

Can theology be anything but public¹?

Rethinking the role of theology at a public university

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Abstract

This study promotes the position that theology as scientific discipline has a role to play at a public university. The article identifies some contemporary issues that may oppose a role for theology at a public university. The author engages with these reasons and argues that the question is not whether theology has any public value but rather if theology can prepare and direct future pastors and the church to be contemporary, relevant and directive for society. For theology to succeed, it needs to be embedded in scientific values, sharpened by scientific discourse and reflected through scholarly activities. The article suggests how theology can meet these expectations through delivering on an agenda that is in line with contemporary society and its needs. Examples such as sustainable development, protest art, the down melting of the economy, research, etc. are used to illustrate what role theology should play in society.

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Key words: public theology, scholarship, theological education

Opsomming

Kan teologie anders as om publieke teologie te wees?

Nadenke oor die rol van 'n teologiese fakulteit aan 'n publieke universiteit

In hierdie artikel word geargumenteer dat teologie as 'n wetenskaplike dissipline belangrik vir 'n publieke universiteit is. Dié posisie word ingeneem ten spyte van kontemporêre uitdagings wat die plek van teologie aan 'n publieke universiteit bevraagteken. Die standpunt wat verdedig word, is nie óf teologie publieke waarde het nie maar hóé hierdie vakgebied voornemende dominees en die kerk kan help om relevant en rigtinggewend vir die samelewing te wees. Vir teologie om suskesvol te wees, moet dit verweef wees met wetenskaplike waardes ondersteun deur wetenskaplike gesprek. Die artikel wys uit hoe teologie relevant kan wees deur op tydrelevante onderwerpe te reflekteer. Voorbeelde waarna verwys word, is onder meer volhoubare ontwikkeling, protesuns, die ekonomiese krisis en navorsing.

1. Core functions: what happened to the corporate memory?

It is an ongoing debate whether the study of theology can be *justified* at a public university. A random selection and study of reasons informing this debate will conclude that an exclusive theology curriculum (as scientific discipline reflecting on the Christian belief tradition) is excluding other religious belief traditions. It may also restrict access to this study programme due to its close connection with church traditions (These opinions relate to the *social democratisation* of the university). Other opinions in this debate may allude to the influence of a post-faith tradition currently prevailing in society (we don't need faith and religious institutions any more), the association with the influence of church on society (the moral justification of political ideologies) and the mistrust in the church (recall sexual scandals in, for example, the church). (The reflection on the church is due to the obvious link between theology and church.)

The conclusion following from these perceptions is that a Faculty of Theology's scope is far too narrow to reflect the role of a university

in a developmental state. The alleged question into the public role of a university is based on the broader discussion of the democratisation of the university. The current perception is that the study of theology at a public university may be too exclusive for a developmental state. It is primarily linked to a religious tradition (not necessarily a church group), it focuses too much on minority issues (issues not of interest to a broader society, for example the Belhar Confession), is almost silent on societal issues (moral regeneration, poverty, reconciliation), removed from the national higher education agenda (skills development, critical cross field outcomes, inter-disciplinarity) and removed from the active engagement with religious diversity.

Even if all these perceptions were true, the counter arguments cannot be ignored either. The argument is that *theology* (as one of many *scientific disciplines*), and the *church as its ally*, have a role to play at a university (as a collection of the scientific disciplines and the public studying these disciplines) and the broader society (as the public being the end users of scientific activity).

Two observations support this remark:

Firstly, Giliomee (2004) reports on the close link between church and society in South Africa. Theological discourses were not excluded from this influence. To understand the South African political and cultural history, the role of the church and theological discourse cannot be ignored. If one wants to understand South African history, then one needs to understand the role of the church as influenced by theological developments. In addition, church members need informed (scientifically trained) pastors to *enlighten* church members on a particular issue. Regardless the view one may have of the church or its pastors, it cannot be denied that the pastors should also be scientifically educated. The latter is the role of a university.

Secondly, theological study has been part and parcel of universities throughout the ages. From history it is evident that theology made a contribution towards the development of the broad basis of human and social sciences and to the universities as custodian of scientific labor. In this sense theology *is* public. In fact, theology was notably a branding tool for many prestigious universities across the world. From the inception of universities in Europe theology was

part of its core business. Theology is offered since the origin of the university (for example, Sorbonne, Paris, Bologna). Theology also contributed to the standing of a university in the community. If the university is defined as a collection of people (organised in staff and student categories) then its scientific disciplines are directed towards the public represented at a university. This makes theology public.

Despite the rigor of different perspectives on this matter, I am of the opinion that the focus in this debate is misplaced. In fact, these debates are leading nowhere. *The issue is not whether the existence of such a faculty is justifiable. Neither is the solution to replace a Faculty of Theology with a Faculty/Department of Religious Studies.* A different take is needed here. My proposal is that another question should be asked: *what role for theology at a public university?* The role should in particular relate to the scientific depth of the theology curriculum, its relevance for society and how theology as discipline is practiced within a university.

The desired role of theology studies and hence its expression of a university's core missions will form the basis for this study.

2. Interim: a personal interest in the matter

As a student, I always felt uncomfortable with the previous stance of theology training at the Faculties associated with the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Not so much due to the *quality* of the education, but I was never convinced that from a university perspective the claims for exclusive DRC theology training could be justified (although mindful of the traditions which contributed towards the practice of theology training at UP, UFS and SU). This opinion was informed by my Masters' study in philosophy that dealt with the question what a university is [Published as *Die wese van die universiteit* (1989)]. In this study the emphasis was that a university should reflect the *unity of science*. I therefore opposed the concept of a multiversity where the deformation of scientific practice exists. From this perspective followed the argument that it is not confession and/or church tradition but science which urges a new approach to theology education. In my reasoning the intension was not the setting aside of confessions, but I also did not promote a one-sided influence of a church confession on the theological curriculum. Although not the focus of the above-mentioned study,

the embryonic idea was that at a university the *scientific tradition* and *no other tradition should direct university curricula*. A reflective perspective will conclude that all scientific disciplines should primarily be informed by scientific principles (see Snyman, 1990).

This perspective is argued in a different context by Douglas and Lovat (2010). Their case is based on an Australian experience. They also consider the role of theology at a public university and point out that there is mutual benefit for discipline and institution to be accommodated at a public university. They recommended that theology should be part of a university's mainstream activities. The difficult position of theology (opposed to religious studies) at a public university serves as good illustration of how theology – as scientific discipline – next to many other disciplines, can contribute towards the understanding of scholarship. They argue that the best place for theological education is in the academy or public university. They claim that as a scientific discipline it can best be developed at a university where it can also maintain its critical intention. A university model is therefore required in understanding the role theology can play in university life. Church models are limited (opposed to university models) since they (the church models) suit bishops' purposes. Unfortunately a church model also impacted on overall standards and quality of teaching and scientific development. This is not always due to academic reasons only, but also the small numbers of students enrolled for the programme (hence a lack of critical mass to create discussion) and the lack of infrastructure.

Although there was historically in the Australian context very little interest in offering theology as scientific discipline at universities, it changed as a result of the Martin Report (1964) which looked at higher education in Australia. Although theological education was not the focus of the report, it commented on an extended role for theological education.

The introduction of theological education to the university curriculum should be seen as an opportunity to revitalise the discipline and to establish theology alongside other disciplines. The argument is stretched that the very nature of theology is to be critical and hence this should be reflected in its curriculum. They pointed out that there should be a movement to link theological education to issues of the day in a scholarly and critical fashion. The

advantages of such an approach is that (i) this model belongs to the university and not any partisan interest group and (ii) it endorses separation between education (as theologians at universities) and training (as clergy for a specific denomination at colleges) but affirms that education is part of a university's activities².

The conclusion therefore is that theology, as science, should participate in the broader context of scientific activity. This will also ensure that scholarship is added to theology. Following from this observation, the question is whether there is enough scientific rigor in academic activities? The imperative is that scientific discourse should influence the curriculum.

3. Some higher education reflections

The debate on the study of theology at a public university cannot be removed from the higher education agenda. From a higher education perspective, the following analytical view can be presented:

- Although a high number of postgraduate students in theology is annually trained, these students do not fit into the so-called STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields of study. It is commonly remarked that for the knowledge economy to grow, the country needs more trained engineers and technologists (This remark should not be understood loose from the debate on the re-awakening of the human and social sciences). In addition, there is a high volume of research articles, but apparently on recurring topics. Another challenge is the publication of theology-based papers in particularly "in-house" publications. This means that scholars from a university publish papers in the theology journal of their university or religious tradition. The concern with this is that rigorous peer review may be absent. This, in return, will have an impact on the scholarly profile of a discipline (ASSAf, 2006 Report). These events can very easily create the perception that theology is of a lesser scientific value. Scientific disciplines – which include theology –

2 This case is discussed against the background of the importance of intellectual life at a university and how scholarship can support the development of intellectual life (see Lategan, 2011).

must portray values such as critical enquiry, rationality, theory forming, hypothesis formulation and paradigm shifts.

- Another perspective is that theology has become too public. A concern is expressed that theology is not growing as a scientific discipline, but that it merely serves the societal demands on a university (also as representative of the public – subsidy, research productivity) and society (answers to questions – note the debate on homosexuality, living together. This is very much a reactive situation). The idea of growing theology as scientific discipline is not new at all. It is a common scholarly dictum that one should guard against the isolation from other sciences. This means that one's own scientific basis should continuously be assessed. Van Huyssteen (1986) opened this debate in the mid 1980s with his advocacy that theology should participate in the philosophy of science debate. A good example is the growing need for multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary research. In reality it means that theology should renew itself by engaging with a variety of disciplines and issues. Here one can make reference to, for example, the debate on human settlements, sustainable livelihoods, poverty alleviation, skills development and responsible citizenship. There is therefore no need for theology (in general) to be removed from the national science agenda. Theology embodies a value system that can positively influence human behaviors following on the advocacy of a value system.

Against the backdrop of these higher education perspectives, theology can now be discussed against the framework of the promotion of scholarship.

4. The promotion of scholarship

The claims made thus far relate to the important role that science and scholarship should play in positioning theology at a university. The basis of all scholarly activity is that it must be informed by scientific theory, practice and discourse.

This claim can be complemented by two additional perspectives.

Firstly, Kuh (1993) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) promote the concept of the “hidden curriculum”. In practice this means that learning takes place outside the classroom. An important feature of theological training is its service character. Service relates to understanding and engaging with what is “happening out there”.

Secondly, theology can contribute towards the building of a *learning community* (see Lategan & Bitzer, 1994). In a learning community the emphasis is on teaching, research and innovation and community engagement (These activities are commonly known as the three missions of a university). *Learning* should not be reserved for teaching only. Learning should also take place in research and community engagement. This will result in new knowledge, the innovation of knowledge and the application of knowledge. An important task for the lecturer is to act as a facilitator of knowledge – this means that the lecturer must assist the student to learn through teaching, research and community engagement. The value of this initiative is that (i) learning is not limited to theoretical knowledge only but (ii) through community engagement, informed by teaching and research, the knowledge is transferred back to the end-user. This is in particular applicable to Boyer's (1990) four quadrant approach to scholarship (teaching, discovery, integration and application) and what I constructed as *applied learning scholarship*. Applied learning scholarship embodies the principles of comprehending scientific content, the ability to communicate on the basis of scientific content and the application of knowledge.

What should be remembered, however, is that science may be the subject for the scientific community *but it is a public good*. The public – as end-users of scientific results – depends on good scholarly work. The best public contribution theology as scientific discipline can make, is to reflect scholarly work. Here some perspectives from the debate on humanities and social sciences can be most helpful. The *Academia Europaea* (Academy of Europe) acknowledges that the economic crisis may force universities to rather invest in those sciences (such as informatics, chemistry, biology, medicine) that can immediately cash in with business and industry. This approach to innovation is used in a technocratic sense and not in the broader sense of intellectual creativity. For the latter the humanities and social sciences are needed. The Academy's recognition is reflected in the following comment: "... to invest in the Human and Social Sciences is also to invest in deepening our understanding and acceptance of diversity, and in increasing our level of cohesion as European citizens, not through the overarching dominion of one model but through the mutual integration of people's cultural, historical, linguistic, and sometimes

antagonistic, differences ... Finally, the Humanities and Social Sciences are essential to nourish our spiritual life, imagination and creativity, and to understand both ourselves and man's relationship to his environment" (Academia Europaea, 2012:2-3).

5. What should be on the agenda?

In this study I am arguing for a contemporary relevance of theological studies. The pillars for such studies are scientific discourse informed by societal challenges leading to useful knowledge. To extend on this perspective the following ethical challenges can be presented in search of an agenda that will promote both the values of a university (creation, transfer and application of new knowledge), the scientific discipline (theology as the discipline studying the revelation of God, faith, the church, etc.) and the end-users of science (the public).

- Theological ethics can continue to reflect on existing behavior or it can contribute towards a new ethical framework and understanding. The debate has not been concluded yet whether theologians need to move on to new themes (examples ethics of memory or sustainability) or should it reconsider old/ existing themes and if the existing guidelines are still applicable to the world in which we live? In addition, it could be that old themes (ethics of war – recall the cold war, cross border conflict) warrant an *opposite* but *complementary* ethical code such as an ethics of peace (unifying conflicting societies) or fundamentalism (post 9/11 conflict). This is a *meta-ethics* debate – what should be the focus of attention – that will evoke a *beta-debate* – the search for new guidelines in post-faith societies. Consider the following challenge: the Reformed view on marriage is that no sexual relations are permitted outside a marriage. Recently the DRC was challenged with the reality that living together relations are at the order of the day. The question now is whether theological ethics should continue to critique such relations or should it rather ask what Biblical norms could be identified for partner/living together relationships. In fact, are there any well formulated principles for such relations? The point is that such relations cannot go without norms either. To simply continue to turn such relationships down, misses an opportunity to care for and direct people in a society where the marriage as institution

is under siege. Here I am very much relying on the debate on what Burggraave (1997) will refer to as an *ethics of possibility*. It is not about the *minus malus (lesser evil)* but rather the *minus bolum (smaller good)*. He continues to argue that no human behavior can go without proper ethical guidelines. He is therefore in favour of moving away from fixed categories of behaviour to constructive engagement with society on the basis of Biblical principles. Here his reference to *minus malum* and *minus bolum* is refreshing. Instead of arguing that in borderline situations we have to choose between the lesser of two evils, he advocates a perspective that we should rather choose the smaller good. This is more than wordplay only. It depicts a deep seated negative attitude towards ethical choices in borderline situations. This approach necessitates an ongoing understanding of the text and context of the Bible. Here we can benefit from a perspective developed by Smit (2012) on the relevance of Scripture in our society. He argues convincingly that in order for a church community to *hear, read and understand* Scripture it requires theological hermeneutics which is based on, amongst other, scientific knowledge. Although scientific knowledge cannot guarantee on its own the spiritual *reading and hearing* of the Bible, it is unthinkable to approach the Scriptures without having a comprehensive knowledge of rhetoric, history, literature, tradition, etc. It is here that scientific depth is required. Theological studies have to lead in designing tools and ways to understand the meaning of the Bible in – our case – a post-faith society.

- An *ethics of hospitality* needs to be developed for society. Recent examples of xenophobia across the world questioned ethical behavior towards strange/foreign people (foreign nationals). Post 9/11 developments demand an understanding of cultural and religious diversity. Theology has a lot to offer to this search. One can recall Hans Küng's remark that no world peace is possible without religious peace – no religious peace without the dialogue between different religions. His remark contemplates the need to the opening-up of religions to each other. Theology can assist our society to understand "the religious other". It will hopefully assist one to appreciate the uniqueness of men but also leave room for other. Vosloo (2006)

argues correctly that in an ethics of hospitality a vision of hope should be developed. No person should live without the hope (as grounded expectation) that things could be different. The Christian traditions present exactly this: *life could be different*. There is no reason why a custom should be maintained. If it is proved that a major part of, say, the public service is dishonest, then there is no reason why one should adhere to this practice too. Even if one is part of a minority of people who prefer a Christian lifestyle then it can never be outvoted by the majority behaviour. Conradie (2006) reminds us that a Christian dream for the future is the vision of a good society. Here theology can assist us to unpack the meaning of, for example, discipleship for a post-faith society. *Society needs to become a community of character*. For such a community, sustainable values and norms are needed. The four cardinal virtues of *prudence* (wisdom), *justice*, *courage* and *temperance* are priceless in building such a community.

- The debate on the role of the church has not been exhausted yet. Despite many opinions researched and expressed, there is yet not a clear direction on what role for the church? The church cannot have meaning only to a particular congregation but should impact on society. After all, this is in line with Paul's ethics of the Christian lifestyle that should influence society. Paul's well-known metaphors of being God's letter to the world (2 Corinthians 3) and the Christian life is like wearing new clothes (Colossians 3) are in line with this view. Some agenda items could be to unpack the role of the church for example the role of the church in an *experience economy*, *the green movement* and a *mixed mode economy (rich and poor)*.

The *experience economy* is defined by Piët (2003) as the products and services directed at the emotional needs of the individual and/or group. This very often leads to the belief that the church must be a "happening". It is no longer about the contents of the sermon but the staging of the sermon. Did you experience anything during the church sermon? If not, then the obvious rating of the sermon is that it is of lesser value.

As society grows more sensitive towards its role in the environment, the question can be considered what is a "*green*" church? The general perception is to relate such questions to

the New Age movement, pantheism, etc. But, what cannot be denied is the apparent absence of the church in the debate on sustainable development. To illustrate this point: this year (July 2012) the Rio+20 summit looked at the progress of the globe with regard to sustainable development. What could be observed from the public domain is that very little (if any) attention was given to this matter. This is a reality that cannot be ignored. A possible reason for the apparent ignorance could be that the pastors are not well trained in this area of church service. This would be strange since man's responsibility to care for the environment is a Biblical imperative (Genesis 1:26).

Another question is: how does the church cash up in a "two economy society"? The origin of the church (Acts) teaches a particular economic behavior whilst the reality of the twenty first century is a church functioning in two economies – prosperity and existence economy. Related to this debate could be the question where the church was in the down melt of the economy and how does it comment on the role of the church in a context of dwindling resources. The first question on the melt down of the economy relates to the absence of the prophetic voice in a period of excessive greed. The second question entail how do we care physically for poor people when the church runs out of money and the government's support for poor people is dwindling.

In responding to the challenges the (Catholic) church is facing, Geybels (2010) remarked that the solution is not more rules, but the Bible. He is of the firm opinion that if church-goers are sufficiently trained to understand the Bible, they will be in a position to frame decisions for many challenges. Without sufficient Biblical knowledge church-goers may not comprehend how to address society's challenges.

- Theology as a scientific discipline can also influence the research agenda. There is an ongoing international discussion on research ethics or the responsible conduct of research. The theological perspective can make a meaningful contribution with regard to values such as integrity, truth telling, plagiarism, professionalism, dignity, etc. in the research assignment.

In a recent editorial comment by the editor of the *Journal of Research Administration*, Edward Gabrielle (2012) refers to the

tragic event of syphilis studies in Tuskegee, Alabama. What was presented as brief operational studies led to the violating of human dignity and autonomy of the citizens who took part in these studies. Theology can assist to understand the concepts such as truth, dignity, honesty, etc. Theology could have given some direction.

Another contribution theology can make, is on the level of theological themes for research. An appropriate action would be to participate in the debate on bio-ethics. Ten Have (2011) points out that modern bio-ethics should depart from the relationship between health and development. This means that this is not only about what is technologically possible, but also what values and norms should guide all technological developments. This calls for the self-regulation of scientific activity. Another challenge research is facing, is the pressure from business and industry to deliver on their particular wants. These challenges – human dignity, technicism, responsibility, greed – are deeply rooted in theological discourse. Human dignity relates to man as *imago Dei*, technicism with the exploitation of the creation, responsibility as an evangelical virtue and greed to uncontrolled and unwanted desire. Theology has a contribution to make towards this debate.

- A topic that can impact on the need for professional behavior is to unpack the Christian calling. This will be welcomed by a society characterised by corruption, poor service delivery, political ideologies overshadowing nation building and the absence of respect for the government because of its current behaviour. Van den Berg's (2010) study on the *theologia habitus* lays the foundation to understand a theology of calling in the workplace. He used the metaphor of architecture to outline the future work space. He says: "... the research *itself* aims to become architecture. Not only is the tentative nature of the proposed design thereby accentuated, but emphasis is also placed on the creation of newly chartered spaces" (Van den Berg, 2010:1). This metaphor invites to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue. It is evident that a technological infused society robs people from their spirituality. What is required, is to relate spirituality, faith and workplace. Religion should be a lived experience. Theology should assist one to find meaning in the

workplace. It has been confirmed that the acknowledgement of faith and spirituality in the workplace have a positive impact on the workplace. It was found that ethical sensitivity and resilience are positive outcomes of faith and spirituality. This, of course, is contrary to religious fundamentalism in the workplace.

In a democratic society it is not possible to accommodate one perspective only. A university, as a micro-cosmos, needs a diversity of discourses to build the knowledge basis. It will therefore be one-sided to claim that theology cannot make a contribution towards the public debate. This claim can only be a reality if different sciences contribute to the encyclopedia of knowledge.

6. The way forward: the creation of a theology value chain

Business studies will learn that *corporate memory* is paramount to the successful operation of any organisation. Business theory will inform that, although it may be good for organisations to adapt to new strategies, it can never be removed from the core business of an organisation. In the debate on theology training at public universities, this memory cannot be ignored.

In repositioning theological training, useful advice (“memory”) can be obtained from Plato. Plato dealt sufficiently with *continuity* and *discontinuity*. He wrote in his youth dialogue, *Kratylos*, that for something *to change* it needs *a basis to change from*. But, regardless the change, what is fundamental/core to the constant should be continued. Therefore, if a university changes its societal position, curriculum, teaching modalities, scope of research focus, etc. then what is core to a university, namely scientific activities, should be found back in the change. If not, then there could be no reference to a university. Applied to the social change at a university, the solution can never be to “drop” what is common to a university in the name of social change. The directive is rather how will change promote science and extend the benefit to society. Relevance in a university context is to ask how can science be employed to change society for the good?

Applied to the focus of this study, the solution is not to remove theology from the university’s programme mix but rather to engage the theology curriculum to be responsive to society’s needs. It is in this context that the phrase, the “theology value” can be developed.

The underlying question is if theology (although closely related with the Christian tradition) can be meaningful in university education at large? Positive support is found in Louw's (2004) claims that theological education is a meaningful value. It searches for evidence and rationality without losing the focus on having a confessional character. Theology searches to understand the Biblical revelation about God and the relationship between God and humans. This links with Shaw and Barry (2004:208) who advocate a *moral responsibility* for organizations on the basis of accountability – “not for a particular past action, but for the care, welfare or treatment of others as derived from the specific social role that one plays. It is here where the concept of public theology is most appropriate. Public theology refers – broadly speaking – to *theological discourse with societal challenges*. The value such training can add to a society in transformation, is endless. Three examples can be offered to illustrate the point: The world economy is under pressure because of capitalism knowing no borders – people want more and more to illustrate their economic freedom. But, the freedom has been without values. Capitalism's focus was to promote availability and demand. On the other end of economic activity, is the former communist controlled economies which have to speed up to deliver on the demands of the people. This too, cannot be without control. Both events opened questions on the sustainable environment, our responsibility towards the environment, limited resources, birth control, greed, want, desire, debt, etc. Theology can stimulate and influence this debate. For example: as God's ambassadors we need to care for the world (Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 8); life is more than possessions (*The Mountain Sermon*, Mtt. 5), the creation suffers because of mankind's wrongdoing (Romans 8), etc. Rio+20 (June 2012) reminded the world again that the globe is challenged by a growing population and consumption. Natural resources are exploited and the earth will not have enough food, water and energy to meet the growing demand of the world economy.

What also comes to mind is the constructive role pastors can play in community development. I foresee almost no reason why pastors cannot also be trained to serve as community development officers. Such officers can turn around the lack of service delivery and poverty in disadvantaged communities (see Westoby & Botes, 2012

for an informed study on community development and community workers). Such an approach will also be aligned with the National Development Plan's *Vision for 2030*. In this plan, actions are outlined to combat poverty, to create institutions to uphold democracy, to have a society free from corruption and dehumanizing activities and create an enabling society for all. Theology – through the study of ethics – can contribute towards the vision and strategies outlined. This Vision is built on effective government, strong leadership and active citizenry. It is especially with regard to an active citizenry that theology can play a role. Smit (2012) rightfully points out that the Scriptures rename things and that it infuses people with hope. It is in this context that theology can assist to design new values for a post-faith society. Theology can assist to point out that the Christian tradition advocates a changed society where people responds to the responsibility to change society through the ways people think, behave and act. This, for example, will be aligned with a (regional) proposal for a tailored human resources development programme that can address the challenges our society is facing.

The recent debate on the artwork *The Spear* (Brett Murray) evoked a political debate on freedom of expression, the role of protest art, respect for the government and presidency and even related the debate to racism. What was not debated enough in the public domain, was how the public view lifestyles (and the influence) of a lifestyle on society's values. It is here where theology can give direction: what is the lifestyle and values that we should have, the role of sexuality in society, respect from positions of authority. For example, people in authoritative positions should also have respect for their fellow citizens, etc. (What the informed reader will note, is that I am once again appealing for a constructive scientific discourse and not simply a congregation's perspective. This does not mean that there is not a role for a denomination's perspective but the appeal is for a scientific perspective on this matter.)

The South African society is deeply challenged by the need to care for people in need, to communicate across cultures and to express dignity towards people belonging to a different culture, credo or life orientation. Here I am deeply touched by some examples that should be considered in framing an *ethics of mercy*. Burggraeve and Van Halst (2010) discussed the well-know parable of the merciful Samaritan: They say that people are “disaster tourists” – they are keen to run to the scene of the accident/crime as part of

sensation. They are reluctant to help, because if we extend assistance then we become involved. An anonymous society does not want to be engaged. How then can a society be created where there is no engagement between people? They continue to argue that ethics is after all also a bodily act. One needs to touch people. To understand this part of ethics, theology needs to unpack these challenges and fear. Theology cannot view this from an audience seat. A second example is Durand's theological orientation which speaks of affection for people based on God's justice in an unjust society, mercy in a merciless society and hope in a hopeless society (Koopman, 2009; Smit, 2009).

These two – and many more – examples relate to what cannot be ignored in contemporary society: the debate is not only on *what* we engage but also on *how* we engage. A doyen of South African theology, J.F. Durand, has shown that the crux of the *how* is God's *justice, faith and mercy*.

The point should be proven: go public with theology instead of privatising theology training or in a broader context, religion. This should be prevented at all cost. It cannot be denied, but religion has an influence on public life.

7. Summative perspective

This article upholds the view that theology is a public affair and has a role to play – both at a university (as scientific discipline) and in society (via the church) to present a different lifestyle, and for people to aspire to a different reality. This necessitates a new agenda for theology training and not the privatising thereof. For this role, theology needs to be contemporary and relevant; it needs to be scientific as all other scientific disciplines, and it needs to be built on scholarly activities. The tipping point is the contribution that theology can make towards science (encyclopedia of knowledge), the university as organisation (depending on the practice of science) and its relevance towards society.

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