Public theology: seeking principles for a Reformed epistemology

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Abstract

Public theology has gained interest and popularity. However, there seems to be great diversity in understanding its wide range of fields and goals. This may be attributed to the choice of epistemology. This article investigates some opposing epistemologies, namely postmodernity and a Reformed theology, for the design of public theology. Various challenges are discussed in search of basic principles for a responsible public theology. The article concludes with a justification for a Reformed epistemology, but also warns against the danger of jeopardising engagement with other discourses by an insensitive insistence on dogma.

Opsomming

Die belangstelling in publieke teologie het merkbaar toegeneem. Ongelukkig is daar opponerende menings oor die prinsipiële besinning en praktiese toepassing van beginsels. Die keuse van 'n epistemologie vir publieke teologie is waarskynlik verantwoordelik vir die groot verskil in benadering en toepassing. Die artikel ondersoek twee moontlike epistemologieë, naamlik postmodernisme en 'n Reformatoriese teologie.

Verskeie komplikasies in die prinsipiële besinning oor die aard en toepassing van publieke teologie word bespreek in 'n poging om sekere beginsels vir 'n epistemologie te identifiseer. Die artikel bespreek redes vir 'n Reformatoriese teologie as epistemologie, maar waarsku ook teen 'n ongeregverdigde hantering van dogmas om die diskoerse te vertroebel.

Key words:
Epistemology, reformed, Bible, principles, interreligious, integrity.

Sleutelwoorde:
Epistemologie, Reformatories, Bybel, beginsels, intergeloof, integriteit.

1. Introduction

There is hardly any doubt that interest in the discipline of Public Theology has grown in recent years. This phenomenon should be welcomed for many reasons. Theology has always been linked to God's will for a just society. The Bible holds many accounts of justice, truth, love, and compassion. Many variables in the development of a rapidly changing society have revealed that a theological analysis of studies on public theology vary in understanding and application. In contrast to recent literature opposing the use of reformed theology, which will be discussed, this research works with the hypothesis that reformed theology is sufficient and effective to serve as driving force for more integrity in public theology. Research that champions for a postmodern epistemology will be analysed in order to enable a choice for a reformed epistemology.

2. Statement of the problem

In principle, theology should inevitably be linked to the Bible as the primary source of thinking about our existence in relation to God. But this is not without complications. As never before, the Bible has been scrutinised and criticised. Choosing the Bible as point of departure may, therefore, raise many eyebrows. Furthermore, an overview of recent literature suggests that a problem epistemology provides a better approach to the many challenges for public theology. This theory is juxtaposed with the many advantages of a reformed approach to public theology.

3. Brief literature overview

An overview of literature on public theology reveals that two major epistemologies are dominant in the debate. The Reformed Theology has been challenged by a postmodern epistemology. These two epistemologies need to be evaluated to effectively target the many challenges underlying the discipline of public theology. The article endeavours to justify the choice of a Reformed epistemology, since the open-endedness of a postmodern epistemology could hardly bring closure to the many challenges confronting public theology. The article leans on the general understanding of a Reformed faith. The fundamental point of departure is and should always be the Bible, which is the Word of God. Whereas the interpretation of Scripture is currently debated by a postmodern hermeneutics, the article chooses the universal interpretation of Scripture as it has been accepted and explained in the Reformed confessions of faith.

The complexity of public theology is further intensified by the need for objectivity. De Villiers (2013:83-85) argues that public theology should preferably not be done by theologians living in the context, since objectivity is extremely difficult in the interpretation thereof. Public theology, based on a biased interpretation of the context, creates confusion and dissatisfaction. This is particularly true when public theology endeavours to help the church understand the public dispensation in general, and the democratic process in South Africa, in particular (De Villiers, 2013:85-86). Economic insecurity, inequality, and a deepening moral crisis are part of a dispensation that begs objective interpretation (De Villiers, 2013:85-90).

According to Du Toit (2015:1-5), urban spiritualities create temporary, unarticulated absolutes. Symbolic systems of spirituality stimulate the theological discourse. Do these systems represent the different spirualties, stimulated by epistemological difference? Does this mean that the process of interpreting the different contexts from within represents different points of departure and different needs? Does this process highlight the danger of subjectivity?

Although the risk of a subjective interpretation within the context is possible, is it not more improbable that a public theology from outside of the context could be a truer interpretation of the problem? How could theologians in another part of the world even begin to understand the complexity of the immense diversity in the South African context regarding demography, culture, and relevant needs? It is undeniable that a responsible public theology should at least strive towards an objective interpretation of the context. This basic

requirement for public theology accentuates the need for an epistemological choice that could connect the context with the scriptural principles of truth, honesty, and compassion (Kim, 2020:247).

In discussing the theology of De Gruchy, Dreyer (2019:3-7) highlights some aspects of his theology as "an indigenous and contextual South African theology". Theological concepts such as the Kingdom of God and biblical eschatology play a major role in the action of public theology. Furthermore, the doctrine of Providence should be applied in addressing the many needs of the land but could be largely distorted by political agendas.

The merit of De Villiers' research is that the complexity of the social and political contexts of South Africa illustrates the daunting task of public theology. De Villiers (2013:92) agrees that public theology must interact with the public sphere. There must be a circular movement between being informed by the context and serving society with information about the interpretation thereof. For Sebastian (2014:338), this would mean utilising the unavoidable issue of multicultural societies to find solutions to the many conflicts created by this diversity. Within the South African context, this has developed into a critical issue. For example, laws on hate speech could prohibit an open discourse, to find solutions. This complicates the task of public theology.

Pragmatic conflicts involve the spirituality and methodology of a biblical public theology. Basic principles for relationships such as love, forgiveness, patience, and self-discipline could be used to tone down the inflammable situations created by multicultural conflict. However, it appears that the church seldom speaks out on issues that cause societal tension. Perhaps, a term developed by Keller (2015:109) should play a role. She calls the church's lack of involvement "a theology of apophatic entanglement". This means that the church "subverts unquestionable answers in any discipline even as it holds us all answerable for our pragma". Even when existing practices beg for answers, there seems to be an apathetic and distant discourse without making any progress.

Since it seems that public theology in South Africa has become silent, many South Africans share Keller's frustration with apathy. Have churches become afraid to speak out on the shame of state capture, increasing poverty, reckless expenditure by the government, abuse of the judicial system, the implications of the hate-speech legislation, and the moral decay?

Although Keller's frustration with apathy is understandable, her solution of "just do it" is also not without complications. How far is the church supposed to get actively involved with political programmes or revolutionary

movements, to enforce change? This raises the question about being faithful to the church's message and identity. Where the message and identity of the church are jeopardised for the sake of a visible move towards change, the true nature of theology and epistemology may, ultimately, become the unfortunate victim. The much-discussed divide between faith and politics, nature and grace need not be introduced in this instance. Where identities of both are at stake, one will need to resist what Bonhoeffer called "the two realms image". By analysing Luther's so-called "two kingdoms concept", Bedford-Strohm (2012b:276-279) shows that the Kingdom of God and the realities of earthly governments need not constitute irreconcilable realities.

However, when a Christ-centred theology is expected to involve humanistic ethics, to facilitate change, and where identity betrayal becomes inevitable, the drive to facilitate change may become an obsession (Buttrey, Eaton & Olkovich, 2015:16-17). Epistemologically, Christian values such as truth and integrity must always uphold the identity of church and theology, faith and action, without simplifying the complexity of the secular city.

Such a conclusion is based on the epistemological choice for public theology. Where a postmodern epistemology is chosen, the lines between right and wrong, faith and politics become vague and unimportant. However, the choice of this article is a Reformed theology, based on a precise interpretation of Scripture and a defined understanding of doing theology.

Ultimately, this contradicts Bowlin's (2013:9-10) definition: "My hunch is this: the hyphenated political identities of Americans and the hyphenated ways in which they address issues both public and private might help us better understand the hyphenated character of Christian proclamation." In this instance, the order seems to be overturned – not from Scripture to theology and then to public proclamation, but from the context to Christian proclamation. If Bowlin's intention is to better understand the complexities of the context, then it is a logical and acceptable conclusion (Kelly, 2011:162). If not, his axiom represents the methodology of a natural theology.

Bowlin (2013:12) illustrates his position by commenting on the famous address by Martin Luther King: "This is the role King was occupying on that day, and this is, I think, how we should regard his remarks: more public theology in sermonic tones than an actual sermon on a public matter." This begs the following questions: Who was the recipient of King's message? To whom should public theology be addressed? To whom is the church supposed to deliver the message? Was the sermon by Martin Luther King addressed to the American government or was it preaching to the oppressed public to stir greater awareness for the struggle? What is the purpose of such

a sermon or address? Should the intention be to make the theological stand known, or is the purpose to stir social unrest, to facilitate change?

All these and other issues are crucial in understanding the methodology and practice of public theology. Strange as it may seem, hardly any attention has been paid to these matters in scientific literature. If this is so, then this is the reason for the article. What follows then is the new knowledge/ interpretation. For example, the philosophical subject-object scheme may be used to identify who the instigators of public theology are and who the recipients are. The subjects of public theology could be the churches (official declarations), theologians (research and writings), ministers (preaching in churches), and the voice of church members. The objects of such declarations could be the State, political parties, societal organisations, and persons facing pastoral situations.

Related to these matters is a public theology that merely reflects the convictions and needs of those who are to be served. Emotional involvement with the needs of people may lead to manifestations such as the different theologies of revolution (Janse van Rensburg, 1979:410-512), where Scripture is forced into meanings of revolutionary action. Rieger (2017:354-364) seems to be aware of the danger to be carried away by the obsession with liberation theology, thereby discarding the diverse legacies that should be an active part of the process. This implies that the nature of liberation should never abandon the very essence of theology: to find solutions and actions for change in societies, motivated by the justice of God. Otherwise, liberation turns into actions of political violence instead of God's movement through His Word and Holy Spirit.

For example, in the past, theologies of revolution leaned towards radical language and violent action. Although not within the paradigm of theologies of revolution, Duhamel (2018:409) discusses the radical use of the term 'evil'. Should public theology involve language in addressing injustice in society, care should be taken not to be liberal in the use of the term 'evil'. According to Duhamel, such language could be stimulated by frustration and dissatisfaction, but also as a sign of the epistemology that is prevalent, an epistemology that could betray the very nature of theology. In this regard, Kettel (2019:391) finds that theological arguments on the issue of euthanasia in Scotland are gradually substituted by secular arguments, thereby betraying the true nature of a theological discipline. A further complication may arise. Billingham and Chapman (2021:451) address the issue of theologians who indulge in commentary on political and social matters without having even a limited grasp of the debates within political theory. This implies that public

theology must be informed by other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, economy, and others, to make an informed analysis of the complexities. It must be able to evaluate them within the context of theological principles.

But then again, a public theology that does not respect the boundaries between theology, political themes, and secular agendas could result in a combination of bad theology and unacceptable social disclosure. Political preaching without fixed boundaries, lacking a responsible epistemology, could cause the predicament of involvement with political struggles and separatist movements. The church should never be viewed as the voice of any political party, but always as the true interpreter of the principles from Scripture. The mere purpose of the existence of the church (and theology) will be jeopardised when the church becomes an agent of the political struggle.

4. Contrasting epistemologies

4.1 A postmodern epistemology

4.1.1 Andries van Aarde

The above issues cut deep into the definition of public theology, simply because of two major obstacles. Van Aarde (2008:1215) justifiably argues that one's understanding of Christian identity determines one's understanding of public theology. This point of departure begs the question as to whether a specific theological paradigm could make a significant contribution in public commentary.

Secondly, the innumerable variables of life and society will complicate a public theology. For example, the influence of postmodernity on the general thinking and chosen lifestyle of society has created a kind of society far removed from the biblical context and principles. Van Aarde (2008:1216) steers away from the traditional concept of theological "doing" to the idea of "theological activity", highlighted by postmodern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and others.

Taking all these factors into account, Van Aarde's (2008:1214-1215) basic question provides a perfect analysis of the research question. Investigation requires answers to the nature of theology. Intrinsically linked to this question is the need to define the public aspect of theological investigation. Van Aarde proposes an understanding of theology separate from the traditional concept of church theology. This noticeable shift from the private sphere to the postmodern marketplace suggests that the discipline of theology could be interpreted as a

secular activity. According to him, this means that true public theology is done by film-makers, artists, novelists, and poets. This corrects the concept of "theology in public" to mean "marketplace theology". Against the backdrop of such an assumption, Van Aarde (2008:1218) defines his epistemology as a postmodern biblical hermeneutics.

Furthermore, Van Aarde's epistemology of "postmodern biblical hermeneutics" has found acceptance within the Reformed Church. During a theological seminar, held in Bloemfontein, South Africa, on 23 November 2021, Prof. F. Tolmie explained that postmodern philosophers such as Jacques Derrida should help the church to interpret Scripture. Was this a coincidental correspondence between Van Aarde and Tolmie? Or is this a precise rendition of postmodern public theology?

Another question arises. If one is serious about the principle of objectivity for public theology (De Villiers, 2013:84-86), what happens to objectivity in Van Aarde's idea of film-makers, actors, and poets as practitioners of marketplace theology? The world view and convictions of such people are necessarily of a compromised and secular nature. They are driven by motivations such as success, popularity, public opinion, and finance.[1] Public media thrives on marketplace ideologies. Surely, there can be few remnants of objectivity in such public "theology"?

Unfortunately, the definition of a postmodern hermeneutic complicates the endeavour to find common ground on a definition of public theology. Since secular practitioners of public theology operate with natural principles and not with Scripture, the intense debate of natural theology becomes a determining factor. The historic debate between Karl Barth and Emile Brunner in 1934 did not lose its significance for defining theology. Against Barth's conviction of God's revelation from above, Brunner's theology may be described as a natural theology, deriving its principles from nature and reality. It follows that Van Aarde's concept of public theology as a theology within the marketplace, practised not by theologians but by directors, poets, artists, and such, fits the concept of natural theology exactly. Indeed, natural theology has grown in popularity in recent times (Smith, 2006:24-35).

Public theology is currently tossed and torn between the two epistemologies of Reformed theology and postmodern natural

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1   This would, in fact, correspond with the epistemology of Jean Baudrillard, who will be discussed below.

theology. Herein lies the deepest cause for the confusion. If the "theologians" of public theology must be film-makers, editors, and artists, its very nature and outcome could be nothing more than a vast variety of possibilities, a multiplicity of narratives or deconstruction, which Seidman (1994:204-205) describes as a revolt against authority, *any authority*.

4.1.2 Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007)

Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) illustrates this point exactly, arguably even more than Jacques Derrida. Baudrillard masterly utilises the role of media, in general, and film/television, in particular, to define the very essence of life. Not without reason, Lather (1992:89) refers to him as "the wild man of postmodernism". The basic drive of Baudrillard's public criticism is the obsession with consumer fetishism, driven by capitalism. This causes a drive towards hyper-realism, where everything must be larger than life. Disney World becomes the ultimate metaphor for the reality of life. In Baudrillard's (1988:72) own words: "The most intimate process of our life becomes the virtual feeding ground of the media. In the media society, the era of interiority, subjectivity, meaning, privacy, and the inner life is over; a new era of obscenity, fascination, vertigo, instantaneity, transparency, and overexposure begins: Welcome to the postmodern world." Eventually, everything implodes, with the result of a shattered life. When he was asked: "What is postmodern?" he answered "Playing with the pieces – that is postmodern". In this devastating commentary on life, postmodernism ends alongside the nothingness ("das nichtige") of Friedrich Nietzsche. At this point, one would have to ask: "Can such postmodern public theology ever be helpful or enlightening?"

4.1.3 Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)

What about Jacques Derrida, since Van Aarde suggested him as a hermeneutic help? Derrida is renowned for his explanation of reality through the process of deconstruction. In strong opposition to a structured concept of reality, Derrida proposes a continued process of fragmentation, resulting in a never-ending cycle of change. Truth can never be found in fixed structures of moral guidelines, since truth is always to be found on the next horizon, a concept in the philosophy of Heidegger (Murray, 1985:101). Caputo (1985:191-192) explains the joint influence of Heidegger and Derrida as a deconstructive unrest that created a tremendous critical energy on the encrusted dogmas of Western metaphysics.

Derrida uses language to express the never-ending cycle of change. The word 'la differánce' describes the dynamic of change, while the word 'defere' suggests that meaning is never fixed, but always postponed. Derrida (1981:26) explains: "Nothing, neither among the elements, nor within the system is anywhere ever present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces." How could such relativism serve public theology?

4.1.4 Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005)

It would be enlightening to further investigate the political philosophy of the formidable Paul Ricoeur. His analysis of the meaning of words set ideas on communication into unknown directions. Particularly of relevance is his rejection of the idea that interpretation is determined by the intentions of the author, thus creating the slogan "the death of the author". The text is rather determined by the different discourses within the text. The initial understanding of the meaning of the text is preliminary and should be verified by other interpretations (Ricoeur, 1978:98-101). Consequently, the interpreter's imagination must explore a world of interpretation and metaphorical meaning of the text. In this instance, the term 'metaphor' means open-ended interpretation (Gasché, 1985:166-167). Heelan (1985:52) defines this multiplicity of meanings as perceptions, the driving forces of the hermeneutic process.

For Ricoeur, the metaphorical character of a text provides more than one possibility of understanding. The meaning of the text is thus both real and possible; it simultaneously "is" and "is not". Therefore, other metaphorical possibilities need to challenge interpretation, causing meaning to be changed over time as the context changes. This constitutes an ethic of compromise with the responsibility to accept the "other" without experiencing the loss of "self".

Once again, it is difficult to think how Ricoeur's philosophy of politics could be an epistemology for public theology. For example, Ricoeur's political philosophy is dominated by a paradox or an enigma, namely that political power is both the necessary condition for the communities' existence and the greatest source of alienation. Dauenhauer (1998:77) argues that, if power is defined as a living contradiction and the state is a force of unconditional constraint, this constitutes legitimate violence in history. Does such a consequence of the political philosophy of compromise not pave the way for oppression by the state and/or revolutionary violence by the oppressed?

Another example should suffice. Dauenhauer (1998:84) comments: "To give people power over forces that always to some extent escape their control and thus to give them some mastery over their own history 'is doubtless an endless task that really deserves the name of permanent revolution'." Applied to the historical context of South Africa, this would imply that the end of apartheid and the start of a democratic South Africa was a mistake, since Dauenhauer's description fits the current profile. However, few would agree to such a point of departure.

4.2 A reformed epistemology for public theology

It seems inconceivable that postmodern interpretations of reality could be the driving force for public theology. Koyzis also faces the reality of so many ideological differences in secular society and in religion. However, this does not prevent him from identifying and embracing the cosmic variety in God's creation. His biblical world view is rather based on the principle of faith that God upholds his creation in the huge diversity of forms. Koyzis (2021:7) calls this the principle of societal pluriformity or the pluriformity of authorities. Such a theological world view chooses a direct link with the Reformed view of John Calvin and others (Koyzis, 2021:3).

4.2.1 John Calvin

The work of Calvin as reformed theologian is well documented (Backus & Benedict, 2011:1-5). Kim (2020:247) concludes that Calvin "was not a socially disconnected person who merely enforced doctrine, but rather a socially engaged Reformer who emphasised Christian stewardship with concepts such as tolerance, kindness and love for the neighbour".

In contrast to biblical spirualty, Du Toit (2015:4-5) proposes an "improper" biblical spirituality that aims to disrupt stagnated spiritualities in an urban area, to create intermediate communities, which then become objects and agents of change. Apparently, this represents an "improper" biblical spirituality because it is not satisfied with comforting and sustaining societies, but rather to restlessly work towards transformation. Such an idea seems to be in line with Calvin's active involvement with transformation of unjust societies.

Calvin's contributions are, after all, not limited to his writings, the Institutes, and his commentaries. His training as a lawyer provided the necessary insight of the marketplace issues in Genève, although this did not come without powerful opposition (Backus & Benedict, 2011:7-13). His ideal to establish a "godly city" in Genève was, however,

not limited to the city, but he envisaged the whole of France. Clearly, Calvin was engaged in discourses on public issues and did not simply write about them (Höpful, 2011). A strong resemblance can be found in Calvin's "godly city" and the City of God (*De Civitate Dei*) described by Augustine (AD 426). While the secular city is noted by people who immerse themselves in earthly pleasure, the City of God is marked by people who forsake earthly pleasures for the sake of eternal truths. God opposes governments, political and ideological movements, or military forces by divine intervention.

Returning for a moment to the theme of natural theology, Höpful (2011:18) notes that natural law and natural rights were not part of Calvin's writings. Whereas a natural theology derives its principles from a contextual understanding of reality to re-interpret Scripture, a reformed hermeneutic would use the whole history of Scriptural hermeneutics to establish principles that could be applied to the many perils of the marketplace. The move is always from Scripture to the context, while in natural theology it is from context to Scripture. O'Donovan (2018:315) describes the choice in the following motivation: "My contention is that this persisting core manifests the inevitable tendency of all naturalistic ethical and political thought, not sufficiently formed by an evangelical moral epistemology and anthropology, to take the self-understanding of sinful human being as a normative stating point." This constitutes "a theoretical disengagement of human moral agency and action from God's right, righteousness, judgement, and freedom, decisively revealed in the history of Jesus Christ" (O'Donovan, 2018:315).

4.2.2 Abraham Kuyper

The history of reformed public theology does not end with John Calvin. Of particular interest is the formidable work done by Abraham Kuyper. The point of departure in Kuyper's public theology corresponds with O'Donovan's critique. He identifies the obsession with the natural goodness of man as the primal instigation of the growing preoccupation with revolutionary change. The positive belief in the abilities of man renders the necessity of spiritual values redundant (Kuyper, 1898:79). In opposition to this anthropological point of departure, Kuyper (1907:611) proposes the basic principles of Calvinism. The sovereignty of God must be upheld in all spheres of life (Kuyper, 1897:36). Where the authority to govern comes from above, it constitutes social change, but when power and authority come from

within, revolution and destruction abound (Kuyper, 1916:547).

Against the growing popularity of revolutionary change in society, Kuyper (1916:603-604) started the Anti-Revolutionary Party, in cooperation with Groen van Prinsterer. The slogan of the party was clear: "The gospel against revolution" ("Tegen de revolutie de evangelie"). Eventually, Kuyper was convinced that this approach is not strong enough to facilitate social change. His improved suggestion is significant. He warns against a reduced understanding of the Gospel as a soul-saving endeavour, leaving the multiple social problems untouched. Therefore, he insists that not a reduced theology but rather the full impact of the Gospel should be the inspiration for the party. The biblical message of God's love and compassion, emphasised in the Old Testament and reiterated in the New Testament by Jesus Christ, must bring hope to the poverty-stricken people. Herein lies the very essence of a reformed public theology.

4.2.3 Other readings on Reformed theology

Reformed theology has a long and impressive history. The so-called *solae* are generally accepted as the most basic principles of the Reformation. How will the fundamental norms of "Christ alone", "Scripture alone", "grace alone", and "faith alone" define or redefine the concept of public theology? Although Bedford-Strohm (2012b:283-284) highlights the Christocentric character of Barth's ideas on public theology, he warns that biblical material should not be used as "conversation stoppers", disrupting conversation on social change (Bedford-Strohm, 2012b:287).

Furthermore, how can this relate to the many issues that could be understood as areas of public theology? A joint publication on interreligious contexts seems to contradict the idea of a Reformed public theology (Pirner, Lahnenman, Haussman & Schwartz, 2019). A year earlier, Smit (2017:290-300) wrote an article, in which he shared his conviction that insistence on Christian values for public theology could ignore the deep diversity and contestations within Christianity itself. This could also be true of a naïve Christianity that ignores the intense complexities of society. According to Smit, Reformed Christianity is known for theological language that ignores the complexity of the status quo.

What are the consequences of such a negative evaluation of a Christian epistemology for public theology? Does this mean that churches within the Reformed tradition are of no use in the endeavour to bring

about social change? Or does it mean that a Christian epistemology would, by necessity, jeopardise projects for social change by involving principles of Scripture? The history of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa reports the actions of theologians who took the lead in breaking the stronghold of apartheid. Reverends Ben Marais (1909-1999), Beyers Naudé (1915-2004), J.A. Heyns (1928-1994), and W.D. Jonker (1929-2006) immediately come to mind for their immense influence in breaking the ideology of apartheid. They were all members of a Reformed theological tradition.

However, servitudes mentioned by Smit and others should be taken seriously; for example, the variety of religions involved with public theology. Buddhism and Islam are mentioned as religions that have a great deal to offer. Bedford-Strohm (2012b:274-276) is of opinion that the only solution to the complexity of many religions is to find overlapping principles that could join efforts rather than divide efforts. In the multicultural and religious context of South Africa, it is inevitable that common ground will have to be identified. Smit (2017:292-293) shares this approach.

Care should, however, be taken not to jeopardise the basic principles of faith. Bedford-Strohm (2012b:275-276) opines that the doctrine of the Lordship of Christ can be implemented in addressing political realities without leaving the biblical perspective aside. However, the churches' involvement with social change needs to be nurtured. "Rather, the churches need to clarify what advice they can give to people who bear political responsibility while trying to adhere to their Christian faith in their daily political decisions; indeed, it would be irresponsible to leave such politicians alone" (Bedford-Strohm, 2012b:274).

5. Research conclusions

The contribution of this research is found in the following principles.

5.1   The research mainly focused on finding an epistemology that could be true to the identity of theology in general and the task of the church in the world in particular. Various ideas and concepts on public theology were discussed to evaluate underlying epistemologies. Research in the past have neglected this important principle underlying public theology.

5.2   Having stated some of the basic issues that will challenge this research, some corresponding principles must be found to bring the research

to a conclusion. In this regard, Bedford-Strohm's (2012b:288-290) six characteristics of public theology are generally accepted while a Reformed theology could identify with each of those principles. Briefly discussed, they are as follows:

- Integrity

Public involvement with social change should always reflect a visible expression of the authenticity of the church. As such, it deserves to be a basic principle. Integrity requires respect for biblical and ethical principles. This means that reverse justification is simply not acceptable. For example, the systems of apartheid and racism greatly enhanced the racial tension in South Africa. Since the start of a new dispensation in 1994, the pendulum has swung to the other side. There is a real threat of a deliberate and government-driven policy of reverse justification, commonly known as Black empowerment. Will the church also uphold the same ethical principles to speak out against laws that discriminate against White, Coloured, and Indian people? How far should affirmative action be allowed to go?

- Context and principles

Public discourse on ethical matters clarifies possible conflicts in the need for action, on the one hand, and the abiding ethical principles of Scripture, on the other. Bedford-Strohm seems to shy away from fundamentalist insistence on solutions that do not help the desperate needs of the context.

- Church and politics

The third principle for public theology champions against the Church's direct involvement with politics, the responsibility being to create an atmosphere.

- Prophetic and practical

The fourth principle, namely that the church's message must be both prophetic and practical, strikes at the very heart of complexities in public theology.

- Ideology and resignation

Again, this clearly implies that neither an idealistic scenario, nor the acceptance of a lesser status quo should be part of the church's epistemology.

- God's faithfulness

The ultimate calling of the church is to be a witness to God's faithfulness to his creation. The church must be a societal force against political cynicism and resignation.

These principles, to which others may be added, define the task of public theology. The researcher contends that a Reformed theology would embrace such principles and could, therefore, serve as an epistemology for public theology.

5.3   Integrity seems to be an essential part of public theology as an expression of the authenticity of the church. For example, will the church uphold the same ethical principles to speak out against a political dispensation that enhances other forms of discrimination? How far should affirmative action be allowed to go? While a postmodern epistemology, true to the essence of its nature, would not be concerned about equal ethical applications, it would be extremely important from a Biblical point of view. This highlights the importance of an epistemological choice.

5.4   The researcher concluded that a Reformed theology would embrace and champions such principles that would ensure a reliable public theology. Against arguments that Reformed theology does not have the authority to effect social change, the research has proven that the contrary is true – that history indeed reveals a significant contribution in changing the political dispensation in South Africa. This contradicts the dominant feature of a postmodern epistemology for public theology.

It is, therefore, difficult to understand Smit's (2017:293) remark: "The Reformed tradition within Christianity, to which I belong, may be even more painfully aware of this than several other Christian traditions, since we lack all structures of authority – whether institutional, legal, or personal – that could help us speak with any finality and *Verbindlichkeit* about these challenges." At the Rustenburg Church Council (1990), Prof. Willie Jonker proclaimed that apartheid is a sin, without the authority or sanction by the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church. This declaration was the start of a radical change in public theology.

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