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The Trinity in African Public Theology

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1. Introduction

This article argues that public theology is indeed a theological endeavour. The central task of public theology concerns reflection upon the meaning and implication of Trinitarian faith for public life. Public life has in mind the three publics that David Tracy[1] so eloquently defines, namely, the public of the church, the public of the academy and the public of society. This article reflects upon the task, role and mode of public theology in each one of these publics.

First, this article outlines the challenges that face public theology in South Africa and, more widely, on the continent of Africa. To understand the challenges for public theology in South Africa, not only South Africa's vast peculiar challenges should be attended to, but the rest of the continent should also be taken into consideration. South Africa is an essential part of Africa; economically it contributes thirty percent of Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and politically it is one of the most stable and thriving democracies on the continent. The challenges on the rest of the continent are essentially part of the challenges for South Africa. Secondly, this article discusses the role and task of public theology in the three publics of academy, church and society. Finally, the article suggests contours for a Trinitarian approach to public theology, in which, lessons are learned from the Trinitarian planetary theology of Sallie McFague.

2. Public theology in a context of immense challenges

The people of Africa face major challenges, perhaps in more severe forms than people living on other continents. We experience economic and political suffering and injustices and abuses; we are faced with diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria; alienations and injustices such as sexism, racism and xenophobia, as well as violence and crime; natural disasters; abusive cultural practices and high levels of hopelessness amidst the courage indeed to never give up. The overview that follows is

1 Tracy 1981.

not extensive and penetrating but aims to give some cursory orientation regarding the context in which public theology in South Africa is practised.

2.1 Economy

First, many (South) Africans are victims of the growing gap between the rich and the poor: the so-called rich north and poor south; rich neighbourhoods and poor neighbourhoods; rich blacks and poor blacks; rich family members and poor family members. The gap between rich and poor in Africa is the highest in the world and is manifested among various countries in Africa; hence the significance of the fact that South Africa alone contributes thirty percent of the GDP of Africa. Similarly, this inequality is witnessed also in the fact that, whereas South Africa's per capita income was $3310 in 1998, Mozambique's was $210 and that of Lesotho was $570.

Together with Brazil, South Africa is the country with the biggest gap between rich and poor in the world. In 1993 the richest ten percent of the population received 47.3% of the income, whereas the poorest forty percent of the people had only a 9.1% share. At the same time, seventy percent of the rural population lived on fourteen percent of the land.[2] A South African economist, Sampie Terreblanche, is of the opinion that the overall situation has not changed drastically, especially for the poorest of the poor. He refers to the 2000 report of Statistics South Africa, which states that in 1996 at least 41.4% of all households lived in poverty; that is, they had to live with an income of between 601 and 1000 rand. He also refers to other statistics that paints an even gloomier picture.[3] He makes the point that unemployment has increased in democratic South Africa;[4] for instance, in 1995, two-thirds of black people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four were unemployed.[5] Many researchers argue that this figure has not changed for the better during the last few years. The economic liberation of black people is mainly limited to a new, growing, black elite. South African theologian, Tinyiko Maluleke, argues that economic liberation has not dawned for the poor masses of South Africa.[6] He also protests that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, did not take economic liberation and reparation seriously enough.[7]

2 Barnett & Whiteside 2006:144, 165.
3 Terreblanche 2002:383, 412.
4 Ibid. 407.
5 Ibid. 374.
6 Maluleke 1996.
7 Ibid. 1997.

The poverty levels in Africa are the highest in the world, with thirty-two of the United Nations least developed countries being found in sub-Saharan Africa. This region's total income is not much more than that of Belgium. The median GDP of the 48 countries in the region of just over two billion dollars is about equal to the output of a town of sixty thousand people in a rich country. Even though South Africa contributes thirty percent of Africa's GDP, it contributes only one percent to the GDP of the world.[8] According to Meredith, the average national per capita income of Africans is one-third lower than the world's next poorest region, South Asia. What is also disturbing is his statement that this per capita income is now lower than it was in 1980, and for some countries, in 1960. Africa contributes less than two percent to the trade which is now half of what it was in the 1980s, amounting to only 1.6 percent. Africa's share of global investments is less than one percent.[9] Meredith argues that the unfair subsidies of western governments for their farmers, as well as their strict tariff barriers, exercise a crippling effect on African producers. Agricultural subsidies in these countries amount to 370 billion dollars per annum; that is, a sum that is higher than the GDP of the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. These policies, subsidies and tariffs lead to low prices and unfair competition between African and western farmers. The subsidies, which are higher than the value of an entire crop, enable US farmers to sell products such as cotton for one-third of the production costs, while the related losses suffered by specifically West African countries is more than the development aid they receive from the US government.[10]

Many people in this country and on our continent are indeed excluded from the benefits of globalisation. The North American theologian, Mark Amstutz, outlines the achievements of the global market economy; he cites the statistics of the World Bank on the improvement of living conditions in the thirty-seven poorest countries of the world, between 1965 and 1985, as proof of the success of the market economy:

1. *The annual crude death rate per thousand declined from 17 to 10.*
2. *Owing largely to a decline in the fertility rate, the annual crude birth rate per thousand people declined from 43 to 29.*
3. *Average life expectancy increased from 47 to 60 years for men and from 50 to 61 years for women.*
4. *Infant mortality for children under one year declined from 127 per thousand to 72 per thousand.*

8 Barnett & Whiteside [note 477] 139.
9 Meredith 2006:681–682.
10 Ibid. 684–685.

5. *The child death rate for children aged 1–4 declined from 19 per thousand to 9 per thousand.*
6. *Average daily caloric supply per capita also increased – from 2046 to 2339.7.*
7. *Finally, the average percentage of children in primary schools increased from 74 to 97 and in secondary schools from 21 to 32.*[11]

2.2 Refugees

Secondly, many Africans are refugees as a result of civil war and the breakdown of economic and social Africa. This number constitutes forty percent of the total number of refugees in the world.[12] It is situations like the one in Zimbabwe that cause people to flee their countries and seek new futures, especially in a country like South Africa. Meredith describes the shocking state as follows:

> *By the end of the 1990s Zimbabwe was in dire straits. The unemployment rate had risen to more than 50 per cent. Only one-tenth of the number of pupils leaving school were able to find formal employment. Inflation had reached 60 per cent. The value of wages in real terms had fallen over ten years by 22 per cent. On average, the population of 13 million was 10 per cent poorer at the end of the 1990s than at the beginning. More than 70 per cent lived in abject poverty. Hospitals were short of drugs and equipment; government schools were starved of funds; state corporations were bankrupt; the public transport system was decrepit; fuel supplies were erratic; scores of businesses had closed. Harare, once renowned as one of the cleanest cities in Africa, was noted for debris on the pavements, cracked cement pavings, broken streetlights, potholes, uncollected refuse and burst pipelines. Street crime was endemic.*[13]

2.3 Health

Africa is a continent with various major diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, and especially AIDS. Although the HIV/AIDS pandemic is growing in various parts of the world, such as India and China, it is mainly manifested in Africa, specifically in sub-Saharan Africa; of the 39.4 million people who lived with HIV/AIDS during 2004, 25.4 were living in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2004, 3.1 million people in sub-Saharan Africa became

11 Amstutz 1995:822.
12 Meredith [note 484] 679.
13 Ibid. [note 484] 634–635.

newly infected with HIV; of the 3.1 million AIDS-related deaths in 2004, 2.3 million were Africans; and a total of seventeen million Africans have already died of AIDS. There is a total of 12.3 million orphans, the result of AIDS, in sub-Saharan Africa.[14] Barnett and Whiteside give one of the best outlines of the causes, growth, effects, impact on family and social and economic life, as well as the treatment and prognosis of HIV/AIDS in various countries and regions of the world. They also describe the impact of other diseases, including malaria, which killed a million Africans in 2004, ninety percent of whom were children.[15]

2.4 Racism

The levels of racism in South Africa and the rest of the continent are still very high; in spite of some progress, racism between black and white is still prevalent at both subtle and explicit, visible levels. Tinyiko Maluleke refers to the story of the teenager, Happy Sindane, who has white physical features and was brought up by black foster parents. He gained public dominance when he started to search for his biological parents, whom he assumed were white. The discovery that he was not white was, according to Maluleke, not based on scientific DNA testing, the texture of his hair or the tone of his skin. His blackness was confirmed in the media, since he demonstrated, as far as white and black journalists were concerned, the typical stereotypes that they held, consciously and unconsciously, of black people; hence, Happy Sindane is thought to be unhygienic, delinquent, criminal, cheating and immoral. The public debate about the status of Happy Sindane reflects, according to Maluleke, existing racial prejudices and practices in South Africa.[16] Meredith observes that the policies of Robert Mugabe have dashed the hope for racial harmony in Zimbabwe, causing mutual mistrust and suspicion.[17]

2.5 Religion

It should be noted also that religion plays a major role in many conflicts in Africa, particularly in Nigeria. Moreover, even in countries such as South Africa, where there is a strong culture of respect, dialogue and cooperation among various religions, people are nevertheless exposed to the religious fundamentalism, absolutism, moralism and judgementalism of some fellow-Christians and some people of other religions.

14 Barnett & Whiteside [note 477] 9–10, 140.
15 Ibid. 142.
16 Maluleke[note 481] 114–116.
17 Meredith [note 484] 627.

2.6 Xenophobia

Many citizens in African countries, who feel threatened by citizens (refugees and immigrants) of other countries in their struggle for daily socio-economic survival, engage in practices of subtle and explicit xenophobia. This is increasingly the case in South Africa, which is to a large extent the economic engine room of Africa.

2.7 Sexism

This country and continent are plagued by various forms of sexual violence and sexism. Maluleke refers to the fact that South Africa has the highest rape figure in the world: 119 reported rapes per hundred thousand people. Sexual injustice is expressed in the silence of men and in the controversial debate over whether a 'rapex' may be developed as a measure to limit HIV infection via an act of rape. A 'rapex' is a so-called female condom that is intended to be inserted into the vagina as part of a woman's daily security routine; during sexual intercourse it hooks onto the rapist's penis and must be surgically removed.[18]

Besides misogyny, homophobia is another face of sexism in Africa. Leaders like Robert Mugabe and former Namibian president Sam Nujoma even expressed their homophobic convictions publicly, and thereby, perhaps unintentionally, encouraged homophobic practices in their countries.

2.8 Crime

Africa is also exposed to high levels of crime and corruption. Sampie Terreblanche attributes the escalation of violent crime in South Africa to, among other issues, the systemic violence of apartheid. According to Terreblanche, the systemic violence, especially during the forty-six years of apartheid, has deeply ingrained the inclination towards violent and criminal behaviour among impoverished South Africans. The violent defence of, as well as resistance against, apartheid fed a culture of violence; during the resistance against apartheid the laws of illegitimate governments were defied, and many who had already been marginalised and criminalised by poverty and coercive labour patterns became involved in organised violence and criminality. Moreover, during apartheid, the police concentrated mainly on protecting an illegitimate political system, often by violent means; consequently a culture of lawlessness, criminality and violence, including gang violence, was able to flourish in underprivileged communities. By the time of the birth of a new post-

18 Maluleke [note 481] 116–117.

apartheid society, the subculture of lawlessness, criminality and violence had become thoroughly entrenched, paving the way for an escalation in violent crime in South Africa. Likewise, the violent system of colonialism, with the accompanying impoverishment and dehumanisation, has had the same impact in terms of violent crime in other countries on the continent. However, apartheid and colonialism are not the only causes of violent crime; human selfishness, greed and pride in the context of growing consumerism are further causes of criminal violence.[19]

2.9 Ecology

Various environmental problems are experienced on the continent of Africa, including various forms of pollution, deforestation, desertification, extinction of various life forms and exhaustion of crucial natural resources. What raises concern is the fact that these ecological challenges do not receive adequate attention in crucial visionary documents, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights and the more recent South African Bill of Rights, as well as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) that articulates the heart of the agenda of the African Union; hence, even when the South African Bill of Rights mentions ecological considerations, it is not for the sake of the integrity of the environment itself, but for the sake of humans.

In addition, Barnett and Whiteside suggest that natural disasters in Africa, specifically floods and droughts, will increase, since Africa is vulnerable to climatic change. Moreover, these processes will increase desertification on the continent, leading to even fewer agricultural opportunities on top of the already very high levels of starvation, famine and under- and malnutrition.[20]

2.10 Culture

Abusive cultural practices constitute another major challenge in African contexts.[21] Potential abusive cultural practices are, among others, female genital cutting, which violates the dignity of women despite the claim that it teaches youngsters about the suffering dimension of life; newer forms of polygamy that do not take seriously the consent of the first wife, the covenantal character of polygamous marriages, the wellbeing of the extended family, or single women who want to get married to be taken care of at least economically; older forms of polygamy that do not take

19 Terreblanche [note 478] 42, 401–402.
20 Barnett & Whiteside [note 477] 252–253.
21 For a discussion of these practices see B. Bujo, Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality (2003:162–75).

the plights and desires of especially the first older wife into consideration; incest that is justified as a means to avoid mixing blood with presumed inferior outsiders; sorcery that is motivated by greed, jealousy and hatred and that demonises persons for various reasons; and birthing more children than a woman's health can tolerate, for the sake of reflecting prosperity and wealth, on the grounds that children will eventually take care of the parents.

2.11 Hopelessness

All these challenges cause, as can be expected, hopelessness among many people, confirmed by the fact that the situation may not be any better for our children: many Africans experience lack of access to formal education; Africa is the only continent where school enrolment is decreasing and where illiteracy is still commonplace; two out of every five Africans, and half of all African women, are illiterate.[22] Furthermore, many youngsters experience hopelessness: due to socio-economic and related factors. they may not be able to complete school education; even if they pass, their results may not be good enough to pave the way for entering higher education or the job market. The desperate situation of school children contributes to problems like drug abuse, the formation of violent gangs, the imitation of 'wrong' role models, teenage pregnancies, a lack of discipline, and violent behaviour from a relatively young age.

3. Public theology and the academy

After this overview of some challenges in South Africa and the rest of the continent, we turn to a discussion of the publics with which public theology is engaged, with these public aims to serve the development of appropriate responses to the various challenges above.[23]

According to Tracy, the academy is the public or social location where serious, critical scientific enquiry, by various disciplines, takes place.[24] In its engagement with the academy, theology is challenged to provide arguments that people from diverse religious and secular traditions can recognise as reasonable. In this discourse, appeals are made to universal categories; such as experience, intelligence, rationality and responsibility, while claims are stated with appropriate warrants, backings and rebuttal procedures. Tracy also pleads that, although theologians confess allegiance

22 Meredith [note 484] 682.

23 The discussion of the three publics draws from earlier work on this theme. See, among others, Nico Koopman '*Theology and the Fulfilment of Social and Economic Rights: Some Theoretical Considerations*' (2005).

24 See Tracy [note 476] 56–59.

to a specific religious tradition or to a praxis movement bearing religious significance, they abstract themselves from these faith commitments for the sake of critical analysis of their religious and theological claims, both by outsiders and adherents to the religious tradition. Such abstraction implies dis-involvement and a quest for objectivity in a logical positivist fashion; hence, the critical self-introspection takes place along the lines that the Dutch systematic theologian, Gijsbert van den Brink, proposes.[25]

With an appeal to the paradigm theories of Thomas Kühn, he outlines support for later developments in the philosophy of science discourse that make room for adherence to particularistic commitments in the scientific endeavour. Although he recognises that there is much to be learned from older important philosophies of science, it remains his conviction that these approaches do not take the significant and determinative particularistic influences, such as faith commitments, of scientists seriously enough.[26]

In all publics, perhaps more so in the academy, public theology opts for scientific reflection, for making faith convictions as far as possible rationally accessible to all reasonable people and for constructing arguments that pass the test of coherency, consistency and logical reasoning. Theology, however, does not have to distance itself from its faith commitments, so long as it takes care that such commitments do not exclude scientific scrutiny. Anselm's notion of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) needs fresh application in the contemporary engagement of theology with the academic public.

Theology supports and participates in the quest of academia to build societies of dignity and humanness. In South Africa, as in the rest of Africa, the academy is challenged to participate in crucial transformation processes. There is an immense danger, however, that appeal for public involvement in the academy will favour pragmatism and utilitarianism to the extent that disciplines which seemingly do not contribute directly to economic development, for instance, will be viewed as inferior, worthless

25 See G. van den Brink, Een publieke zaak: Theologie tussen geloof en wetenschap (2004).

26 Van den Brink [note 500] reasons that, despite their weaknesses, older philosophies of science still pose some important challenges. Logical positivism challenges us to ensure that cognitively meaningful statements be verifiable as far as possible; confirmationism teaches us that it is much more difficult to confirm so-called non-existence statements than existence statements; the falsification theory of Karl Popper challenges us to open ourselves to criticism, to continuous disturbance and critical opposition by researchers who do not just take our positions for granted. See Van den Brink 2004:219–221.

and of no use. Yet, if human dignity, development and humaneness are viewed as comprehensive categories that include all dimensions of social and natural life, the contribution of all disciplines will be acknowledged and appreciated. Thus, the academy has to guard against, on the one hand, the extremes of ivory tower scientific practices that do not enhance human dignity and, on the other hand, pragmatism, economisation and the commodification of life, and the adoption of commercial utility as the supreme norm for academic practice.

Gavin D'Costa spells out the central place of universities in church and society and, consequently, the importance of theology's involvement with the academy:

> *I claim that Christian culture and civilization are at stake if we do not attend to the nature of the university, a major institution that fosters the cultural and intellectual life of nations and trains the intelligentsia of the ecclesia. No doubt, government and big business are important as are civic societies (like churches, mosques, temples, baseball clubs, music societies, and so on), but all these groups get their intelligentsia from the universities and in this sense the intellectual life of nations finds its primary nourishment in its universities.*[27]

Public theology is challenged to journey with the academy as a crucial partner which will jointly fulfil the calling of academic life to build societies and environments of dignity, justice and joy. Further, the unique contribution of theology as an academic discipline is not limited to the provision of meaning-giving frameworks for life and scientific practices, neither is it limited to spelling out visions of the good life, nor is it confined to offering an idea of the wonderful *telos* of all life in terms of religious convictions. Academic theology also makes indispensable contributions to the contents of discourses. Theology can, for instance, deepen and strengthen justice discourse by appealing to Jewish and Christian traditions which argue that justice cannot be understood and adequately enhanced without the notions of compassion, sacrifice and justification. Justice is therefore always sacrificial, compassionate, restorative justice.

4. Public theology and society

South African theologian, Dirkie Smit, offers a helpful description of modern democratic societies.[28] He is of the opinion that modern societies

27 D'Costa 2005:215.
28 See Smit, 'Oor die unieke openbare rol van die kerk' (1996).

consists of four spheres: the political and economic spheres, as well as the spheres of civil society and public opinion-formation.[29]

The political sphere focuses on the state, government, political power and the control and regulating of public life. The economic sphere entails aspects such as the so-called autonomous market-economy, globalisation, ecology, science and technology. Civil society focuses on themes relating to the relationship between theology and, among others, the institutions, organisations, associations and movements of civil society that, independently from the state and the economy, strive to enhance the quality of life, satisfy needs, and foster the interests of people, changing the nature of society and building a common good, that is, a life of quality for all. Schools, legal bodies, cultural and sports clubs and the neighbourhood are all institutions of civil society, and from a sociological perspective, churches are also a part of civil society. The area of public opinion-formation focuses on themes such as the nature of society, common foundational values for society, common challenges and common priorities for society, whereby the ensuing public opinion paves the way for jointly striving towards the common good.[30]

29 Tracy [note 476] divides the public of society into three spheres; namely, the realm of the technoeconomic structure that deals with the organization and allocation of goods and services; the realm of the polity, where the aim is to embody social justice in the traditions and institutions of society, through the legitimate use of power and force and the regulation of conflict within the rule of law; the realm of culture, including art and religion, which explores and expresses the meaning and values of individual, group and communal existence. See Tracy 1981:6–14.

30 Smit's distinctions coincide with the distinctions of Jürgen Habermas. For him the democratic public consists of four spheres. The first sphere has at its centre: government, civil service, judiciary, parliament, political parties, elections and party competition; outside this core system, but still belonging to the state, is an inner periphery of institutions (such as regulatory agencies) with powers delegated by the state. The second public sphere, which is part of the outer periphery, is organizations that Habermas calls customers; that is, business associations, labour unions and private organizations. The third public sphere, which is also part of the outer periphery, consists of organizations that he calls the suppliers; that is, voluntary associations, churches, new social movements and public interest groups. Fourthly, he makes room for the public opinion that is formed by the dialogue of public interest groups and professionals who, as the sensors of society, identify, draw attention to and interpret social problems and who, with the aid of the media, propose solutions and apply pressure that can bring forth change that will better the situation of especially the disadvantaged. See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (1996).

The dialogue and cooperation of theology with these spheres takes place in appropriate modes. In this regard, the typology of James Gustafson is helpful; he identifies four varieties of moral discourse that suggest four ways in which theology can engage with these spheres: prophetic discourse, narrative discourse, ethical or technical discourse and policy discourse.[31] Prophetic discourse takes on the form of indictment and utopia, where indictment points to the roots of moral or social problems and utopian discourse evokes a hopeful vision, proclaiming an ideal state of affairs in the future that allures and motivates people towards its realisation. In narrative discourse, stories and parables are told of significant events and of moral heroes in the community and tradition, sustaining the common memory and shaping the conscience and moral identities and characters of the members of the community. Thus, more than a rigorous casuistic argument, stories provide illumination and help in the process of moral decision-making. Ethical or technical discourse uses philosophical and rigorous modes of moral argumentation, employing logic, precise distinctions and clear definition of concepts such as justice and rights, and it identifies the rational grounds of autonomous ethics; this may be supported by Christian convictions that can be shared with non-believers. Policy discourse is the discourse of the policy and decision-makers in society, dealing with questions about what is desirable within the constraints of what is possible, whether we have power to affect change, what the time frame is for the achievement of ends, whether we have all the necessary information and knowledge, and so on. Consequently, policy discourse entails that we have to distinguish between matters of ethical principle and the inferences we draw for policy; there is more certainty about the former than the latter.

In the engagement of theology with these sectors of society, attention is to be given to all these discourses. The vision of an alternative society that energises and opens innovative possibilities should be spelled out.[32] Clear critique where injustices exist should be voiced. The grassroots

31 Gustafson, An Analysis of Church and Society Social Ethical Writings (1988:267–78); Gustafson, Varieties of Moral Discourse: Prophetic, Narrative, Ethical and Policy (1988); Gustafson, Moral Discourse about Medicine: A Variety of Forms (1990).

32 Envisioning opens up creative, innovative and surprising possibilities that technical reflection alone cannot. Biblical Studies scholar, Walter Brueggemann (1978:13), argues that envisioning enables us to see new possibilities that are in contrast to the dominant gloom. Vision creates hope in situations of despair and energy where people feel powerless. Vision, on the other hand, also helps us to be clearly aware of the shortcomings of our endeavours and policies; vision opens the door for courageous and constructive criticism. Various forms of the church help

stories of poverty, suffering and the violation of dignity are to be heard, but also the stories of smaller achievements and successes. The technical discourse is of immense importance; it suggests that it is not enough to spell out broad principles and visions of dignity and justice, since the hard work of critical, scientific, interdisciplinary and intersectional analysis and deliberation that can lead to jointly reached preliminary solutions is of crucial importance. Engagement with these various discourses paves the way for appropriate interventions in the policy-making processes on different levels of governance and authority in different spheres of society.[33]

In engaging these spheres, it is important that theology resists the temptation to fulfil the role of being merely a watchdog of society, engaging only in the prophetic discourse of critique and indictment. In the same vein, theology that merely spells out the vision of a good society is not responsible.[34]

The road of partnership that institutions such as the South African Council of Churches currently opt for is perhaps the most fruitful path to follow. In this cooperation, it is important that theology should not be co-opted by the agenda of the state.[35] A guiding principle for this cooperation is

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to develop this vision of an alternative society. For example, Stanley Hauerwas argues that ethicists function like artists: what they see determines not only their choices and actions but also who they are; in other words, we are and we do what we see. Vision determines ethics. See Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (1974); *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (1977); *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (1981); *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (1983) and various other works.

33 Theology's dialogue and interaction with broader spheres of society occurs mainly through the denominational and ecumenical church. There are instances where theologians make direct input in their personal and professional capacities, such as, in ethical committees of hospitals and ethical committees in the business and public media sectors as well as parliamentary portfolio committees. The bulk of inputs are, however, made through church bodies. The remarks made here are, therefore, also relevant to the section on the institutional church below.

34 For an analysis of the prophetic task of churches in the context of poverty in a democratic society, see Nico Koopman, *Freedom of Religion and the Prophetic Role of the Church* (2002); *Let the Plight of the Poor Be Heard: Prophetic Speaking about Poverty Today* (2004).

35 For a description of the danger of Constantinianism, see Nico Koopman, Tussen die duiwel van Konstantinisme en die diep blou see van sektarisme – kerk en staat verhoudinge in postapartheid Suid-Afrika (2001) The concept Constantinianism refers to any co-option of the church by the agenda of the state.

to ask continually what the impact of dialogue, cooperation, compromises and policies is on poor and vulnerable people. One of the most cherished notions in Christian theology, recalled by liberation theology between the 1960s and 1980s, is the conviction that God is in a special way the God of the poor, the destitute and the wronged. The acid test for our social and economic discourses, policies and priorities rests on the question of how they impact on the most vulnerable in society.[36]

The engagement of theology with political institutions, business and trade unions, sport and cultural bodies, schools and other organs of civil society, such as different forms of the modern communication media, within the parameters, modes and styles outlined above, may prove to be fruitful for building human and natural societies of peace, justice and dignity.

5. Public theology and the church

To understand the use of the word 'church' in public theological discourse, Dirkie Smit once again offers a valuable typology, identifying six forms of the church.[37] The first four forms constitute the church as institution; they are worship services, local congregations with their various practices, denominations, and ecumenical bodies. The other two forms constitute the church as organism: namely, individual Christians in their normal daily roles in family, work, neighbourhood and so on, as well as individual Christians in voluntary organisations.

5.1 Worship services

Worship services have the potential to transform people into just people, who can enhance the social and economic transformation of society. The impact of worship on ethics, including economic ethics, is treasured increasingly by a growing number of authors; in particular, the recent collection edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells makes a plea for an end to the separation of worship and ethics that came to the fore under the influence of Immanuel Kant. From their different perspectives, authors demonstrate how worship impacts on ethical choices, policies and moral living in various walks of life, specifically also in the area of social and economic justice.[38] While the transformative, subversive and

36 For an extensive discussion of the notion that God is in a special way the God of the poor and the destitute, see Nico Koopman, *... In a Special Way:The God of the Poor, the Destitute and the Wronged: A Basic and Neglected Conviction of (Reformed) Theology?* (2002).

37 See Smit, Oor die kerk as unieke samelewingsverband (1996).

38 See Hauerwas & Wells The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics (2004).

revolutionary potential of worship services is being investigated by an increasing number of theologians, those participating in worship see alternative realities that are in conflict with the beforehand realities of a world where injustice reigns supreme; thus, they are transformed to participate in the building of these alternative realities. Those who pray for daily bread see a world where there is bread for everyone, and they participate in creating such a world.

5.2 Practices of congregations

Various practices of congregations also enhance the fulfilment of social and economic rights. A definition of Christian practices, according to Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass is: 'things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world'.[39] That is, 'practices' refers to cooperative and meaningful human endeavours in which certain beliefs, virtues and skills are intertwined with certain behaviours, relationships and symbols.[40] Examples of such practices are baptism, Holy Communion, worship, prayer, singing, catechesis, public witness, deaconate, and various dialogues.

5.3 Denominations and ecumenical bodies

Denominations and ecumenical bodies can embark on the so-called priestly task of showing solidarity with the marginalised and the wronged; care, compassion and solidarity are expressed in the various diaconal services of the churches. Denominations and ecumenical bodies also fulfil the prophetic task of clearly spelling out the vision of a good society where people enjoy a life of dignity and justice, which involves constructively critiquing societies that do not meet the conditions of a good society, through declarations of faith, and even confessions of faith. In addition, churches at both the denominational and the ecumenical level have the responsibility for intervening in public policy processes to ensure that laws are formulated that will enhance the vision and ideals of justice and dignity, as found in the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution and the principles of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.[41]

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39 Dykstra & Bass 2002:18.

40 Ibid. 19–21.

41 J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Perspectives on Politics* (2000:264–273), summarises the public responsibility of churches as follows: influence the public ethos; educate the church's membership about particular public issues; participate in advocacy and lobbying initiatives; support specific political parties and candidates with positive records on civil rights and other social justice issues; encourage lay Christians to

5.4 Individual Christians

Individual Christians in their normal daily roles and in voluntary organisations are equipped by the institutional church to participate in appropriate ways in various sectors of society, so that a life of dignity is advanced. The institutional church, through its worship services, congregational practices, denominational and ecumenical policies, declarations, confessional statements and public actions and witnesses, contributes to the transformation of individual Christians into people who live with specific virtues. According to J. Philip Wogaman, a virtue is a tendency and predisposition to be and to act in accordance with goodness.[42] Virtues are incarnate, embodied, practised values.[43] When the virtues, with their personal and public dimensions, are cherished and developed, a significant contribution is made towards the material realisation of a life of dignity for all.[44]

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establish a Christian political party, if circumstances warrant this move; engage in truly extreme situations of oppression in civil disobedience and participate in even violent revolutions. Th e contentious nature of some of these proposals is obvious.

42 See J. Philip Wogaman *Christian Moral Judgment* (1988), especially chapter 2.

43 The Christian tradition formulated seven virtues: four of them are borrowed from Greek philosophical thinking, specifically from Aristotle, and are called the cardinal virtues; including justice. Justice entails that people embody fairness, commitment to a life of equality, dignity and joy for all; just people are even willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the other. Th e other three cardinal virtues are: temperance, discernment or wisdom and fortitude or courage. The three theological virtues that complete the list of seven Christian virtues are faith, hope and love. All these virtues impact on a life of social and economic justice and dignity for all. For very helpful accounts of the virtues see, besides the works mentioned above about approaches to moral decision-making, S. Hauerwas and C. Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (1997) and N. Richardson, *Ethics of Character and Community* (1994).

44 Recently much work has been done in the field of moral and virtue formation, with both the theological and anthropological dimensions of these processes being investigated. For a general orientation to the process of moral formation, see N. Koopman and R. Vosloo, *Die ligtheid van die lig: Morele oriëntasie in 'n postmoderne tyd* (2002). For a very helpful description of the various modes of moral formation, see J. van der Ven, *Formation of the Moral Self* (1998). He identifies seven modes of moral formation: discipline, socialization, value transmission, value clarification, moral development, emotional development and character formation.

6. Public theology as Trinitarian theology

Our analysis thus far demonstrates that engagement with the challenges on the African continent, and cooperation with the three publics, is taking place from an explicit theological perspective. A Trinitarian perspective entails reflection on the meaning and significance of faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for these challenges and in these publics.

6.1 Trinitarian perspective

The Trinitarian perspective helps us to view the various social, political, economic, ecological, sexual, medical, cultural and personal challenges of our context as moral challenges; that is, they are connected to the wellbeing, wholeness and joy of people and the rest of God's creation. Moreover, a Trinitarian approach enables us to view these challenges as theological challenges which are, at heart, related to God; thus, how we describe them, how we prioritise them, how we respond to them and whether or not we take ownership of them reflects faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God, obedience or disobedience, holy or unholy living and trust or distrust of God.

A Trinitarian theological engagement with these challenges in and through the three publics of contemporary South Africa and the rest of Africa can perhaps be described by the famous Christian triad of faith, hope and love: faith expresses the foundation and anchor of our lives in something that happened in the past; hope articulates the joyous future, *telos*, purposes and ends of our lives because of what is yet to come; love reflects the present life of service and compassion on the basis of our past and future realities via remembrance of the past and expectation of the future. People who adhere to a Trinitarian faith are people who remember, and they are people who wait, who sigh and who long for the new. Public theology reflects upon a faith that remembers the triune God: what God has done in the past, what God will do in future and what God is doing currently.

6.2 Planetary theology

In her construction of public theology as planetary theology, Sally McFague employs a Trinitarian approach to theology that offers some contours for doing public theology from a Trinitarian perspective. Her work is valuable since she focuses on the public dimension of Trinitarian faith; both God and the world are crucial for her. In particular, her focus on ecological liberation is inclusive of the liberation of human beings; that is, she does not function with a dualism regarding the salvation of nature and humans. Rather, her model of planetary theology has the salvation of the whole

universe in mind. This inclusive and comprehensive understanding of liberation and salvation makes her thoughts on Trinitarian faith important and interesting. In addition, her work is helpful because it does not ethicise Trinitarian faith or draw blueprints from it for public life; instead, she strives rightly to discover a vision for public life from her Trinitarian faith. While the following brief outline does not entail a thorough critique of her position, its portrayal is sufficient for drawing out some guidelines for a Trinitarian public theology in (South) African contexts.

McFague pleads for a theological engagement with questions of justice and the integrity of creation; in fact, for McFague, theology is public by nature. She states: 'It is not enough that a Christian theology be meaningful to an individual; it must, if it is to be Christian, speak of God's love for the world and whether that world is flourishing as God wishes it to.'[45] Doing theology entails, according to McFague, having a narrative, first-order experience of God to start with. We reflect upon that narrative and we articulate what we believe in a personal credo; a personal, thoughtful expression of an individual's deepest beliefs on which she or he is prepared to act.[46] Then, the faith that is articulated in the credo is understood in the context of the public challenges that we face.

For McFague, Trinitarian thinking does not deal only with the question regarding Jesus of Nazareth as the second person of the Trinity, but the Trinity is about a basic conviction: namely, God's love for the world and the world's response.[47] McFague states that Jesus is an affirmation, deepening and clarification of the Trinity, where the Trinity is a model; a way of speaking about God, an attempt to express God's profound involvement in, with, and for the world. Trinitarian talk is an attempt to express the full dimensions of the experience of God as the one in whom we live and move and have our being; the one from whom we come, to whom we return and in whose presence we live every minute.

6.3 God

First, McFague's Trinitarian picture of God is that of God as creator, sustainer and liberator, God as Christ the saviour, and God as the Spirit. Statements of doxological formulations are ways of speaking about a radical dependence on God for life, love and all the things we need to exist and to flourish.[48] Faith in the creator is not primarily about whether God produced matter from nothing; nor is it about the exact moment in time

45 McFague 2001:15–16.
46 Ibid. 15.
47 Ibid. 143–144.
48 Ibid. 144.

when the universe appeared; rather, faith in God as creator refers to God's total graciousness in the gift of life and God's total commitment to created life. 'God as sustainer' refers to God's provision of the breath, food and necessities required for creation to survive. 'God as liberator' refers to God's protection from the 'evils' and dangers that threaten to enslave and undermine us.[49] McFague summarises faith in God as creator, liberator and sustainer as follows: 'The radically transcendent *and* radically immanent God is the source of everything that is, the power that frees creation from what would destroy it, and the love that nourishes it in every moment.'[50]

6.4 Christology

Secondly, McFague develops two Christological models, namely, prophetic and sacramental Christologies. The prophetic model builds on the prophetic ministry and death of Jesus Christ, advancing love, care, concern, justice, rights, dignity and worth for all humans and all of creation. It proposes a cruciform lifestyle, expressed in a sharing and sacrificial love that challenges the selfishness and greed of consumerist lifestyles.[51] While prophetic Christology focuses on the human work of Christ, sacramental Christology emphasises Christ's divinity; thus, in Jesus, God is present among humans and in all creation. Hence, Jesus as the incarnate *Logos*, Wisdom, or Spirit of God is paradigmatic of God's broader incarnation in the whole universe. Appealing to Aquinas's claim that the whole panorama of nature is needed to reflect the divine glory, McFague argues that the whole of creation is a reflection of God incarnate; it is an image of God.[52] Specifically, the notion of the cosmic Christ accentuates the view that God is the God not only of human history, but also of nature. Thus, sacramental Christology does not reflect only the inclusivity of nature in the realm of God's redemption, it also stresses incarnation. Consequently, the physical dimension of life is vitally important, As McFague states:

> *Incarnational Christology means that salvation is neither solely human nor spiritual; it must be for the entire creation, and it must address what makes different creatures and ecosystems flourish. Incarnational Christology says that God wants all of nature, human beings and all other entities to enjoy well-being in body and spirit. Incarnational Christology, then, expands the ministry and death of Jesus, the model for Christians of 'God with us', to envelop the entire universe.*[53]

49 Ibid. 145–146.
50 Ibid. 143 (original italics).
51 Ibid. 167–168.
52 Ibid. 169–170.
53 Ibid. 169–170.

According to McFague, a sacramental Christology is characterised not only by inclusion and embodiment, but also by hope; hope based in the resurrection of Christ.[54] The resurrection is the first day of the new creation that is preceded by diminishment, pain and death; it is emblematic of the power of God that is on the side of life and its fulfilment.

6.5 Spirit

Thirdly, McFague describes the Spirit as God at work in individuals, the church and human and natural society. The Spirit actualises atonement through salvation from personal sin, and life in the Spirit implies salvation from the communal, systemic, structural and institutional sin that prevents creation from flourishing.[55] The work of the Spirit in individuals implies the formation of people of virtue and character, like Dorothy Day and John Woolman, who serve as walking parables, cautionary tales and role models of cruciform and eventually flourishing life.[56] The Spirit inspires the church to live a counter-cultural life; that is, a sacrificial, cruciform lifestyle. The Spirit feeds the imagination of the church and enables participation in the task of re-envisioning in various publics; hence, according to McFague, the Spirit enables churches to participate in public opinion-formation and policy formulation processes, such that

> *they should see themselves as advocates for such an alternative paradigm within the public discourse. The Christian churches (and all other religions as well) should be part of the conversation for the public good – not as cogs in the wheels of the establishment but as counter-cultural voices for an alternative kind of abundant life for all members of the global family.*[57]

McFague's pneumatology, in keeping with her Christology and doctrine of God, makes room for the universal and cosmic work of the Spirit.[58] The Spirit's work of renewal outside the church implies that Christianity participates with other religions in the public sphere, and that one of our most crucial contributions entails making people aware of the worldviews that underlie their social, economic and political choices. Christians are called upon to help people, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to see differently. Where people see differently, where they see the world as hidden in Christ and where they see with the lenses of cruciform and

54 Ibid. 169–170.
55 Ibid. 185–186.
56 Ibid. 186–195.
57 Ibid. 199.
58 Ibid. 198–202.

sacrificial living, their hearts, minds and wills and eventually laws, policies and social practices are transformed; this renewal and transformation is worked out by the Spirit.

7. Concluding remarks

In considering what light a Trinitarian perspective sheds on addressing the tremendous challenges of (South) African societies in and through the three publics of theology, McFague's helpful analysis offers some, perhaps preliminary, answers; answers that ask for further reflection, deepening and amending.

That is, in the midst of our crises and challenges, African people can believe in a God who has created us for lives of dignity and flourishing; we are liberated by this God from all enslavements so that we never have to live as slaves again; we are nurtured by this God every day of our lives; in Jesus Christ this God shows solidarity with the oppressed and wronged and champions their cause; Jesus Christ includes all people and all of creation in the work of redemption; salvation is not only spiritual but it includes earthly, material, economic, political and cultural salvation; Christ's open grave is the basis of our hope and the assurance of our eventual victory and flourishing, and this is true despite the seemingly persistent presence of 'evil' in the world; while the Spirit transforms individuals, churches, human and natural societies to live with the vision of flourishing societies that flows from the self-giving, sacrificial love of God and God's people.

A Trinitarian approach to theology does offer a rationale to engage theologically with public life in an inclusive and faithful way that does justice to the God who created, liberates, sustains, saves and renews comprehensively and, by doing this, actualises abundant, flourishing life.