation, the understanding and actual character of the relationship between the church and the world will inevitably undergo change so that the principle of 'a particular and dynamic relationship to the world' is seen as being a key element of any particular ecclesial identity.

In the work of John Calvin, who termed the church the 'Society of Christ', we have an exemplary case of the (theological) principle of incarnation as that which defines and supports the role of the church in human history.²⁸ From Calvin ecclesiology also gains a «profound theological warrant in the trinitarian summary of God's dealing with humankind in history».²⁹ On church-world relations, Calvin's ecclesiology weds theological and organisational factors into what Haight has described as «a powerful statement of the church's involvement in society» that offers abiding value for markedly different contexts, as well.³⁰

In the Anglican tradition, the origins of the English Reformation lie in a very public series of encounters between ecclesiastical and temporal power and between theology, and the political and civic realm. The transition from the church in England to a state Church of England, continued to hold these seemingly separate spheres in close proximity and Richard Hooker's (1554-1600) *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* perhaps offers the most representative attempt at a constructive 'public theology' from this period. Hooker would influence many, not least of all the political philosophy of John Locke (1632-1704).

In later times, the free churches and non-conformist traditions gave rise to new challenges and perspectives in matters of relations between theology and public life and the place, and role and influence of the church in the wider society. The Baptist pioneer, Thomas Helwys (c. 1575- c. 1616), penned the first call for religious liberty in print and the Quaker, James Nayler (1618-1660) warned political leaders against bad governance. The Levellers and Gerard Winstanley (1609-1676) offer additional examples of the radical tradition in England, while John Woolman (1720-72) campaigned against slavery vociferously long before any of the more well known abolitionists appeared on the scene.

Those seeking freedom from religious intolerance and persecution, would seek a new beginning in the so-called 'new world' and the Pilgrim fathers and subsequent generations of migrants would embark upon the great social experiment that became the United States of America and where no religion was to be privileged and yet faith would remain steadfastly part and parcel of public and private life for many generations to come. Alongside the obvious clashes across Europe that were mirrored in the emigrant communities, perhaps these pilgrim's realisation that the

²⁸ See, E. VAN DER BORGH - G. MANNION (edd), *The Society of Christ: Perspectives on Calvin's Ecclesiology*, forthcoming, 2010.

²⁹ R. HAIGHT, *Christian Community in History*, II, p. 143.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

world they had found was neither new or without religion impressed these instinctive virtues of tolerance and pluralism upon their foundational social and political norms and values.

Indeed, the striking thing about these earlier periods of history, from the medieval to the post-reformation eras, is the inter-disciplinary nature of so much theological discourse and, in turn, how theologically informed, so much public discourse actually was.³¹

Stepping backwards in time once again, negative public theology has continued as a tradition in the church – even if we do not dwell long on figures such as Julius II (1443-1513) or Machiavelli (1469-1527). The interplay between theology and public life only grew, as opposed to shrinking in the Renaissance period.³² Machiavelli was far from being the only influential person from this period who could still hear the Apocalyptic sermons of the Dominican Savonarola (1452-1498, himself the theocratic ‘ruler’ of Florence for a time). When asked what inspired his painting of the Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel, an elderly Michelangelo recounted those very same sermons.

With the imperial expansion by European powers into the ‘new world’ and other continents, the need for both negative and positive forms of public theology grew further still. The sense of a ‘law of nations’ is today discussed in political philosophy but was originally much the preoccupation of theologians would emerge from these struggles. Bartolomeo de las Casas (1484-1566) was a particular hero here in seeking to ensure theology placed a civilising influence upon the barbaric expansionism and greed of particular European states. He sought to ensure moral and social questions were not divorced from economic and crudely political ones.

Later theorists who could rightly be termed public theologians would include the more aggressive form of Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) – although the unsavoury ending of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) at Rome’s Campo de’ Fiori brings a very different and sombre meaning to the place of theology in the ‘public square’. With lamentable irony, Bruno’s statue stands today where he was burned, having been ‘handed over’ to the ‘secular’ authorities to carry out the dirty work of the church after his conviction on charges of heresy by the ‘Holy’ Inquisition.

More constructively remembered, are those contributions from the likes of Francisco de Vitoria (c. 1492-1546), Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), and Alberico Gentili (1552-1608), who are renowned as the founders of international law – of course one might equally say that they were first and foremost public theologians and laid further foundations for modern public theology. The Swiss theologian Thomas Erastus (1524-1583) gave

³¹ M. STACKHOUSE offers a similar observation in *Public Theology and Ethical Judgment*, pp. 170-177. See, also, M. STACKHOUSE, *Globalization and Grace*, pp. 81-100.

³² Just how much an influence theological discourse had upon Machiavelli, for example, is illustrated by C.J. NEDERMAN, *Amazing Grace: God, Fortune, and Free Will in Machiavelli’s Thought*, in «Journal of the History of Ideas», 60 (1999), pp. 617-638.

his name to a particularly influential doctrine of the separation of church and state during these turbulent times – although Erastianism was something that developed a great deal further from the thoughts of this scholar's own writings on the subject. Indeed, Grotius himself was one of those who pushed the ideas of Erastus still further.

Missionaries and religious movements and orders would continue to shape aspects of a 'public theology' as the modern era developed. For example, Martino Martini (1614-1661), who travelled to China and was eventually made a mandarin, so engrossed in the public affairs of his adopted country did he become. He played a prominent part in perhaps the first known attempt to defend a theology of inculturation in the 'Chinese Rites' affair (1655-1656).

These periods also illustrate how art and music have served as forms of 'public theology' of a different kind during the history of the church, and not simply those forms addressing spiritual and moral forms or even forms of a specifically addressed to the vanities of public life such as Holbein's *The Ambassadors* or the many of works of Bosch challenging the ecclesial and political leaders alike. Or, if one considers frescoes such as the *Ciclo dei Mesi* (the 'Cycle of the Months') in the Castello del Buonconsiglio in Trento, one sees how blurred the distinctions between the church and the full panorama of social, cultural, and political life truly were and such works of art were commissioned to emphasise this fact.

As we enter the middle-late modern periods, obviously we must simply restrict ourselves to fewer representative examples still. Less constructive forms of public theology continued to evolve as well from aspects of the Jesuits' involvement in European politics to Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642) to the struggles involving the Jansenists down to the bulwark against modernity erected in the papacy of Pius IX (b. 1792, pope from 1846, d. 1878). The French Revolution and, a century later, the German Kulturkampf marked a particular period when the public relevance and rights of faith and of theology would ruthlessly be challenged.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the march of the scientific worldview and an increasingly secularist approach to politics and philosophy, along with the emerging social sciences all led to particular challenges for the churches and theology alike, vis-a-vis wider public life. Some theological and ecclesial perspectives turned their back on the modern world but others sought to try and ensure that they remained a full player in the ebb and flow of the times. To mention but a few representative figures, the visionary Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855) – much misunderstood for being far too sympathetic to the 'public' realm by the church authorities of his day –, gave birth to a very positive tradition indeed. In England those such as Lord W. Wilberforce (1759-1833), S.T. Coleridge (1772-1834) and later F.D. Maurice (1805-1872) would ensure theological discourse played a major role in wider public debates, and in differing ways, the co-operative movement, which was born in the north of England and was fired by the

theological and ecclesial passions of a generation of Christian socialists. Then there were the likes of Lord Acton (1834-1902), who campaigned against a Catholicism that would take the church into further isolation from the world and the public realm. Advocating a more conciliarist line in dialogue with those such as Döllinger (1799-1890) in Germany he warned against the excesses of power, having in mind, primarily, not simply civic powers but the papacy itself. 'Catholic modernism', a movement essentially invented by its arch-critic, the then fortress-minded Vatican, contributed a distinctive form of public theology. Those labelled modernists, along with their sympathisers and collaborators were, more often than not, Catholics more involved in public life than many of their detractors.

c. Public theology in the 'Long' 20th century

As we move from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century the prevalence of contributions of 'public theology' from all around the globe grows to such an extent that we must abandon any possible hope to do justice to even a representative sampling of such here. Missionary initiatives must be included and indigenous responses to the same. Official, ecumenical, and grass roots movements would be included, as well as the various forms of the Christian socialist movement, the social gospel and modern Catholic social teaching. Pope Leo XIII (b. 1810, pope from 1878, d. 1903), delved into the concerns and challenges of what we now call public theology throughout his pontificate.³³

Indeed, one could say that modern Catholic social teaching arose out of the pressing need for a 'public theology' in challenging times. The studies of Leo XIII by scholars such as Charles Curran and John Courtney Murray have offered constructive pathways for the contributions of theology in the wider public sphere in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. But Catholic social teaching did not only influence wider debates, it was also influenced and shaped by them as well.

Elsewhere, we find a succession of Archbishops of Canterbury dealing with social issues from Frederick Temple (1821-1902) and onwards to his son William ((1881-1944), who embraced the social mission of the church wholeheartedly and also had to speak out for the Gospel in the dreadful circumstance of the Second World War. Irish bishops had to deal with a Catholic populace in a subject nation at the same time as a serious of movements for insurrection to bring about a change to this oppressive situation. In the United States, different churches were coming to terms with their own sense of differing identity from their European 'mother' churches. In Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania, the challenges were writ large as indigenous populations obviously entered successive

³³ J. Courtney Murray's own study of Leo XIII's 'public theology' has been admirably summarised by M. EASTHAM, *The Church and the Public Forum: John Courtney Murray's Method*.

generations of their Christian stories and social, political and economic challenges demanded attention to 'public theology' with relations across churches and with other faiths posing hugely significant questions also.

The Baptist, W. Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), was a leading pioneer in ensuring that the notion of the 'social gospel' developed into a movement for social change in the United States and beyond. Two ironies occur here – his proto 'public theology' would later earn him the ire of the so-called Christian ethicist S. Hauerwas for 'selling out' to the dreaded secular world, and, second, he must have had some influence upon his grandson, R. Rorty (1931-2007).

The twentieth century posed the starkest challenges yet to the churches in terms of how to preach and put the gospel into practice in a wider context. The challenges of two world wars, the rise of oppressive regimes and counter-evangelical values would plague this century from start to finish. And this far beyond the obvious examples of Nazi Germany, where the Confessing Church had to move away from some aspects of the Lutheran tradition concerning political theology (the Barmen Declaration of 1934 being what we might now term a 'classic text' of public theology), or Stalinist Russia where religion was either enslaved to the service of the state or ruthlessly oppressed.

In terms of theory, E. Troeltsch (1865-1923) and his classic *Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* charts the story of much of what we call public theology from a social scientific perspective.³⁴ In terms of practice, sacrifice and serious ethical-theological reflection in equal measure, the work of D. Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) offers a considerable legacy to the emergence of public theology.

The Niebuhr brothers (Helmut Richard, 1894-1962 and Karl Paul Reinhold, 1892-1971) are also two pioneers in the area of public discourse that would become public theology. The 'Christian realism' grounded in the social gospel that they sought to commend was a sensible forerunner of public theology in discerning how theology should be present in the public square. H.R. Niebuhr's classic study, *Christ and Culture* (1951), offers a variety of responses from within theology to the 'wider world'.

The rapid growth in population and industrialisation, and hence attendant exploitation meant that the Social Gospel movement in its various manifestations would find the challenges growing faster than the theologising could keep up for much of the twentieth century. The ecumenical movement realised the scope of these challenges early on – with the International Missionary Movement's nurturing of what became the Life and Work movement and the eventual birth of the World Council of Churches. Equally, the Faith and Order movement played a major role in the hard graft in 'public theology' in the ecumenical sphere. The Justice,

³⁴ E. TROELTSCH, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (1912), 2 voll., Engl. translation London 1931; New York 1960.

Peace and Integrity of Creation movement would eventually blossom from these beginnings. J.H. Oldham (1874-1969) was one of the key pioneers of those elements in the modern ecumenical movement which fed into the development of public theology. Oldham was the driving force behind the very significant 1937 Oxford Life and Work conference on «Church, Community and State» and he also composed the conference report with the telling title of «The Churches Survey their Task».³⁵

Although one might class as belonging to the genre of public theology those new forms of Vatican diplomacy which emerged in the twentieth century and resulted in new forms of concordats between the Vatican and other states, obviously of far greater significance is the continuing development of Catholic Social Teaching which sought to be responsive to the challenges of the century. So, for example, the pontificate of Pius XI (1857, pope from 1922, d. 1939) pursued an especially public agenda in *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), *Dilectissima Nobis* and *Mit Brennender Sorge* (1937). In 1938 he ordered a *Syllabus Against Racism* be issued and distributed to all Catholic universities. Such official Catholic contributions would continue down through a growing corpus of literature and reflection which was gathered together in 2005 in the Roman Catholic Church's *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

The notion of the 'common good' and how it might best be discerned would preoccupy much of this tradition in the twentieth century and, of course, is a concept that lends itself readily to wider questions of social justice, welfare and harmony than within the confines of one particular religious community. If we add other core principles from this tradition of social teaching, such as those of subsidiarity and socialisation, or in relation to the fair distribution of wealth and property, we can appreciate further ways in which Christian social thought has contributed to wider social, political and economic discussions in the twentieth century and beyond in various ways.

Obviously, the twentieth century was an epoch where social criticism became mainstream and the social and political sciences developed at a rapid pace beginning to exert their own influence upon theology and church policy and polity. Existentialism and Critical Theory would likewise shape the theological and philosophical formation of generations of theologians and church leaders, and grass roots activity alike.

For Roman Catholics, particular questions concerning how best to live out one's faith in the world, were met with responses from various lay movements from the different forms of Catholic action, to the Catholic Worker Movement, the Worker Priests' movement and Young Christian Workers' Movement (analogous movements in other churches also emerged), as well

³⁵ J.H. OLDHAM (ed), *The Churches Survey their Task: Report of the Oxford 1937 Conference on Church*, and *The Oxford Conference Official Report*, New York 1937, with a later edition appearing as *Foundations of Ecumenical Social Thought: the Oxford Conference Report*, Philadelphia (PA) 1966.

as from more conservative groups. It is worth singling out two figures who embody the spirit of such activism. They are radical co-founders of the Catholic Worker movement, Dorothy Day (1897-1980), who converted to Catholicism in 1927, and Peter Maurin (1877-1949) who nurtured the movement from being a newspaper on issues of workers' rights to taking direct action on behalf of those rights, launching advocacy campaigns and establishing communes which spread around the world.

Christian-Marxist dialogue became not simply a necessity in the second half of this century as much as a public theological declaration of common ground and values. John XXIII's (b. 1881, pope from 1958, d. 1963) and Paul VI's (b. 1897, pope from 1963, d. 1978) social encyclicals demonstrated just how much the church had learned from, as much as contributed to this great century of the turn to justice and human rights. Discerning the 'signs of the times' was John XXIII's great legacy to the church – this, alongside the dialogical imperative further underscored by Paul VI and the opening of the doors of the church, finally, to the modern world, were the true legacies of the Second Vatican Council.

John Paul II's (b. 1920, pope from 1978, d. 2005) devastating critique of capitalism and his outspoken remarks on a host of issues pertaining to the 'public domain' would have been impossible without so much of the foregoing work done by others in the borderlands between theology, faith and the 'public' sphere. Having lived only under oppressive public regimes in his adult life, and having been deeply immersed in the Christian political philosophy and personalist traditions of the twentieth century, John Paul II could not avoid speaking out on public issues. Yet there is the great tension here in that he addressed public issues relentlessly and encouraged a very public form of theology and church involvement in his native Poland, and yet in Latin America and elsewhere sought to dissuade priests and religious from taking an active role in politics and social administration and tried to rein in liberation theologies.

d. New theological engagements with public life

Although the term 'public theology' became part of the lexicon of theological and ecclesial thought and practice in the 1970s, it was essentially in the 1980s and 1990s that there gradually developed a more distinctive form of 'public theology' as a sub-branch of theological science, which built very much upon the above sources but also practical theology which emerged as another sub-discipline in its own right during the same period. Indeed many of the pioneers of explicit practical theology were the very same pioneers in public theology.

The various forms of Christian social activism, with its own very long history, also reached something of a 'golden age' during this period. Additional teaching documents played a part as well, such as the US Catholic Bishops' statements on nuclear weapons and economic justice, both build-

ing on the examples of other bishops' conferences in the late 1960s and 1970s such as CELAM, the Latin American Bishops' conference.

In places such as South Africa, Ireland, the Philippines and across Latin America again, the realities of social and political struggles demanded nothing less than a fearless public theology. In El Salvador in the 1980s, theology was all too public as the martyrs of the University of Central America, San Salvador, six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter, paid the ultimate price in 1989 for articulating a faith that does justice.³⁶ In Brasil in 2005, Sister Dorothy Stang paid the same price for her defence of the integrity of the Amazon and its peoples.

And as government after government lurched to the right from the late 1970s onwards, so, also, were churches called to resist the social and human costs of the policies of neo-liberal economics and the rapidly emerging forces of globalization. The clash between the Church of England and British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher over the Anglican Report, *Faith in the City*, was a prime example of how public theology can penetrate to the heart of the matter in a wider secular society. Not that Anglican bishops in Britain faced imprisonment. But in many other parts of the world, church activists, leaders and theologians risked and suffered exactly that and much worse, such as South Africa's Steve Biko (1946-1977). And, of course, moral, political, liberationist and feminist theologians were silenced in differing but also painful ways by the authorities of the Roman Catholic church for being far too 'public oriented' in their theologising.

By the 1990s, the fight against the dehumanising forces of globalisation perhaps became the main issue in the realm of public theology.³⁷ And new generations of Christian charities and NGOs, which had begun to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s, were also putting theology into public practice in many different ways.

What we have discussed in the genealogy thus far entails approaches that were essentially public theology in all but name.

Instead of charting the many works in public theology that have been explicitly identified as such in the last twenty years or so, we will propose here a typology of those approaches, before moving on to consider some of public theology's central themes and methodological debates today.

³⁶ The leader of this Jesuit community, Ignatio Ellacuría, offers perhaps a further insight in the nature of public theology with his famous statement that 'The struggle against injustice and the pursuit of truth cannot be separated nor can one work for one independent of the other'. This massacre followed the earlier murders, in 1980 of an Ursuline sister (D. Kazel) and a lay missionary, J. Donovan, two Maryknoll Sisters (M. Clarke and I. Ford). Archbishop O. Romero (b. 1917) was murdered that same year.

³⁷ Though it must also be said that, as in many other areas of theology, the focus in the United States in public theology remained nonetheless a very 'insular' approach towards issues of what public theology meant in and for the USA.

4. *The decades of explicit public theology*

I believe that, in particular, ‘public theology’ as a sub-discipline in its own right, emerged as one way in which the church’s ecclesiology and ethics alike could be understood and applied in secular societies. We can say that ‘public theology’ came into its own in the second half of the twentieth century. The continued development of Catholic Social teaching and social ethics, and ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue facilitated this (especially, after WWII and Vatican II). Of course wider ethical questions and the church’s contribution to discourse about such challenges were also very much part of the picture. Issues such as poverty, debt, war and conflict, nuclear weapons, birth control, famine and the emerging bioethical and environmental challenges all increased the discourse between church, theology and wider societies and other disciplines.

I think that, in addition to ethical issues, ecclesiological developments have played as great a part in helping public theology come into being and in ensuring that it develops in line with the challenges that need to be faced in today’s world. All of this has been aided by what Roger Haight has identified as the most significant area of ‘Twentieth Century Ecclesiology’, which is characterised by Haight as being most distinctive in the «growing consciousness, appreciation and organization of pluralism»,³⁸ a shift in the understanding of the church’s relation to the world and the entire geographical and existential world now increasingly «becomes the horizon for understanding the church».³⁹

But where does one draw the line with regard to the beginning of explicit public theology? For example, Edward Schillebeeckx was one of several who sought to offer a new model for a theology of correlation. Gregory Baum’s work, crossing the boundaries of systematic, ecclesiological and moral theology, as well as those of the social and psychological sciences, has moved increasingly in the direction of the public arena, with much of his recent effort addressing injustice and ethnic tensions in the Canadian context. Johan Baptist Metz’s pioneering political theology has helped pave the way for forms of public theology in the German context and beyond. Are these, also, ‘public theologians’? Analogous developments obviously have taken place in Asia and Latin America where the tradition of public theology was much more established already in the range of liberationist and contextual theological perspectives.⁴⁰ And where do political theology and practical theology end and where does a distinctive public theology begin?

Even before the 1970s theology played a significant role in explicitly public discourse. This growing trend, epitomised by those such as John

³⁸ R. HAIGHT, *Christian Community in History*, II, p. 368.

³⁹ *Ibidem*. W. STORRAR also locates the most pressing challenges for the church and theology today in the global context, cfr. *2007: A Kairos Moment for Public Theology*, especially pp. 24-25.

⁴⁰ Indeed, the South African context might be perceived in a similar fashion.

Courtney Murray (1904-1967), was perhaps especially decisive for the later formation of public theology, as was the influence of the USA's distinctive constitutional arrangements with regard to the place of religion in that society.⁴¹ John Coleman has therefore listed Murray alongside Orestes Brownson (1803-1876) and John A. Ryan (1865-1945) as pioneering Catholic public theologians in the United States.⁴² Theologians, «because their intellectual work drew consciously from the wellsprings of Christian theological tradition»⁴³ and «'public' theologians because their concerns emerged from the life of the *polis* – civil liberty, economic justice, Church-state relationships etc».⁴⁴ Perhaps most importantly «their public theologies also helped to shape the general discussion in society of some of the most important moral and political issues of their day».⁴⁵

When speaking of 'public philosophy' as opposed to public theology, Murray tried to translate and bring the values of that faith to a wider society in order to make a positive contribution to the moral and social challenges of the USA. At the same time he was trying to allay protestant suspicions of the Catholic church while seeking to defend the right of Roman Catholicism to be a distinctive community in the wider society as well as resisting secularising tendencies to relegate religion to being a concern of the 'private' sphere alone.⁴⁶ Murray was bringing the particular American questions and debates into a fruitful exchange with the different challenges for theology in the public square in 1960's Europe, Latin America, Asia and Oceania alike.

M. Marty and D. Tracy, building on the work of Reinhold Niebuhr and John Courtney Murray have been the leading pioneers in this explicit wave of development. After them come the likes of D. Forrester, R. Preston (1913-2001, famous for developing further the theory of 'middle axioms'), W. Storrar, and others in the UK. In the US context, as well as the prevalent work of Stackhouse, the names of R. Benne, L. Cady, K. Himes,

⁴¹ Of course there is something to be said for the fact in the USA, the notion of a separate 'public' theology aside from other theology was possible in a way in which it would simply not have been an issue elsewhere (notwithstanding our critique of de Kruijf, above).

⁴² J. COLEMAN, *Vision and Praxis in American Theology: Orestes Brownson, John A. Ryan, and John Courtney Murray*, in «Theological Studies», 37 (1976), pp. 3-40.

⁴³ In the words of D. HOLLENBACH (whose own study is something of a response to and development of Coleman's own essay), *Public Theology in America*, p. 290.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 292. Crucially, Brownson, especially, and Murray, also, were led to believe that a form of socialism was where their theologically-informed reflection took them in determining the most just form of societal organisation.

⁴⁶ Cfr. D. HOLLENBACH, *Public Theology in America*, pp. 292-293. Perhaps one lasting legacy of this 'integrationist' approach is that, in most Roman Catholic churches in the United States, the US flag is seen on one side of the altar, with the flag of Vatican City (seen as the 'papal flag') on the other. This is quite a surprise and somewhat disconcerting to Roman Catholic visitors from numerous other countries. Possibly the precedent of the Union Jack in English churches gives some historical background here. One church in Chicago in recent times has overcome this dilemma by including a multitude of flags from nations all over the world, something more in tune with the New Testament message and the opening line and title of Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.

M. Himes, D. Hollenbach, P. Palmer and R. Thiemann are usually mentioned as pioneers in public theology.⁴⁷ From J. De Gruchy to N. Koopman and numerous fellow collaborators in South Africa, and on to scholars shaping a public theology for the Oceanic context such as C. Pearson and J. Haire. And while there is less explicitly identified 'Feminist Public Theology' perhaps not least of all because the concerns of so much feminist discourse are already focused upon the wider public arena, D. Sölle (1929-2003), R. Radford Ruether, and L. Sowle Cahill have all helped to offer particular contributions to how theology should relate to the public realm in this period. People such as E. Graham, heavily influenced by Preston, would eventually begin to shape forms of public theology further influenced by considerable feminist input and perspectives.⁴⁸

This development of an ever more explicit and diversified public theology in various contexts lead to the 2007 launch of an *International Journal of Public Theology*.⁴⁹

By the 1990s at the height of neo-liberalism/neo-conservatism with its Christian forms and the emergence of neo-exclusivism, attitudes began to harden, with correlation becoming a difficult concept. By the twenty-first century, many contributions to public theology are driven by an exclusivistic and uni-directional understanding of church and theology: the 'world' and the church are separate and this division is accentuated. The emphasis is placed upon what the church and theology can give to the world and not vice versa: one finds this line of thinking in a range of thinkers from S. Hauerwas to J. Milbank to G. D'Costa, W.T. Cavanaugh⁵⁰ to D.S. Long,⁵¹ or, in a different form, the late 'Theocon', R.J. Neuhaus (1936-2009) and M. Novak and it is there throughout the theology of J. Ratzinger and appeared in both his first two encyclicals as Benedict XVI. Hauerwas' influential book with W.H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, appeared in 1989, the year of the demonstrations that were ruthlessly crushed in Tiananmen Square and the year that the Berlin Wall came down. The world was entering into a period where some fled

⁴⁷ E.g., cfr. M. DOAK, *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ In fact, for many feminist scholars, the debates about public theology have been primarily an ecclesiological debate in an explicit fashion for quite some time, cfr. R.P. CARBINE, *Ekklesial Work: Toward A Feminist Public Theology*, in «Harvard Theological Review», 99 (2006), 4, pp. 433-455. Karen Guth is also currently undertaking work in this area. See, also, E. GRAHAM - A. ROWLANDS (edd), *Pathways to the Public Square: Pratical Theology in an Age of Pluralism*, London 2005.

⁴⁹ Offering another definition, this journal's editorial notes states that «Public theology is the result of the growing need for theology to interact with public issues of contemporary society. It seeks to engage in dialogue with different academic disciplines such as politics, economics, cultural studies, religious studies, as well as with spirituality, globalization and society in general».

⁵⁰ Although he has fluctuated theologically and politically, W.T. CAVANAUGH's *Theopolitical Imagination*, London - New York 2002, certainly belongs in the neo-exclusivist camp of approaches to theology and public life. A useful discussion, in relation to our broader concerns and purposes here, is R.S. ROSENBERG, *The Catholic Imagination and Modernity: William Cavanaugh's Theopolitical Imagination and Charles Taylor's Modern Social Imagination*, in «Heythrop Journal», 48 (2007), 6, pp. 911-931.

⁵¹ E.g. D.S. LONG, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market*, London 2000.

to the extremes, whilst others sought to build bridges. Theology mirrored these developments, again illustrating how public life impacts ecclesial life and discourse to as great extent.

5. *Divergent pathways*

Something of a previously emergent consensus articulated by people such as David Tracy that theology (and hence the churches) could address and co-exist with differing 'audiences' (and hence contexts) has been dissipated. Those earlier visions of the church playing a full role in the wider world in partnership with others was not allowed to come to full fruition. Today perhaps one of the few things differing schools of thought agree upon is that the church faces new and particular challenges in a postmodern era. But a great gulf exists between them with regard to *how* they believe theology and the church should respond to these challenges.

Furthermore, many of those seeking to discern the role of 'theology in the public square' today appear to be privileging the wisdom and traditions of the church over and against what they perceive to be 'outside' the church and in 'the world'. Many ecclesiological approaches today entail a church that deems itself to be 'alienated' from the world that, paradoxically, Christians understand as God's own creation. The phenomenon of neo-exclusivism⁵² has taken hold in many parts of the church and the churches.

This all has an impact upon how and whether the church can influence moral, social, political and economic debates in that wider world and how, why and whether the church can contribute to moral discourse in pluralist and secular societies. Frequently, stereotypical portrayals of Christian contributions to such debates portray the churches as offering only conservative and backward looking perspectives that hamper 'development' and 'advancement'. Some Christian approaches to social and ethical issues have indeed sought to lecture the 'world without' and to offer the Christian narrative and 'tradition' (understood in the singular) as the only solution to the contemporary ills of the world.

The method I would seek to outline here could not entertain such an approach as being in tune with the heart of the Christian moral and ecclesiological traditions themselves but seeks instead an approach whereby Christian voices in pluralist societies are neither rubbished nor ignored, but can make genuine and yet no less critical contributions to the pressing moral, social, political and economic debates of these times.

What unites those more conservative approaches is a certain debt to a particular brand of neo-Augustinianism, a pessimistic view of the 'world' beyond the church and, for many, a disdain for the 'political' and anything

⁵² See G. MANNION, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in our Times*, Collegeville (PA) 2007, especially chapters 1-4.

that vaguely resembles left wing approaches. Thus many speak of ‘public’ theology to avoid the ideological connotations of ‘political theology’.

Some of these approaches also prefer to focus not so much on public theology but ‘theology in/and/of public life’. In the literature of more recent times, public life appears to represent the ‘civic’ domain and hence issues that pertain to government, governance, law, justice and so on are brought together here, risking being a ‘sanitised’ (by which I mean a ‘de-politicised’ and ‘de-ideologised’) Anglo-Saxon take on liberation and political theology (perhaps especially so in those UK theologians who exhibit neo-exclusivist tendencies).

But for many others, including myself, the term public theology embraces the key challenges of the role the churches can and should be playing in today’s increasingly secular and pluralistic societies, bringing together questions of ecclesiology, mission, ethics, social teaching and so on, and methods from liberation to political to feminist and ecological, as well as practical theological approaches.⁵³ The notion of a uni-directional understanding of theological discourse is alien to such approaches.

6. *A Typology of contemporary public theologies*

It is with the foregoing in mind that the typology of the multiple approaches in public theology I will propose here is thus determined by respective ecclesiological perspectives and, more specifically, positions adopted on the church-world, and even nature-grace relationship.

The first type we can label is the defensive approach, with its proponents trying to offer an argument that theology and religion continue to have relevance in the wider public sphere. Some proponents of this approach are essentially open to the world but perplexed and frustrated by the antipathy towards the faith and church exhibited by individuals and groups in that world. But others go a step further and this brings us to our second typology.

This approach we might call the ‘reactionary’ stance where ‘battle lines’ are drawn between the ‘secular’ world and that of theology/faith/church. The social, philosophical, scientific and cultural aspects of the world beyond the church are seen as insufficient for humanity and hence theology has to act as a corrective to this ‘fallen’ world.

The third approach is perhaps best described as integrationist. It essentially wishes to ensure that the church, theology and Christian life can carry on with their own business and also be free to interject into public debates of particular relevance to Christian teachings, when the occasion arises.

⁵³ James F. Keenan’s notion of Catholic Theological Ethics in the world church belongs here also.

The fourth approach is pluralist in orientation. Critics believe that some elements of faith can be in danger of being sacrificed for the sake of the pluralist ideal. But those who pursue this approach would reject such a claim, believing that faith demands a pluralist outlook. They thus seek to bring to bear the value of Christian symbols and language to discourse in the public arena, advocating a public theology both ‘fully theological’ and ‘fully public’.⁵⁴

The fifth and final approach is a further development of the pluralist outlook. It could be labelled as analogical, pluralist-constructive, dialogical, or indeed (particularly for an intra-Christian audience) sacramental in character. In essence, such an approach would perceive the public realm and the realm of the church and faith to be free of borders in both positive and negative terms. In negative terms, the public world’s faults are present as much in the church as anywhere else. In positive terms, making present the transformative gift of God’s self-communication to the wider world is the very business of the mission of the church. Such an approach employs a comparative and hermeneutical method, is attentive to historical consciousness and acknowledges and affirms pluralism in itself. Therefore this has necessarily public, political, economic, social and ethical consequences. For Christianity believes in a compassionate God at whose core is a community of love. How else can this faith be manifested other than through active love *via* political, economic, social and ethical modes of practice? Approaches of this type would argue that, in one sense, the word ‘public’ is almost redundant for if theological discourse does not have relevance to society, then it is not really theology. It would be a strange theology that would not give much positive attention (in addition to just critique) to the creation of the very *theos* that it is concerned with.

In fact, many proponents of these last two approaches to public theology would be the least likely to insist upon the use the term, itself, taking it as a given that theology and the church can and should seek to play a constructive role in the world in positive and learning dialogue with others. Thus they might perceive no need especial to specify that their approach to theology seeks to offer a positive contribution to play to the wider discourse of societies beyond the confines of the church.

There is a certain contradiction in the fact that those approaches which rely on an ecclesiology of alienation, feel at all comfortable with the term ‘public theology’. For logically and morally speaking public theology and an ecclesiology of alienation, which is precisely the retreat from the public square, are incompatible. These approaches are marked by the tendency to understand public theology as a one-way street – with the church or

⁵⁴ K.E. HEYER, *Prophetic and Public: The Social Witness of U.S. Catholicism*, Washington DC 2006, p. XIX and pp. 177-205. Perhaps this sense of ‘double belonging’ became particularly developed in the United States context but has become increasingly familiar in other contexts, also, such as the UK in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Some forms of such double belonging, however, can also mask intentions that are neo-exclusivist at worst or integrationist at best.

theology informing society and not vice-versa. An example against such a unidirectional understanding of public theology is the Roman Catholic Church's denunciation of the concept of human rights in the mid-nineteenth century, and its subsequent embracing the concept during the 1960s – facilitated by learning from wider social discourses and other traditions.

Thus the method and logic of critical hermeneutics must be applied as much *ad intra* as *ad extra* to the church itself and indeed to academic theology, theology's second audience according to D. Tracy, otherwise what does theology in general and public theology in particular become but pious hypocrisy and sanctimonious platitudes?⁵⁵ All of this points to the need for further work in relation to the development of forms of 'public ecclesiology', and how this interacts with the ethical, social and political mission of the church.

7. *The future of public theology? Some thoughts on bringing together ecclesiology and ethics*

So, having explored the scope and genealogy, the differing methods and approaches, what of the prospects for public theology in the future? Earlier voices sought to make a case for the church being more «in the world if not of the world» (Y. Congar), but subsequent developments and new challenges mean that responses attuned to this new situation are required. Some recent voices have sought to commend a reprinted version of 'natural law' ethics, but such usually is still a tradition-bound and confession-privileging understanding of natural law not admitting of alternative voices.

Today, an expanded understanding of a 'wider ecumenism' has emerged, whereby groups and persons from differing backgrounds, traditions and contexts can nonetheless seek to form a coalition over and against not simply alienation and exclusivism, but all the forms of dehumanisation that haunt the postmodern world. What is required are theologically-*informed*

⁵⁵ Pope Benedict's first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, in parts, falls into this genre. For only if *caritas* is seen to be practised within the church and within every institution, organisation and agency connected to it, can the church hope to fulfil the noble vision and mission for the church itself vis-à-vis civil society that Benedict's encyclical describes. Or to take a further example, this term more hermeneutical in character, it seemed quite strange how, in his recent work, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy, Nation*, Oxford 2005, G. D'Costa demanded the right for theology to scrutinise and critique every other discipline and science and how he adopted a critical attitude to just about every authority possible with the one notable exception of the documents emanating from the central authorities of the Roman Catholic church. As a further example here, cfr. D.S. Long, who in his, *Divine Economy*, charts a variety of attempt to understand the relationship between theology and economics and so, in effect, also covers many of the debates fundamental to the notion and possibility of public theology in various forms. His own theological leanings, developed more fully since this study, lie in the direction of radical orthodoxy and what I here term the 'ecclesiology of alienation', where theology and church are, to borrow Niebuhr's terms from *Christ and Culture*, against and above the wider world (although like so many of the alienated ecclesiologies, Long fluctuates between Niebuhr's various types as the intention of the rhetoric seems to be to 'transform' the wider culture – even if the success of such an aim is neutered because of the tone and mode of discourse adopted).

ethics: ethical, social and political discourse that can be enhanced through theological reflection. This is an approach which recognises the value of other moral approaches and ethical methods as well, which are informed by differing worldviews and outlooks. The end result might be dialogue across the disciplines (engaging the philosophical, social, human and natural sciences) with regard to moral dilemmas and ethical discourse in general. One need not be of a particular religious persuasion to gain moral insight through such theologically-informed social and ethical discourse. And this is not simply building upon the concept of ‘middle axioms’, and proving wrong the neo-exclusivist charge that a reductivist ‘translation’ into a neutral language of discourse is thereby imposed upon religious and theological symbolism.

Seeking to make a space for the public value of theology per se is a long tradition, as we have seen. In the era of explicit public theology it forms a core objective from the outset. Instead the ‘T’ word is embraced anew as Hollenbach argues, «Like Murray, this approach to a public theology will grant full scope to an analyses of historical, cultural reality and to the complexity of the moral situation. But, departing from Murray, it will make explicit its act of faith that Christian symbols have a power to help society understand its own life and appreciate its moral obligations».⁵⁶ For those in doubt, the concept of ‘social imaginaries’, much discussed by Charles Taylor and his interlocutors of late, will offer further evidence. I believe that a broader understanding of symbolism and imagination – particularly the ‘analogical’ imagination (which feeds into what many Christians call the sacramental) – needs to be considered here. Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes offer a related understanding of public theology that has become oft-cited in many subsequent works,⁵⁷ namely that it is ‘the effort to discover and communicate the socially significant meanings of Christian symbols and tradition’. The Himes brothers also, seek to soften Murray’s opposition to the employment of theological language and symbolism in the public arena.⁵⁸ Where problems occur is when Christians take the truth-bearing symbolic mechanisms of their faith too literally and seek then to employ these misused tools in the wider public and secular realm. As already observed, Tracy, of course, has said much about the scope of the ‘analogical imagination’ in relation to the different ‘publics’ of theology. This also relates to what, elsewhere, I have called the approach of theologically-informed ethics.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ D. HOLLENBACH, *Public Theology in America: Some Questions for Catholicism after John Courtney Murray*, p. 302, with the argument developed across, pp. 300-303.

⁵⁷ M.J. HIMES - K.R. HIMES, *The Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology*, New York 1993, p. 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 14-15. See, also, related argument throughout the work of Stackhouse, e.g. *Globalization and Grace*, e.g., pp. 96-100.

⁵⁹ Cfr. G. MANNION, *Theologically-Informed Ethics: a Call for Inter-disciplinary Dialogue*, chapter 1 of J. ELFORD - D.G. JONES (edd), *A Tangled Web: Medicine and Faith in Dialogue* (New International Studies in Applied Ethics Series), Berlin et al. 2008, pp. 19-36.

Our explorations in public theology should lead towards a commendation of moral dialogue and collaboration within and between cultures and hence a process of mutual learning between differing contexts. Attention here must be focused upon a method that ‘ventures out’ from the ‘safety’ of an intra-theological perspective alone, into fruitful dialogue ‘without’.

We require a method that seeks to better assist the church in its efforts to have a positive impact upon pluralistic and secular societies. Thus not a privileged and separate ‘Christian’ or even ‘Theological’ ethics or ‘social philosophy’, but rather a method whereby Christians can openly acknowledge the traditions, beliefs and practices that have helped form them and form their processes of moral and social discernment. Yet equally, there will be an emphasis upon dialogue, participation and plurality and an acknowledgement of the provisionality of much moral discernment.

It is thus that the two sides of the balance between ethics and ecclesiology are united by the proposition of a ‘public ecclesiology’ for these postmodern times, i.e. a self-understanding of the church that envisions it as being an affirming member of the wider human family in open dialogue and collaboration with other members of that family towards common moral and social ends.

In contradistinction to the ‘neo-exclusivist’ approach, we argue in favour of what, from a Protestant Presbyterian background, Lewis Mudge calls a ‘Coalition of Traditioned Cosmopolitans’ (2006) who, affirming multiple-belonging in their daily lives, collectively seek to respond to the moral and social challenges of our times. Then the churches, along with various other influential ‘players’ in public life today, can all form part of a wider ‘community of moral discourse’, what Murray termed a ‘conspiracy of cooperation’ – literally meaning that people are ‘breathing together’ and ‘thinking together’.⁶⁰

Far too much discourse in ‘public theology’ in recent times is mono-logical – it is concerned with telling the world what to do and in boasting of how Christianity has all the answers. Numerous voices who claim to be ‘doing’ public theology, remain postmodern dogmatism at best, unchristian and counter-theological polemic at worst.

But what alternatives present themselves? D. Hollenbach helps to outline the heart of the challenges here very well offering a more positive account of the role a public *theology* as opposed to simply a public philosophy might play in addressing pressing moral and social challenges, where a successful ‘synthesis’ of the ‘goods of justice and liberty’ will not be achieved simply by juxtaposing ideas from various sources.⁶¹

The church today more than ever needs to be seen to have authority to speak and to ‘teach’, but *not* to lecture because the culture of post-modernity will not accept such self-evident hypocrisy given the evident

⁶⁰ See M. EASTHAM, *The Church and the Public Forum*, pp. 3-4.

⁶¹ Cfr. D. HOLLENBACH, *Public Theology in America*, p. 292.

failings of the church itself.⁶² If the church is to be listened to, by its own members, other Christians, peoples of faiths and peoples of no clear religious affiliation or faith at all, then it must attend to a different way of ‘authorisation’ to speak on important matters.

To my mind, the outlook of Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes* captures what public theology is really about – or the sentiment expressed by Y. Congar when he said that we need a church more ‘in’ the world if not ‘of’ the world. Thus a more truly sacramental church that affirms God’s creation in the world, rather than a church that adopts all the mechanisms of secular governance, including hierarchical and coercive power. A more sacramental approach obviously embraces the need for public theology and for a public ecclesiology to help discern a positive role for the church in the public square. Such an approach is the polar opposite of neo-exclusivism and the retreatist sect mentality that has been so much in vogue again in recent decades. And once again, such an approach would affirm and reflect, as well as build upon key documents of the World Council of Churches, Vatican II and post-conciliar documents, as well as multi-lateral statements by representatives of differing faiths (e.g. the World Parliament of Religions).

Public theology must learn from and celebrate the best of the world at the same time that it condemns and confronts the worst of the world. As G. Baum has shown, this is where the church and theology have much in common with critical theory.⁶³ Public theology, then, can never develop in a uni-directional ‘flow’ from world to church for the church can never be totally cut-off from the ‘public’ world. As R. Haight reminds us «[a]ll theology is bound to some culture and historical situation; no theology can prescind from it; every theology should explicitly identify its place in a context and the problematic that drives it. For a theology to pretend to be above culture or to claim that it can speak adequately for all cultures invites appraisal as either naïve or intellectually dishonest».⁶⁴ The church must be prophetic, but it must also be a listening church – note how E. MacDonagh’s assessment of the Catholic ethical approach in the wake of

⁶² Pope Benedict’s letter to the bishops ‘explaining’ the failings concerning the rehabilitation of the members of the Society of St Pius X was a defensive and self-justificatory document in the main, as opposed to the ‘humble’ apology that was called for and which over-supportive commentators and ambitious church leaders rushed to state that the document was. It failed to acknowledge that in this situation, as often, the wider world has taught the church some important lessons, including with regard to the church following its own values more closely. The saddest thing about this letter is that it is a thinly veiled attack, yet again, on those who wish to see Vatican II fully implemented – the agenda of the *Communio* group’s long-held ‘project’ returns to the foreground. Furthermore, if a paternal gesture of reconciliation can be extended to those such as the divisive and regressive Society of Pius X, then why not also to theologians that the CDF deems ‘errant’, such as H. Küng, L. Boff, C. Curran, R. Haight, et al.? Why not reach out and allow these fine servants of the church to be considered truly Catholic theologians and able to operate as such within Roman Catholic institutions of education once again?

⁶³ G. BAUM, *Amazing Church: A Catholic Theologian Remembers a Half Century of Change*, Maryknoll (NY) 2005, p. 142.

⁶⁴ R. HAIGHT, *Christian Community in History*, I, p. 57.

Vatican II involved the church and moral theology utilising and embracing wider secular calls for justice.⁶⁵ On the reverse side of this equation is the realisation that religious beliefs, or their absence have an inevitable impact upon «perceptions of the moral good» and a given society's understanding of «what counts as a reasonable and intelligent argument about justice and social morality».⁶⁶

8. *Concluding thoughts*

In the end, might 'public theology' really be a category mistake? In what sense could theology ever not be of wider public relevance and merely private? How can theology without practical outcomes really be theology at all?

For the neo-exclusivists, public theology must, in the end, be an oxymoron for in their 'reasoning', the public realm and theology are far apart from one another. If the term public theology is used simply to delineate methodological issues and questions concerning focus and audience, then all very well. But if it is a term used to mask an overbearing and uni-directional ecclesial and/or theological attitude towards the world, then this is something far from the best of the tradition of theology and the churches' engagement with the wider public world and public issues as sketched in our genealogical account above. Those who adopt the term and discourse of public theology need to resist the temptation to retreat, paradoxically, ever-further inwards and to pronounce that only (narrowly defined) 'confessional' theology is true theology.

If public theology does turn out to have been a 'category mistake', and so, *per se*, does not really need to be seen as a separate sub-discipline, then at least something such as a public ecclesiology might be desirable. A return to the emphasis of Murray is a wider alternative – whereby public 'philosophy', understood as «primarily a universe of moral discourse rather than a detailed set of moral prescriptions» as well as «a commonly shared form of thinking about matters of public policy and their moral dimensions»,⁶⁷ might be highly appropriate. After all, public philosophy is a term

⁶⁵ E. MACDONAGH, *The Christian Ethic: a Community Ethic*, in L.K. SHOOK (ed), *Theology of Renewal, II: Renewal of Religious Structures*, Montreal 1968, pp. 307-327. MacDonagh's assessment is discussed in G. MANNION, *After the Council: Transformations in the Shape of Moral Theology and the Shape of the Church to Come*, in «New Blackfriars», 90 (2009), pp. 232-250, at pp. 238-240.

⁶⁶ D. HOLLENBACH, *Public Theology in America*, p. 297. Eastham summarises some of Murray's lesser-known interventions as follows: «Murray's unique and distinctive contribution to a number of domestic and foreign policy debates in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, ranging from government financial support to Catholic schools to US foreign policy with the Soviet Union. In these debates, Murray nuanced the historical critical method he developed in his scholarly analysis of the Church/State tradition and the writings of Leo XIII. His method of public argument uniquely suited a religiously pluralist, secular society»; M. EASTHAM, *Church and the Public Forum*, p. 2.

⁶⁷ D. HOLLENBACH, *Public Theology in America*, p. 296. He has in mind here J.C. MURRAY, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, New York 1960, pp. 79 and 86. Perhaps 'solar system' might be a better analogy than 'universe' for public theology.

better suited to pluralistic societies than public theology. But there remains the contemporary possibility that public 'theology' could exist alongside public philosophy as the particular contribution of specific churches and theological methods to the shaping of that wider public 'philosophy'. If this proves to be the case, then an ecclesiological focus would help keep the focus in a multi-directional perspective, refracted through two major channels of the *ad intra* and *ad extra* ecclesial modes of being and relating.⁶⁸ First things, then, would necessitate a public ecclesiology.

In the concluding chapter of his own *Festschrift*, entitled «Working in the Quarry», Duncan Forrester believes that public theology must always avoid the twin evils of inward-looking aloofness and exclusivism just as it must shun over-accommodation to the point of the disappearance of what Christianity has to offer that is enduring and distinctive (and one takes him to mean it has something to offer that is the former, *because* it is the latter). He speaks of rekindling our utopian energies and steadfastly defends the need for theology in public debate. «What we need is a theology which makes a difference, a theology that heals, reconciles, helps, challenges. Perhaps we need more theologians who are angry, and determined to make a difference ...».⁶⁹

Public theology entails doing theology even, perhaps especially when nobody appears to be listening – whether those deaf ears are in the wider world or within the church and academy themselves. In the end, public theology is theology that makes a positive difference.

⁶⁸ Here some further interesting reflections are offered by J.B. HEHIR, *Church-State and Church-World: The Ecclesiological Implications*, in «Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America», 41 (1986), pp. 54-74.

⁶⁹ D. FORRESTER, *Working in the Quarry*, in W.F. STORRAR - A.R. MORTON (edd), *Public Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, p. 436.