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Living more decently in an indecent world? The virtues and vices of a public theologian

Dion A. Forster

THEOLOGY
EYEZENKOLO NEZIFUNDO NGENGQIQO BUTHIXO
TEOLOGIE

2022
Professorial Inaugural Lecture

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ŉ Betaamlike lewe in ŉ onbetaamlike wêreld? Die deugde en ondeugde van ŉ publieke teoloog

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Biography of author

Dion Forster was born in Zimbabwe and grew up in South Africa. After completing high school, he went on to study electrical engineering. In the late 1980s he was accepted as a Methodist lay preacher and started studying theology through Unisa. He entered the ministry of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in 1990 and was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in 1998 after studying at Rhodes University and serving in a variety of cross-cultural church contexts. At Rhodes University he completed a BTh Hons degree (with distinction, 1998) and an MTh degree (with distinction, 2001). He completed his first PhD in Systematic Theology at Unisa in 2006, with a thesis titled "Self-validating consciousness in strong artificial intelligence: An African theological contribution". Part of his time was spent at Cambridge University and Duke University Divinity School. He completed his second PhD in New Testament Studies at Radboud University, Nijmegen in 2017, with a thesis titled "The (im)possibility of forgiveness? An empirical intercultural reading of Matthew 18:15–35". He also completed a Senior Management Development Programme at the University of Stellenbosch Business School (with distinction, 2009).

Dion was appointed as the dean of John Wesley College, the seminary of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, between 2002 and 2008. During that period, he also served as the chairman of the Joint Board for the Diploma of Theology (2004–2005), as a contract lecturer in New Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria and as a contract lecturer in Theological Ethics at Unisa. Between 2008 and 2013, he served as a workplace chaplain at the Power Group, where he participated in the leadership of the Global Day of Prayer, the Unashamedly Ethical and the Exposed – Shine a Light on Corruption movements.

His first appointment at Stellenbosch University came in 2011, when he began working with Ekklesia in a part-time capacity. He took up his current post in the discipline group of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, serving as a senior lecturer in Public Theology and ethics from 2014. He currently serves as the chair of the discipline group of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, director of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, the head of the Unit for Innovation and Transformation, and professor of Systematic Theology, teaching, supervising graduate students and conducting research in systematic theology, public theology and ethics. He also serves as a research fellow at Wesley House, Cambridge, and as an associate of the Allan Gray Centre for Values-Based Leadership at the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business. He is also currently the chair of the board of TEE College.

Dion is married to Megan (who has just completed her PhD in Education Policy Studies). They have two children: Courtney (busy completing an honours degree in Political Science at Stellenbosch University) and Liam (in Grade 9 at Parel Vallei High School in Somerset West).

Living more decently in an indecent world? The virtues and vices of a public theologian

Dion Forster

Abstract

This lecture engages a strange paradox that characterises contemporary life in South Africa. While 92,3% of South Africans indicate that they are religious (in fact, 85,6% of the population claim to be Christian), we continue to struggle with the individual and systemic indecencies of racism, sexism, poverty, violence and environmental destruction. What would be good, right and wise for a Christian theologian to profess in this situation? Answering this question requires careful and critical reflection on the complex intersections of faith and public life. The evils that we face are not only evidenced in the indecent behaviours and beliefs of individuals; they are also sustained and intensified by indecent systems and institutions (such as economic systems, political systems and religious institutions, to name just a few). The Christian tradition confesses that God, who created the world, is good. Moreover, Christians confess that what God created is good, and that God's good creation is intended for good. This is a political claim that has consequences for both faith and public life. As persons who are being formed in the image of Christ, what is the fitting, proper and decent thing to do when encountering evil? To understand how we might live more decently, we should focus on practising patience, acting with courage and cultivating a prophetic imagination so that our hope for a better world does not remain a mere fantasy. This reflection will be grounded upon a critical understanding of the nature and responsibility of doing public theology in South Africa today.

SEO:

Public theology; ethics; South Africa; virtue ethics; decency; evil; patience; courage; imagination; paradox.

Living more decently in an indecent world? The virtues and vices of a public theologian

Prof Dion A. Forster, Inaugural lecture, Stellenbosch University, August 2022

"... what made living almost worthwhile for me were the saints I met. They could be anywhere. They are people behaving decently in an indecent society."

– Kurt Vonnegut[1]

Living more decently in an indecent world? The virtues and vices of a public theologian

The tradition of an inaugural lecture is that a newly appointed, or promoted, professor should have something to 'profess'. Having spent years reading, listening, reflecting and writing, it is expected that one would have a body of work, and perhaps even a few good ideas, that are worth sharing. Well, it is not surprising that I have some ideas! You will have to judge the quality of these for yourself. Yet, my hope is that this lecture, as tentative as it may be, might offer a few points on which to ponder. This lecture did not come easily, and rightly so. It took much thought, reading and conversation, and I am immensely grateful to be able to share it with you. I will confess that I feel the weight of this moment, both because all of you (for whom I care deeply) are here to listen with me, and because the beliefs and practices of the Christian faith matter so much to me. I do fear that I may not do justice to you or to them. But, here goes!

This lecture engages a strange 'veridical paradox'[2] that characterises contemporary life in South Africa. While 92,3% of South Africans indicate that they are religious (in fact, 85,6% of the population profess to be Christian),[3] we continue to struggle with the individual and systemic indecencies of racism, sexism, poverty, violence and environmental destruction.

Recognising these realities, I reflected a great deal about what would be good, right and wise for a Christian theologian to profess.[4] Answering this question requires careful and critical reflection upon the complex intersections of faith and public life. The evils that we face are not only evidenced in the indecent behaviour and beliefs of individuals; they are also sustained and intensified by indecent systems and institutions (such as economic systems, political systems and religious institutions, to name just a few). As Paul Ricoeur said, if we are to live ethically, we will need to understand how we might live "a good life, with and for others, within just institutions".[5]

The Christian tradition confesses that God, who created the world, is good. Moreover, Christians believe that what God created is good, and that God's good creation is intended for good. This is both a theological and a political claim that has consequences for faith and public life. As a Christian who is committed to being formed in the image of Christ, what is the fitting, proper and decent thing to do when encountering evil? To understand how we might live more decently, I shall focus on practising patience as an antidote to violence, acting with courage as a commitment to the truth and cultivating a prophetic imagination so that our hope for a better world does not remain a mere fantasy. This reflection will be grounded upon a critical

[1] Kurt Vonnegut, in Kevin A. Boon, *At Millennium's End: New Essays on the Work of Kurt Vonnegu*t (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), viii.

[2] A veridical paradox is a claim, or an instance, that seems absurd, yet appears to be true regardless of the absurdity; cf. Willard Van Orman Quine, *The Ways of Paradox, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 12, 17.

understanding of the nature and responsibility of doing theology, indeed public theology, in South Africa today.

As the question mark in the title signals, this is a project of inquiry. It is tentative rather than conclusive. It is certainly not a story to end all narratives; merely a few lines of an ongoing tale. I hope that my profession embodies something of the virtues that are necessary to be a Christian theologian, indeed the virtues required to do the work of an ethicist and public theologian, in South Africa today.

On being more than one thing

One of the strange things about my appointment in the Faculty of Theology is that I am not one thing, but two (perhaps more!) My appointment is to the Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology in the subdiscipline of Systematic Theology and Ethics. Specifically, I was appointed to a position in Public Theology and Theological Ethics.

I am grateful for this appointment and for all that it allows me to do. I am expected to spend my time reading, observing, thinking, serving and contributing from within these fields. Being a theologian, and an ethicist, tasked to think about the implications of the intersections of faith and public life matches my values, passions and interests very well.

I have had to work hard over the years to put into words what I have hoped to say.[6] The philosopher Richard Fleming says that writing one's thoughts for others to read is difficult, as we "try to mean what we say using words that are not our own. We find our life fated in the language of our ancestors, in the language we inherit from them … Hence to understand what words mean we must understand what those who use them mean".[7] So, please be warned: Parts of this lecture may be surprisingly personal. Over the years I have said many things about many things. I think I have enjoyed writing more than my students and colleagues have enjoyed reading what I write. In part, that is because my interests are somewhat diverse, perhaps even eclectic.

My first published academic article dealt with posthuman consciousness and an evolutionary cosmology (working in theology and the natural and social sciences).[8] My most recent publications focus on public theologies in Africa, African identities and theological ethics, a politics of forgiveness among black and white South Africans, and yes, the relationship between theology and the sciences.

In spite of the variety of topics and disciplines that I have engaged in my work to date, there is some coherence – at least for me! I believe that I have been engaged in what Nadia Marais calls "systematic unsystematic theology".[9] This is an approach to theology "which makes use of systematic arguments and analyses without resorting to formulating systematically worked out Christian doctrines".[10] In some sense, I have taken my lead from Mercy Amba Oduyoye (an African Methodist matriarch), who said that instead of "telling people what questions to ask and then furnishing them with the answers", a theologian should "listen to the questions people [are] asking and then seek the answers".[11] This description resonates with how I think about my work as a South African Methodist working in public theology and theological ethics.

As I scanned my publications and reflected on the major shifts and developments in my work, I see that I have been trying to answer a few important questions that resonate strongly with what John de Gruchy suggests shape theology: "what does it mean to be human, who am I [and who are we], is there room for God, and how will future generations live?"[12] A great deal of what I have written has dealt with ethical

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[3] Willem J. Schoeman, "South African Religious Demography: The 2013 General Household Survey," *HTS Theological Studies* 73, no. 2 (February 16, 2017): 3; https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i2.3837; Statistics South Africa, "General Household Survey 2013" (2014), 12, http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182013.pdf.

[4] As you will see, I believe that one way to do responsible (public) theology is to listen for the questions that people and institutions are asking in one's context and then seek to engage them with these questions using the resources of theological and other intellectual traditions. Hence, this

questions that relate to the character of individuals and communities (societies, denominations, political constructions, etc.), connecting contemporary concerns to what we read in the Christian scriptures and what we have come to confess in the historical traditions of the Christian faith.

Both of my PhDs were interdisciplinary in their methodological approach (the first focusing on systematic theology and cognitive neuroscience;[13] the second on New Testament studies and social psychology).[14] Both projects emerged from, and sought to reflect upon, what it means to be Christian and African. Both projects focused on the complexity of human identity, as a theological concern, in relation to the social, economic and political challenges of our context, and both were dedicated to my children and the children of fellow South Africans.

Learning to live more decently in an indecent world

If I was to identify one common thread that seems to run through all that I have done, and that I am busy doing, I would say that I am *trying to understand how faith in Christ might help people to live more decently in an indecent world.* This phrasing is not my own. It comes from the American novelist Kurt Vonnegut. He was once asked how he made sense of living in the midst of the Vietnam war, rising poverty, political corruption under Richard Nixon and America's ongoing racial injustice. He replied, "… what made living almost worthwhile for me were the saints I met. They could be anywhere. They are people behaving decently in an indecent society."[15]

I tell my students that one approach to the work of theology is to engage the semantic meanings of words and the grammar of sentences. Perhaps this is a reason why I have found a home working with the sacred texts of Christianity (particularly the New Testament) and the philosophical and contextual meanings of African Christianities (as they relate to dogmatics and ethics).

So, first, my work is a journey of seeking to understand and learning what it means to be subject to the radical rule of Jesus the Christ, the radically loving, peaceful, just, liberative and inclusive King. That has required study, reflection and being in the Church as well as in the world.

Second, my work has sought to understand how people live, and ought to live. Understanding people and the systems within which we live requires a sober evaluation of the social imagination, the cultural imagination and the practices that constitute our lives and the living of them. These include the political, economic, cultural and religious systems within which we "live and move and have our being".[16]

Third, there is a kind of quality to the life that I long to understand how to live and to encourage others to want to live. It is this kind of life that can be characterised as decent in a certain sense.

Let us pause for a moment to reflect on this word 'decent', to consider what it might mean in this context. My understanding of decency is influenced by the definition provided by the philosopher Avishai Margalit, who asserts that a "decent society is one whose institutions do not humiliate people".[17] His understanding is shaped by wrestling with the ongoing injustice that Palestinians face under Israeli occupation.[18] He asserts that it is the confronting of evil that brings us to a politics of decency.[19] Now, while I understand that we should commit ourselves fully to the pursuit of justice, Margalit argues that decency is a further step in such pursuit, or at times a necessary step along the way to realising a particular quality of justice. I am convinced that my faith in Christ demands that wherever I identify the humiliating and destructive presence of evil, the

question is what I believe could be posed to a public theologian in South Africa who works at a public university, who trains people for ministry in its various forms and who is called upon to provide descriptive insight, and at times normative ethical and theologic al contributions, on the intersections of faith and public life. Please see Nico Koopman's discussion of the complimentary relationship of Paul Ricoeur's understanding of the good, the right and the wise in Nico N. Koopman, "Towards a Human Rights Culture in South Africa: The Role of Moral Formation," *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa* 48, no. 1 (2007): 109.

decent thing to do (the thing that is proper, fitting or suitable) is to confront it.

Working to undo systemic humiliation is an urgent task. I liken it to the well-known idea in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 1933 essay, "The Church and the Jewish Question".[20] Bonhoeffer argues that in the face of systemic injustice, citizens should not just "bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but […] seize the wheel itself".[21]

So, why the emphasis on discerning how to live decently, rather than just advocating for living justly? First, I take it for granted that Christians should live in a way that establishes justice in the world, as justice is an aspect of the character of God and we are creatures who are to live according to the image and will of our creator. Karl Barth speaks of the dialectic tension between human agency and God's will, saying that God has made "our business His own, [God] is zealous about His divine justice in order that there may be genuine human justice under His heaven upon our earth".[22] I find the grammar of Barth's statement as important as its content. Because God is just, we are to be just in our human affairs, as God is zealous for justice.

Second, I doubt that there are many people of conscience, and even fewer people with a sincere Christian faith, who would dispute that justice for all humanity, and all of creation, is not a worthy ideal. However, where the problem arises is when there are disagreements about what constitutes justice. Justice is an ideal, and as such it is open to dispute. Let me illustrate this by means of an important historical example. The Marikana massacre, during which 47 people were killed at the Lonmin mine exactly 10 years ago today (14–16 August 2012), was, unsurprisingly, about a tension between justice and decency. Peter Alexander writes:

> The workers' demand was simple. They wanted their employer, Lonmin, to listen to their case for a *decent wage*. But this threatened a system of labour relations that had boosted profits for Lonmin, and had protected the privileges of the dominant union, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). It was decided to deploy 'maximum force' against the workers.[23]

In labour relations, we have become accustomed to the phrase 'living wage', which serves as what is believed to be a basic minimum that allows workers to subsist.[24] However, think about the brutality of a world in which we would settle for *mere* living as an acceptable standard. At Marikana, the workers were clear: They were advocating not only for a 'living wage'; they were holding their employer to a higher standard. They wanted a 'decent wage'.[25] Decency, used in this context, was more than basic justice. Decency for the victims of the Marikana massacre was about more than just securing the right to subsist (meeting their bare needs for survival). It was about securing a standard of living that could deconstruct the historical indecencies of migrant labour, the separation of families, living in poverty and being humiliated and dehumanised by rich and powerful people and institutions. The question that Christ might ask, that Christians *should* ask, is what would be the decent thing to do so that no person is dehumanised, abused or humiliated (that no injustice is done), while a dispute about justice is being settled?

This is the way I understand, and use, the notion of decency in this lecture. I am careful to differentiate Margalit's understanding of a decent society from some understandings of decency that are used to separate and humiliate people, rather than to respect and recognise them. I realise that decency has been misused by some religious communities over the centuries as a form of exclusion based on moral judgements about what is considered indecent, for example certain sexual behaviours, forms of dress, types of speech or action.[26] The social historian Keith Thomas rightly points out that what is respectable and decent (in the narrow moral sense that I have just described) changes from time to time, and from culture to culture. He relates how a French visitor to England in the 18th century was shocked to see 20 men drinking

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[5] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (translated by Kathleen Blamey) (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172.

[6] For a full list of my research and publications, please see https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7292-6203.

[7] Richard Fleming, *First Word Philosophy: Wittgenstein-Austin-Cavell, Writings on Ordinary Language Philosophy* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004), 127.

from the same beer mug (which was for the men a sign of friendship and trust). Yet, at the same time, an English lord was shocked to see that every beer drinker in Paris had their own mug (which he considered distrustful and rude to other drinkers).[27] The point is that we should be careful not to judge smaller historical or cultural differences as indecent, but rather look out for the larger indecencies that may challenge our collective humanity and the survival of our planet. In fact, in her book *Menschenrechte und Menschenpflichten: Schlüsselbegriffe für eine humane Gesellschaft*, Aleida Assmann argues that in times of political, cultural and moral dispute, the ability to treat difference with respect, empathy and humility served to help societies deal with some very difficult political, social and moral concerns.[28] Robert Vosloo contends that the communicative behaviour, "waarvolgens ander nie verneder, beledig of gekwes word nie" [where others are not humiliated, insulted, or hurt], which is a form of empathetic decency, played an important role in dealing with difference, conflict and even injustice over the centuries.[29]

This is the way I hope my work has sought to think about decency: as a form of engagement (both in thought and in action) that addresses some of the immediate, yet larger, evils of our time (such as poverty, racism, sexism, violence, greed) in pursuit of the ultimate end of justice. Decency, in this sense, is about more than mere survival; it equates to the flourishing of humanity and all of creation.

It is not that I think the world is inherently bad, or evil – quite the opposite. Throughout my life I have benefitted from the kindness and care of others, particularly as a child. This has left me with a great deal of optimism about the possibility of goodness in the world. I believe that the world, and humanity as part of this world, are created good. Yet I am enough of a realist to understand that the world is not currently as it was created to be.

Here is the first surprise (possibly!). I do not believe that it is the work of the church or the work of Christians to make the world a better place. Such a belief would be a denial of the very claim that I made just a few moments ago – that the world (and people) are created good. No, like Stanley Hauerwas, I believe that the role and responsibility of Christians and Christian communities is to live in such a manner (a manner that is decent, fitting and responsible) that witnesses to a way of life that may help all of us to re(dis)cover what we were created to be. Hauerwas writes that the "first task of the church is not to make the world just. The first task of the church is to make the world the world".[30] Our world is not ontologically unjust; it has, however, become indecent.

The ethicist Chesire Calhoun references Ebenezer Scrooge (from Charles Dickens' 1843 novel, *A Christmas Carol*) as an example of someone who was proud of doing business responsibly, paying his debts and being 'just' by the standards of the law. Yet, he was indecent in the way that he treated his family. He was unnecessarily harsh with his employees, lacking mercy with his debtors, and so proved himself to be "a shamefully inadequate moral agent – a being without common decency".[31]

I hope that this offers some insight into how I use the term 'decent' to explain the purpose and intention of my work. I believe in a good God, who created the world good, and I believe that the good world is created towards good ends. In my work I want to understand where we have gone wrong, and how we can once again become what we are created to be: God's good creation, intended for good. Such belief has some obvious political implications. This has necessitated that I engage with the intersections of faith and public life in its varying forms.

Hence, you could characterise what I do as a form of 'public theology'. So, let's dwell on that for a few moments.

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[8] Dion Forster, "Post-human Consciousness and the Evolutionary Cosmology of Pierre Teilhard de Ch ardin," *Grace and Truth: A Journal of Catholic Reflection for Southern Africa* 22, no. 2 (2005): 29–44.

[9] Nadia Marais, "Imagining Human Flourishing? A Systematic Theological Exploration of Contemporary Soteriological Discourses" (Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2015), 28, http://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/97855; David H. Kelsey, Imagining Redemption (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 87.

How (not) to be a public theologian?

What is public theology, and what is a public theologian?[32] Stanley Hauerwas once wrote an article with the title "How to (Not) Be a Political Theologian".[33] In the article he notes, in his characteristic wry and humorous way, that he must be a political theologian because others have identified him as such.[34] Much of the article is spent on unpacking the dangers of naming things. He writes, "I have always resisted modifying theology with descriptors that suggest theology is the possession of certain groups or perspectives."[35] Central to his argument is the common-sense claim that all "theology reflects a politics whether that politics is acknowledged or not".[36] Hence, he is cautious to speak of "political theology", as that might create the impression that some theologies are political, while others are not. He does, however, concede that whether or not he is a political theologian depends to a great extent on how 'political theology' is defined.[37]

I feel similarly about being identified as a public theologian. For me, all theology has public implications, whether this is acknowledged or not. The South African theologian Nico Koopman sums this up very aptly when he writes that the "church [and the Christian faith] exists in public, is a part of it and impacts upon it both knowingly and unknowingly".[38] Similarly, the Swiss-Brazilian theologian Rudolf von Sinner notes, "of course, Christianity and theology are public, strongly present in everyday life and in the media, [they are] missionary in different ways, not private, not secret."[39] In this sense, at least, we could conclude, as Jürgen Moltmann does:

> … [f]rom the perspective of its origins and its goal, Christian theology is public theology, for it is the theology of the kingdom of God … As such it must engage with the political, cultural, educational, economic and ecological spheres of life, not just with the private and ecclesial spheres.[40]

So, while I agree that all theology is public in this broad sense, I would not claim that all theologies are public theologies.

I have spent a fair amount of time trying to understand what 'public theology' might mean.[41] Simply stated, I know that the naming of a thing must be done carefully, as it can either be a descriptive or a prescriptive task, and this distinction can be misunderstood.[42] This is true for the terminology that academic theologians use in research and writing. Hence, some flexibility, indeed generosity, is required in understanding the various meanings and usages of the term public theology'.

When using the term 'public theology', I am convinced that all theologies are narratives, stories, that stem from a complex set of histories, friendships, commitments and discourses. Kenneth Latourette explains in *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* that the story of the Christian faith can be related to its spread across varying geographies (i.e. the socio-historical consideration of Christian individuals and groups in different places at different times), varying expressions throughout the ages (i.e. the philosophical and theological consideration of how new ideas led to the establishment of movements, communities and expressions of the faith) and finally the impact of Christianity upon humankind and the rest of creation, and vice versa (i.e. an anthropological, sociological, political, economic and ecological study of how communities and their beliefs engaged with, and were engaged by, other people and the rest of non-human creation).[43] Christians throughout the ages have found themselves located within particular histories and contexts that do not, and will not, remain static. Therefore, we should not be surprised when some descriptors, terminologies, methods and characteristics find wider recognition and purchase, and outgrow their initial usages and understandings. Dirk J. Smit does a marvellous job of tracing six narratives (stories) that led to some usages

[10] Marais, "Imagining Human Flourishing?", 29.

[11] Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 3.

[12] John W. de Gruchy, B*onhoeffer's Questions: A Life-changing Conversation* (London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019), 175.

and understandings of the term 'public theology' in his article "The Paradigm of Public Theology: Origins and Development".[44] These six stories capture some of the ways in which the term was used, understood and developed in certain points of history and certain contexts. However, this took on a new meaning with the establishment of a particular 'community' in 2007 with its history and debates centring around the Global Network for Public Theology and the *International Journal for Public Theology.*[45] Smit explains, …

> [t]hose who claim to pursue public theology have widely different views on what they are doing. Many who seemingly engage in doing public theology never use the term at all – and some deliberately choose not to. Those who critique the notion hardly share any consensus on what they are rejecting. Opinions differ. What should be included as public theology? What does not qualify as public theology? Who is actually doing public theology – where, and how?[46]

Smit argues that a normative definition may matter less than we think.[47] I find his explanation of the fluidity of public theology helpful and instructive. He acknowledges that such a thing as public theology exists. Indeed, in contemporary theological study it is a "growing field" that is "already widespread and popular".[48] This is certainly the case among African theologians.[49] Yet, he makes this claim in a context in which we are not quite sure what public theology is.

In this sense, public theology must rightly be considered not as a normative discipline, but as a richly diverse, at times even different, set of commitments, approaches and issues.

In my recent work I, like Smit, have highlighted the difference between using the term 'public theology' *descriptively* (with a small 'p' and small 't', where 'public' is an adjective describing forms of theological engagement in relation to public life), and *prescriptively* (with a capital 'P' and capital 'T', as a noun that names an emerging community of scholars, a certain set of debates, a commitment to studying particular methods, schools of thought, people, and normative contributions in a field called Public Theology).[50]

To my mind, this displays a sensitivity to the notion that public theologies are not, and should not, be totalising or all-encompassing. Of course, like all theologies, those who engage in what they claim to be public theology, or those whose work is described as public theology by others, are explicitly or implicitly taking some position. In that sense their work is both "visionary and normative" not because of the descriptive terminology that is attached to it, but because it "seeks to make a difference, to serve what matters".[51]

In part, it is for this reason that I opt to speak of 'public theologies' in the plural rather than in the singular form.[52] I do so because I understand that the term has had multiple uses and applications throughout history (in general) and has its own conceptual and linguistic history (in particular).[53] Moreover, I do so because I am not convinced that public theology is a discipline or methodology. Like Dirk J. Smit and Russel Botman, I tend to view it in paradigmatic terms.[54]

In relation to this understanding, I am a public theologian in both a descriptive and a prescriptive sense. In a descriptive sense, I believe that all theology (including my own work) has public consequences and is informed and shaped by its interaction with public life. In the prescriptive sense, I formally participate in the community of scholars who are part of the Global Network for Public Theology and serve as an editor and have published in the *International Journal for Public Theology*.

Public theology, understood in this sense, is engaged in the work of 'public reasoning' with, alongside, and sometimes in spite of, the conceptions and expectations of three typological publics.[55] These are the church, the academy and society at large (according to David Tracy).[56]

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[13] Dion A. Forster, "Validation of Individual Consciousness in Strong Artificial Intelligence: An African Theological Contribution" (PhD, University of South Africa, 2006), http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/2361.

[14] Dion A. Forster, T*he (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness: An Empirical Intercultural Bible Reading of Matthew 18:15–35* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019).

[15] Kurt Vonnegut, in Boon, *At Millennium's End*, viii.

Rudolf von Sinner rightly points out that historically, in terms of both Christian mission and Christian identity, many forms of Christianity are deliberately engaged in public life and deeply committed to certain values (such as justice, peace and flourishing), as Christianity "is a public religion in the sense of conveying its message to the wider public, taking an interest in the well-being not only of its members, but also of those who are not part of a church or congregation".[57]

This has often meant that public theologies have been allied to the commitments and contributions of, for example, Kairos theologies, Black theologies, feminist theologies, queer theologies and liberationist theologies. In this regard, Smit comments on the characteristic of 'inter-contextuality', saying that,

> … [p]ublic theologians should learn from one another and from what is happening in other contexts without any attempt to emulate one another or to reduce what is called public theology to one comprehensive and all-inclusive methodology. Being inter-contextual, being widely divergent and different, belongs to the very nature of what is today known as public theology.[58]

I resonate with such an understanding of the nature and scope of contemporary public theologies as they relate to the descriptive and the prescriptive field that is emerging. My hope is that public theologies, and public theologians, will remain deeply committed to inter-contextual engagement in order to critically reflect on the intersections of faith and public life.

On the virtues and vices of a public theologian in South Africa today

I have been reading the work of the Methodist theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas for decades now. This is a joy that I share with many people who have had a significant impact on my life (such as the late Neville Richardson, Robert Vosloo, Nico Koopman and Arne Rasmusson). While I try to read everything that Hauerwas writes (which is no mean feat!), there is one little book that I have read more than any other. The book is called *The Character of Virtue: Letters to a Godchild*.[59] In the book he writes a letter to his godchild, Laurie Wells, each year on the anniversary of his baptism. I find Hauerwas's way of thinking about the world, and particularly Christian hope in the world, very instructive. He writes,

> … to be a hopeful person means you rightly will want the world in which you find yourself to be a better one … But you'll have to be patient, courageous, and imaginative for that hope to be more than a fantasy.[60]

In this quotation there are a number of important tensions at work. First is the tension that while it is not our task to make the world good, we are not absolved from our responsibility to live in such ways that goodness is seen, experienced and embraced in the world. Second, Hauerwas's ethics is based on becoming a person of virtue who rejoices in the worship of God. He writes to Laurie: "I hope you'll find it to be true that to be a person of virtue is to learn to rejoice in what we have been given. And to learn to rejoice in this is called 'worship.'"[61] So, in a slightly different way to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, but in keeping with the tradition of virtue ethics exemplified by Alasdair Macintyre, Hauerwas emphasises the storied nature of the good life. He writes: "[o]ne of the wonders of our lives is that we don't have to create the world because God has made it possible for us to enjoy – and would have us share his delight in – what he has created."[62] What Hauerwas is doing here is to place us in our right relationship to God and to God's good world. Sometimes when I listen to, or read, contemporary theologians, I have a sense that they have forgotten that God is the one who creates,

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[16] Acts 17:28, *The New Revised Standard Version Bible with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[17] Avishai Margalit, The Decent Society (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1.

[18] He is known in some Zionist circles as the "Anti-Israel Israeli professor", see https://knowbdsinisrael.com/lecturers/avishai-margalit/.

[19] Margalit, *The Decent Society*, 136.

sustains creation and recreates the world. This does not mean that we are rendered passive, or that we do not have any role to play in God's redemptive plan for the world. Quite the opposite! It calls us to deep discernment and radical political action, when we see that we (or others) are living according to contending stories, half-truths and blatant lies, about the good aims of the good creation that is created by the good God. In this regard, Hauerwas contends that "[o]ne of the tasks of theology is to help us discern how our lives may be possessed by unacknowledged stories that make our ability to live in gratitude for the gift of our existence impossible".[63]

What are the stories that shape your life? They may be narratives of race, or gender, or of economics, or culture. How do these 'unacknowledged stories' relate to the story of the loving God who gave his life for our liberation, and who longs that we would story our lives according to the same radical love that can contribute to fullness of life, and flourishing, for humanity and all creation?

So, while we rejoice in what we have been given, and how we have been made, we are not rendered passive in the world. No, to be virtuous, to be decent in the face of obvious indecency, will require exacting action. Again, as Hauerwas claims, the "virtues are habits acquired through training in practices and activities that make up a way of life".[64] Notice that the words that he uses, namely "training" and "practices and activities", are active words; they convey the need for discipline, effort, commitment, even sacrifice. Now, while there are traditionally seven virtues listed in the Christian tradition, there are fourteen vices. Aristotle said that having too much of something (e.g. being a glutton) is morally as problematic as not have enough of something (e.g. experiencing hunger).[65] A virtue lies between the two extremes of vices. For example, too much confidence could result in recklessness, while too little confidence could result in fear. Courage is the virtue that would strike the right balance between the vices of recklessness and fear. Traditionally, there are three theological virtues – faith, hope and love – and four cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. The Anglican ethicist Samuel Wells suggests that virtue "names the ways good habits become inscribed on our character by steering between excess and defect".[66]

This makes the task of the theologian significant. Theologians are not called to be smart, qualified, famous, or even to be promoted! When we seek those things, we contribute towards the loss of the true power of our faith and our Church, to witness towards God's good creation. In recent decades, the Church has lost much of its social and political power to form society. This may come as another surprise: I do not necessarily think that this a bad thing, as we have not always done well when exercising social and political dominance. However, what does worry me is that we are increasingly losing our power to form even the lives of those who want to be Christian. I very much want to be Christian, although I have not yet managed to get it right. Sometimes I fear that I may never get it right. One of the temptations a failing Christian faces, particularly a Christian theologian, is to try to be smart. Doing research, presenting ideas at conferences, publishing books and articles, and building an 'academic CV' can easily become a distraction from the good work of learning to be Christian and learning to be a decent human being. As Stanley Hauerwas reminds me, there is a "danger in becoming so articulate that we might confuse thought and reflection with living well".[67] More pointedly, he cautions people like me not to overestimate the work that we are doing: Theology is significant, but we must not misjudge its importance. He places the emphasis for virtuous living where it rightly belongs:

> The church calls some out to think hard about the Christian faith, but I think you'll discover that the bearers of the virtues for sustaining the Christian faith aren't necessarily theologians. Instead, they're the people who, day in and day out, through small acts of tenderness and beauty, sustain the kind of life

[20] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in Clifford J. Green and Michael DeJonge, eds., *The Bonhoeffer Reader* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 2013), 374. Bonhoeffer's comment relates to a state that has created either too much, or too little, law and order. Too little order is where some citizens are deprived of their fundamental rights, whereas too much law and order would be where the state deliberately attacks the freedoms and rights of its citizens (in his case, it was the banning of baptised Jews from worship, or curtailing Christ ian care for Jewish people).

> we call Christian. In short, Christians lead lives that would be unintelligible if God wasn't present to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[68]

Hauerwas's description of the virtuous person holds a strong resonance for me with Vonnegut's description of the "saints" he met, who were people who "could be anywhere", "people behaving decently in an indecent society".[69]

In this last section of the lecture I want to reflect on the virtues that I hope might shape my life, and my scholarship, as a South African theologian who hopes for a better world. Earlier in this lecture we were reminded that if our hope is to be more than fantasy, we would have to live in a way that embodies patience, courage and imagination.[70] I'd like to share how I understand these to be virtuous practices that witness to the kind of world that I believe our faith in the good God, who created us good, and for good, has intended us to be.

Patience as the mean between violence and apathy

South Africa remains a deeply wounded society. Twenty-eight years after the end of political apartheid, the lived reality of the majority of young black South Africans does not differ all that much from the experiences of racial enmity, poverty and spatial separation that their parents, grandparents and historical forebears experienced growing up, first under colonialism and later under apartheid.

South Africa has a predominantly young population. The average age of its citizens is 27,6 years. Shockingly, 55,5% of the population live below the international poverty line of less than US$2 per day and the unemployment rate sits at 34,5%, with youth unemployment at 66,5%.[71] Moreover, South Africa remains the most economically unequal society in the world.[72] What is of particular concern is that the injustices of white privilege and black subjugation continue to be evidenced in the economic and spatial inequalities of black and white South Africans at present. The average South African household income is only R930 (US$55) per month. White South African's earn on average three times more than black South Africans.[73] White South Africans, constituting less than 10% of the population,[74] continue to dominate the ownership of private land, owning 72% of such land,[75] while black South Africans, who make up 89% of the population, only own 26% of private land. This is indecent.

Social economist Sampie Terreblanche indicates that on average, white South Africans have never been as prosperous as they have become in the years since the end of political apartheid.[76] Achille Mbembe, an African philosopher and political scientist, notes that young black South Africans are expressing their political, social and economic discontent by turning to a politics of identity (pitting the races against one another), a generational politics (where young people are increasingly distrusting of older generations of activists and liberation leaders as 'sell-outs') and a politics of impatience (where young people seek rapid and significant transformation through revolution rather than social evolution).[77]

I don't find this impatience surprising. So, how could it be possible for a South African theologian, committed to justice and decency, to profess the virtue of patience? If I am to be a Christian theologian, I will need to take the sources and traditions that inform Christianity seriously. Patience features prominently in the Christian scriptures and in Christian discipleship. We must, however, 'trouble' the popular understanding of patience as calling for a kind of passivity in the face of injustice and suffering by seeing how it is presented in some instances in the Christian scriptures. Many Christians would know that patience is listed as one of

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[21] Bonhoeffer in ibid.

[22] Karl Barth, *God Here and Now* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 38.

[23] Peter Alexander et al., *Marikana: Voices from South Africa's Mining Massacre* (Ahtens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012), 25, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n3k0 (emphasis added).

the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22. I have often heard preachers employ this text to admonish people to remain passive, silent, even thankful in the face of suffering and injustice. I fear that such a view of patience may cause our hope for a better world to remain nothing but a fantasy. It is worth noting that the Greek word **μακροθυμεω** *(makrothymeō)*, as with most of the virtues presented in the New Testament, does not take its primary meaning from the historical, personal or political situation it is engaging (i.e. the injustice, abuse, disregard, misrecognition, slander, etc.). Rather, it takes its semantic meaning from the religious and moral tradition in which it functions. Its meaning is derived from the theological beliefs that the author(s) have about the person and character of God and those who imitate God (see, for example, Heb 6:12; Jas 5:7–8). To be patient (**μακροθυμεω**) is to retain a state of "emotional calm in the face of provocation or misfortune", as God does when faced with our sin.[78] God's patience with a sinful and broken humanity is not passive, not mere resignation to sin. It does not disregard evil or condone injustice. God is not indecently patient in the face of evil. Rather, as we see in the New Testament presentation of the life, work and ministry of Jesus, there is a kind of urgency and dynamism to right what is wrong (see, for example, Lk 4:16–22; Matt 21:12–13; Jn 8:1–11). Yet, there is a certain quality and character to the work of justice, liberation and transformation that is presented in the telling of Jesus' life. His work of redemption is undertaken in ways that are not violent or destructive.[79] This is one of the surprising aspects of the presentation of the virtues in the New Testament, and what makes them so different from Roman and Grecian views. The New Testament often portrays the rich and powerful as destined for failure. The virtues are not available to the elite – only to those who were disenfranchised, disempowered and disregarded at that time, such as slaves, women, the sick and children.[80] Simply stated, we learn from the portrayal of Jesus[81] and the theologies of some passages in the New Testament that "patience is the virtue necessary to sustain a people who have disavowed violence as a means to settle disputes".[82] Robert Vosloo writes that the relationship between the "Triune life and the Christian life" requires "imitation, imagination, and participation".[83] We are to become as God is, and live analogously as the persons of the Godhead live in relation to one another and to creation.

God's patience shows us that God will not deal violently with the violence of sin and injustice.[84] God chooses not to crush and defeat us, but rather to liberate and redeem us. God redeems us from the perpetual cycle of violence evidenced in patriarchy, poverty, racism, xenophobia, greed, etc. In Colossians 3:12–17 we encounter a presentation of a list of virtues: "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." The passage next moves on to a discussion of love (v. 14): "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." I would commend the whole pericope to you, but what is interesting is that patience comes at the end of the list. Without patience we cannot have true love that binds us to God and to one another. We already know the damage that was caused when a group of people used violence, prejudice, identity politics, selfishness, corruption and power in an attempt to create what they thought was the perfect society for them and their kind. It is called colonialism and apartheid. We will be frustrated by the time that it takes to become the people that God wants us to be, but we must remember that we are living for a particular vision, being formed into a redemptive story for humanity and all of creation. Emmanuel Katonogole calls this a "vision of reconciliation through the cross" that is built on the "patterns of patience and courage" that are necessary to redeem relationships, indeed all of creation, for the flourishing life.[85]

What is the alternative to the 'patterns of patience and courage'? Surely, as Christians, we cannot achieve redemptive aims by obliterating those who stand in our way? This would make us no better than those oppressors who sought, impatiently, to achieve their aims at the expense of those they considered as 'others'. Another surprising thing about patience is that patience is not foreign to us; it is in fact very natural, as we are

[24] Jane Parker et al., "The Living Wage: Concepts, Contexts and Future Concerns," *Labour and Industry 26*, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/10301763.2016.1154671.

[25] Alexander et al., *Marikana*, 25–49.

embodied creatures. We were created to be patient. As I have aged, I have had to learn to be patient with myself (and of course with others), because I am no longer able to perform some of the tasks that I once could with the same ease.

Dealing with the consequences of colonialism and apartheid, while transforming society from benefiting a privileged few to meeting the needs of the many, has proven a slow and complex task.[86] If we are to live with the hope of a better future, not only for ourselves and our children, but also for all children and for many future generations, we will have to make some choices about how we respond to the evils of our time so that we do not perpetuate the abuses, prejudices and brokenness that have made our current lives so difficult. Like Jesus, we must respond with energy and urgency, but in doing so, we should not choose the indecencies of violence and destruction.

I believe that to be Christian in South Africa today will require patience. This means that as we work and witness to a better way of living, a decent way of living, we must choose to do so in ways that cohere with the "vision of reconciliation through the cross". Another aspect to the virtues is that they do not stand on their own. Patience is closely related to courage.

Courage as the mean between lies and inconsistency

The next virtue that I wish to profess as a Christian theologian in South Africa today is the virtue of courage. If 9/11 signalled a moment in history when contemporary geopolitics was forever changed,[87] then the Covid-19 pandemic signalled a radical historical challenge of a more personal and existential kind.[88] Who of us can say that we were not changed, or at least challenged, by the physical, psychological, social and economic realities that Covid-19 presented around the world? We were suddenly reminded of our frailty, our mortality, and the injustices, and indecencies, of our social and economic arrangements were exposed (spatial injustice, economic insecurity, healthcare inequality, etc.). I am not sure whether we have yet fully realised the impact of the changes that will take place because of the pandemic. Of course, the world is constantly changing. It was changing before the pandemic, and will continue to change in the years ahead. In some sense, wise people do not just try to account for the nature of change, but rather to seek to understand how they can remain constant, perhaps even decent, in the midst of perpetual change. A person of true courage can be trusted to respond appropriately, consistently, correctly, even decently in the face of crisis, challenge and significant change.

It is in this regard that I think the virtue of courage is important to develop in South Africa today. Courage may sit a little more easily in the contemporary popular imagination – certainly if books, movies and television shows are any kind of barometer of what our cultures admire. Courage was also highly regarded as a virtue among ancient civilizations.[89] Courage is the power of the will to strive for what is good and right, even in the face of opposition, and to do so in a manner that achieves both a greater and a lasting good.

Courage is not expressly mentioned as a virtue in the various lists of virtues in the New Testament. Perhaps this is because Christians are called to be peaceable, and in the earlier Greek tradition the virtue was largely associated with courage in battle. However, variations of the Greek verb **εὐθυμέω** (euthymeō) are used in numerous instances. It means to be "inspired with confidence" or "to be given hope" (cf. Acts 27:22; Php 2:19).[90] Of course, the presentation of courage in the life, ministry and death of Jesus, and later the courage of the early disciples, is presented as a virtuous example to be followed.[91] In this regard, the virtue of courage was

[26] I want to acknowledge the work of my former PhD student, Dr Alease Brown. She passed away suddenly in March 2020. She was a gifted theologian who asked important and necessary questions about the ways in which decency seeks to exclude those who are considered indecent. See, for example, Alease Brown, "Bleeding Women and Theology from below: How Mark's Narrative of the Indignity of the Bleeding Woman Serves as a Model of Transgressive Resistance for the 'Violent' Contemporary South African Student Protest Movement," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal 6*, no. 4 (2020): 13–36, https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2020.v6n4.a1.

fully taken into the Christian tradition between the second and the fourth centuries as it merged with the inherited theological understandings of rabbinic Judaism's notion of the Prophet who speaks God's truth to power and early Christianity's experience of martyrdom.[92]

The Hebrew prophets had the courage to speak Divine truth to those who held political and religious power, and even to declare judgement upon their own people when they identified practices and beliefs that were evil, indecent or deceptive. While the early Christian martyrs were so deeply committed to the truth of God's love for the world and the living out of God's ways in the world, they would rather have died than renounce them. While courage is often identified with heroism, I want to commend it to you as a virtue for everyday life. This, once again, shows the relationship between the virtues and the habits that constitute our lives. Truly courageous people don't have to stop and think "How should I act with courage in this situation?", as their lives are constituted by the habits of truth and constancy that speak of trustworthiness and decency. They respond with courage because they live truthfully, even in the presence of lies, and they know that they can live truthfully because they believe in a God who can be trusted. Emmanuel Katongole unpacks this notion beautifully when he speaks of the courage of some Rwandan Christians who sought reconciliation after the terrible 1994 genocide. He says that they had the courage to "resist the violence of tribalism, a courage made possible by the sense and experience of a 'new family' as well as the gift of divine providence".[93] Rosemary Radford Ruether also writes as follows:

> Fearlessness or courage is based on [the] grace of being both upheld by God and placing our trust in God. It is precisely this trust in God that enables one to speak truthfully and act justly without regard to those worldly vested interests that have a stake in lies and injustice.[94]

Decent people don't lie, and they don't invest their lives in systems and institutions that perpetuate the lies of racial supremacy, economic inequality, religious bigotry, environmental injustice and the like. Also, for Thomas Aquinas it was not soldiers who embodied the highest form of courage, but martyrs.[95] Martyrs also resolve to face evil, even to the point of death. Instead of fighting with weapons intended to wound and destroy, they rely on the stronger weapons of patience and faith that are intended to heal and restore. Interestingly, it is for this reason that Christian martyrs are not traditionally considered heroes, as their aim was not to defeat their enemies, but to endure in the truth in the hope that their enemies will be saved.[96]

I believe that it will take great courage for us to continue to profess the truth of the "vision of reconciliation through the cross", which is built upon the "patterns of patience and courage" that are necessary to redeem our future from the brokenness of our past.[97] South Africans will have to choose not to compromise to lesser truths, half-truths and blatant lies. There will be many individuals, and institutions, who will find it very difficult to allow us to live according to the truth. They may try to bribe us to compromise, or manipulate us, or even persecute us. But, in the end, the truth will prevail because it is true. Courage will name the determination we need to see our commitments to truthful living through to their intended end. It takes great courage to live in love and peace, and not to opt for violence and hate. It takes great courage to live generously in economic systems that proclaim scarcity and competition. It takes great courage to live in love and acceptance when our cultures seek to 'other' and divide. Opting for courage is also an acknowledgement that our lives are part of a larger story that gives them meaning and purpose. That story is a true story that is called 'the gospel'.[98] It names a way of living that not only proclaims good news, but establishes good news, so that people not only hear it, but also see it in us and experience it through us.

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[27] Keith Thomas, In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and Civilization in Early Modern England (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 51.

[28] Cf. Aleida Assmann, Menschenrechte und Menschenpflichten: Schlüsselbegriffe für eine humane Gesellschaft (Wien: Picus Verlag, 2018).

[29] Robert Vosloo, "'n Meer Menslike Samelewing Vra om Groter Beleefdheid," *Die Burger*, September 21, 2019, sec. Geestelike Waardes.

What might it look like if South Africa were a country in which those who bear the name of Christ in government, business, education, the arts and in their religious groups and communities were good news to the poor (cf. Lk 4:18–19)? What might it look like if we lived to bring freedom for those who are held captive to addictions, lies and hatred? What if we had the courage to become a nation that not only helped those who are blind to be able to see, but also those who suffer from other ailments to find comfort and relief? What if we were to establish economic and political systems that set the captives free and announced the arrival of the flourishing that God has intended? I would like to spend the rest of my life, using the skills and opportunities I have, living with the kind of courage that may contribute towards the establishing of such truth. Courage, if it is understood in this way, will need to be embodied in our thoughts, speech and behaviour. This will require imaginative alternatives to our current lived reality.

Imagination that is prophetic in the offering of political direction

As I age, I have wondered how the story of my life will be told when it is done. I wonder, also, how the story of the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University will be told. I even wonder about the Church of which I am a member: How will its story be told? Of course, I also wonder, and sometimes despair, about how the story of South Africa will be told. Will South Africa's story be one of gender-based violence, xenophobia, economic inequality and deeply entrenched racism? Or can we imagine a future that looks different from our past?[99]

I started this lecture by saying that our lives are constituted by the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. I also mentioned that one of the tasks of theology is to "help us discern how our lives may [have been] possessed by unacknowledged stories that make our ability to live in gratitude for the gift of our existence impossible".[100] As I listen to students, friends and family members, and to politicians, the news and the media, I have a feeling that we have lost our ability to imagine hopefully. Young people, in particular, experience the utter hopelessness of the slow violence of poverty, racism and ongoing spatial injustice. In short, they are losing hope for the future.[101] I do not find this surprising. However, I am concerned that as Christians and the Church we are losing our capacity to activate a kind of prophetic imagination that can transcend the tragic experiences of our daily lives. While our existential realities are important and central to our experience of life, Christians believe that they do not constitute the end of history. We live with an eschatological hope for a time when all suffering and evil will end, and we understand that our lives are to be directed towards that end. This understanding is framed by questions such as "What is it [the church] for?" and "Who does it serve?" In order to answer these questions, a "recovery of the eschatological vision is crucial for how the church understands her relation to the world".[102]

Much of my work has sought to understand how our identities are formed by prevailing social and cultural imaginaries. The cultural imagination emerges from our history and identity and then feeds back into our history and identity, transforming our "politics, religion, economics and all the relations that bind and oppose us, one to another".[103]

This is a deeply social and theological topic. Who and what we are as human beings, both as individuals and in relationship to one another and the rest of creation, is the 'stuff' that makes up all of our inner and outer lives. It is deeply private, and yet it finds very clear expression in our public lives. What we believe, either knowingly or unknowingly, shapes our living, indeed our whole lives. It has personal and political consequences. Charles Taylor calls this the modern "social imaginary". By this he means "the ways people

[30] Stanley Hauerwas, "Faith Fires Back: A Conversation with Stanley Hauerwas," *Duke Magazine*, January 31, 2002, https://alumni.duke.edu/magazine/articles/faith-fires-back.

[31] Cheshire Calhoun, "Common Decency," in *Setting the Moral Compass : Essays by Women Philosophers*, ed. Cheshire Calhoun (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 139.

imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations".[104]

Taylor deliberately employs the term 'imagine', as it is often a clearer expression of how people believe their lives (both their identity and their interactions) are structured. This is not only a broadly social function; it also has some very specific implications for the Christian faith. Willie Jennings notes that Christianity,

> … lives and moves within a diseased social imagination. I think most Christians sense that something about Christians' social imaginations is ill, but the analyses of this condition often don't get to the heart of the constellation of generative forces that have rendered people's social performances of the Christian life collectively anemic.[105]

I believe that one of the responsibilities of a South African theologian, at this time in history, is to try to identify and name what Jennings calls a "diseased social imagination" and Hauerwas calls the "unacknowledged stories" that make the "gift of our existence impossible". How does one do that? We can begin by distinguishing imagination from fantasy or ideology. One way to do so is to conform our imaginations to a story that is greater than our own personal desires and wants. For Christians, this means schooling our lives according to the truthful story of God's good will. One of the consequences of schooling ourselves according to hope that is established in God is that we free ourselves from the tyranny of optimism. Optimism is a judgement that is based on circumstances, and because it is our judgement of circumstance, it is limited according to our limitations – the limitations of knowledge, history, power and desire. An imagination that is built on the hope that comes from being shaped according to God's story requires both patience and courage. It requires patience to achieve God's good will by means of goodness, not violence. It requires courage to live according to truth, as it calls on us to stand firmly against the lies that seek to rule our lives, which are so dominant in our culture, the media, our politics and our consumerist habits.

Thankfully, we are living at a time when many of us have had our optimistic illusions of control (cultural, political or economic) shattered. So, the Christian imagination, expressed in the scriptures, creeds and historical witness of Christians and the Church, is a life-giving and transformative imagination. It is a prophetic imagination, as it is informed by the truth of God's vision for humanity and the world.

The late Russel Botman was a purveyor of the kind of imagination that we call hope. Dirk J. Smit coined the phrase 'hopeful agency' to describe Botman's understanding of the co-operative missiological relationship, the prophetic relationship, that exists between God and humanity.[106] The tension between hope and agency is an important one, as we don't want our hope-filled imagination to remain a fantasy. Some things will need to be changed, and we may even need to change, for this hope to be realised. It is a 'this-wordly' hope, ushered in by the God who is incarnate in Jesus Christ. Smit sums up Botman's interpretation of 'hopeful agency' as follows:

> The fact that it was a this-worldly hope meant for him that it should not lead to idle waiting and become a form of escapism, but rather that it should inspire concrete actions, practical engagement in the fullness of life, hopeful agency in the utterly serious realities of the penultimate … The fact that it was an empowering hope was for him of great importance … he refused to be held captive by the past – with its legacies, divisions, hurt and bitterness … The fact that it was a modest and self-critical hope meant for him that these transformation processes – all these attempts to make history for the coming generation – remains provisional and penultimate.[107]

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[32] Parts of this section of the lecture will be published as a chapter in a forthcoming book. Please see Dion A. Forster, "Revisiting 'Can Public Theology Bridge the Divide?': Some Tentative Reflections," in *Space and Place as a Topic for Public Theology*, eds. Thomas Wabel, Torben Stamer and Katharina Eberlein-Braun (Leiden: Brill, Forthcoming), 131–52.

[33] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 170–90.

I see this kind of hope-filled imagination embodied in the lives of many faithful women and men, and in many Christian communities. In 1985, when none of us could imagine when a non- racial, democratic South Africa would become a reality, Peter Storey admonished the Church to stimulate an imagination of a "new land". He said, "I say to black and white today, South Africa waits to see a working model – a visual aid – of things we believe to be the will of God."[108] Thirty-seven years later, I think South Africa is still waiting to see this working model. Instead of unity in the Church, they see division. Instead of reconciliation with justice, they see callousness and disregard.

So, I feel compelled to assert that my work as a South African theologian is to profess, and stimulate, and cultivate, a prophetic imagination with the Churches, and through the Churches, that can contribute towards the realisation of justice, healing and transformation. I believe that is a decent thing to do.

Conclusion

So, you may ask why only patience, courage and imagination? Why not the myriad of other virtues that will help us to live more decently amid the indecencies of our world? Well, of course there are many other virtues that we will need, and that we should cultivate, in order to live more decently amid the current indecencies of the world. However, these three resonate with where I am in my 'story', and I feel that they may just relate to the stories of others, the story of our nation, and they may even resonate with God's redemptive story. Moreover, I feel that we need to face the reality of the paradox that I mentioned at the start of this lecture. How is it possible that so many people in our country claim to bear the name of Christ while we face such deep divisions and continue to live with such blatant injustices? In that same sermon from which I quoted earlier, Peter Storey said that rather than "being part of the nation's disease, the Church had to be a place where 'the love of God leaps across the parallel lines drawn by history'".[109]

The work and witness of many have guided me, and will guide me, as I seek to embody this profession in the years to come. As I thought of a truly decent person, one who serves as an example of living, and working, with the kind of decency that I have tried to point to above, I kept coming back to Prof. Denise Ackermann. She wrote that if a public theology exists at all, it can be identified "in its broadest sense [as being] concerned with the common struggle for justice and the general welfare of people and their quality of life in a society".[110] I hope to be able think and act decently as a public theologian who embodies that kind of virtue. I hope to do so with the patience that works for radical change without resorting to violence or collapsing into despair. I hope to speak, write and act with courage that is committed to the truth that we are created good and that our lives are intended for good, to witness to a truth that unmasks the lies of the false stories that want to deform our common life. I want this work to be informed by a prophetic imagination that is aligned with the public aims of God's love for the world, an imagination that can provide political direction towards the good that we are created to be. And finally, I hope that you may join me in seeking to live more decently amid the indecencies of the world.

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[34] See Rusty R. Reno, "Stanley Hauerwas," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 302 –316.

[35] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 171.

[36] Ibid., 170.

[37] Ibid., 171.

[38] Nico N. Koopman, "Public Spirit: The Global Citizen's Gift – a Response to William Storrar," *International Journal of Public Theology 5*, no. 1 (2011): 94, https://doi.org/10.1163/156973211X543760.

[39] Ronaldo de Paula Cavalcante and Rudolf von Sinner, "Special Issue : Public Theology in Brazil," I*nternational Journal of Public Theology 6*, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 1, https://doi.org/10.1163/156973212X617145.

[40] Parts of this section of the lecture will be published as a chapter in a forthcoming book. Please see Dion A. Forster, "Revisiting 'Can Public Theology Bridge the Divide?': Some Tentative Reflections," in *Space and Place as a Topic for Public Theology*, eds. Thomas Wabel, Torben Stamer and Katharina Eberlein-Braun (Leiden: Brill, Forthcoming), 131–52.

[33] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 170–90.

[34] See Rusty R. Reno, "Stanley Hauerwas," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 302 –316.

[35] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 171.

[36] Ibid., 170.

[37] Ibid., 171.

[38] Nico N. Koopman, "Public Spirit: The Global Citizen's Gift – a Response to William Storrar," *International Journal of Public Theology 5*, no. 1 (2011): 94, https://doi.org/10.1163/156973211X543760.

[39] Ronaldo de Paula Cavalcante and Rudolf von Sinner, "Special Issue : Public Theology in Brazil," I*nternational Journal of Public Theology 6*, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 1, https://doi.org/10.1163/156973212X617145.

[40] Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 7 (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971), 417–418.

[44] Dirk J. Smit, "The Paradigm of Public Theology: Origins and Development," ed. Heinrich Bedford -Strohm, Florian Höhne and Tobias Reitmeier, *Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology*, Theology in the Public Square, 2013, 11–23.

[45] Sebastian Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 6.

[46] Dirk J. Smit, "Does It Matter? On Whether There Is Method in the Madness," in *A Companion to Public Theology*, ed. Sebastian C.H. Kim and Katie Day (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 67.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Please see Agang et al., *African Public Theology*.

[50] Dion A. Forster, "Public Theology in Africa," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Public Theology*, ed. Christoph Hübenthal (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 469–488; Forster, "Revisiting 'Can Public Theology Bridge the Divide?'," 135–52; Forster, "African Public Theology?," 1–10.

[51] Smit, "Does It Matter?," 89.

[52] Forster, "The Nature of Public Theology," 15–19.

[53] Smit, "The Paradigm of Public Theology?," 11–23; Etienne de Villiers, "Public Theology in the South African Context," *International Journal of Public Theology 5*, no. 1 (January 2011): 5–22, https://doi.org/10.1163/156973211X543715; Vuyani S. Vellem, "The Reformed Tradition as Public Theology," *HTS Theological Studies 69*, no. 1 (2013): 1-5, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.1371 ; Vuyani S. Vellem, "The Task of Urban Black Public Theology," *HTS Theological Studies 70*, no. 3 (2014): 106, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2728; Andries van Aarde, "What Is 'Theology' in 'Public Theology' and What Is 'Public' about 'Public Theology'?," *HTS Theological Studies 64*, no. 3 (January 1, 2008): 1213–1234; Abraham A. Berinyuu, "Doing Public Theology in Africa: Trends and Challenges," in *Pathways to the Public Square: Practical Theology in an Age of Pluralism*, ed. Elaine Graham and Anna Rowlands, (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005), 147–156; H. Russel Botman, "Theology after Apartheid: Paradigms and Progress in South African Public Theologies," *Theology in the Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Thomas W. Gillespie* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2000, 36–51; L. Juliana Claassens, "Towards a Feminist Public Theology: On Wounds, Scars and Healing in the Book of Jeremiah and Beyond," *International Journal of Public Theology 13*, no. 2 (July 1,

2019): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341571.

[54] Botman, "Theology after Apartheid," 36–51; Smit, "The Paradigm of Public Theology?," 11–23.

[55] Smit, "Does It Matter?," 76–77.

[56] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1981), 6–13; David Tracy, "Three Kinds of Publicness in Public Theology," *International Journal of Public Theology 8*, no. 3 (August 26, 2014): 330–334, https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341354.

[57] Rudolf von Sinner, "Public Theology in Brazil: A First Overview," *Toronto Journal of Theology 30*, no. 1 (March 2014): 41, https://doi.org/10.3138/tjt.2534. This view of theological reasoning in the public sphere is often related to the work of Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991); Judith Butler et al., The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011); Habermas, in Craig J. Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Boston, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 421–480.

[58] Smit, "Does It Matter?," 85–86.

[59] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Character of Virtue: Letters to a Godchild* (Atlanta, GA: Canterbury Press, 2018).

[60] Ibid., 97–98.

[61] Ibid., 124.

[62] Ibid., 50.

[63] Hauerwas, The Work of Theology, 29.

[64] Hauerwas, The Character of Virtue, 188.

[65] Ibid., 15–17.

[66] Wells in ibid., 15.

[67] Ibid., 33.

[68] Ibid., 34.

[69] Kurt Vonnegut, in Boon, *At Millennium's End*, viii.

[70] Hauerwas, The Character of Virtue, 97–98.

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[78] Johannes Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019), 306.

[79] Margaret Hebblethwaite, "Patience," *The Furrow* 36, no. 3 (1985): 140.

[80] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: A&C Black, 2013), 213.

[81] It is argued that the ethical intent in the Gospels, but also in some other New Testament writings, was not merely captured in the sayings of Jesus and the polity of the early Church, but that it is also witnessed in how Jesus acted. Early Christians were expected the 'imitate' Jesus (i.e. *mimesis*) in order to become virtuous people and virtuous communities. This is particularly evidenced in the moral content of the parables and the Sermon on the Mount. See Richard A. Burridge, I*mitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 31.

[82] Hauerwas, *The Character of Virtue*, 79.

[83] Robert Vosloo, "The Gift of Participation: On the Triune God and the Christian Moral Life," *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa* 79 (2002): 94–96.

[84] Trying to solve violence with violence is not possible. Walter Wink says that such attempts have succumbed to the "the myth of redemptive violence". See Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York, NY: Harmony, 2010), 42–57.

[85] Emmanuel Katongole, *Who Are My People? Love, Violence, and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 114.

[86] Cf. Dion A. Forster, "Translation and a Politics of Forgiveness in South Africa? What Black Christians Believe, and White Christians Do Not Seem to Understand," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 14, no. 2 (2018): 77–94, http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n2.a04; Dion A. Forster, "A Social Imagination of Forgiveness," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 1, no. 32 (2019): 70–88, https://doi.org/doi:10.1163/15709256-12341387; Dion A. Forster, *The (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness: An Empirical Intercultural Bible Reading of Matthew 18:15–35* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019).

[87] John G. Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 17.

[88] John W. de Gruchy, *This Monastic Moment: The War of the Spirit & the Rule of Love* (Wipf & Stock, 2021), 10.

[89] MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 143.

[90] Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 304.

[91] Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 301.

[92] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Courage as a Christian Virtue," *CrossCurrents* 33, no. 1 (1983): 11.

[93] Katongole, *Who Are My People?*, 49.

[94] Ruether, "Courage as a Christian Virtue," 12.

[95] Hauerwas, *The Character of Virtue*, 111–112.

[96] Ibid., 112.

[97] Katongole, *Who Are My People?*, 114.

[98] Hauerwas, T*he Character of Virtue*, 116.

[99] This is what Paul Ricoeur calls "the liberation of the unfulfilled future of the past". See Paul Ricoeur and E. Brennan, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 21, no. 5–6 (1995): 8.

[100] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 29.

[101] Sharlene Swartz, James Hamilton Harding, and Ariane de Lannoy, "Ikasi Style and the Quiet Violence of Dreams: A Critique of Youth Belonging in Post-apartheid South Africa," *Comparative Education* 48, no. 1 (February 1, 2012): 27–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2011.637761.

[102] Stanley Hauerwas, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013), ix–xi.

[103] Graham Ward, *Unimaginable: What We Imagine and What We Can't* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 10.

[104] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

[105] Willie J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 6-7.

[106] Dirk J. Smit, "Making History for the Coming Generation: On the Theological Logic of Russel Botman's Commitment to Transformation," Russel Botman Memorial Lecture, Stellenbosch University (October 18, 2015); Dirk J. Smit, "'Making History for the Coming Generation' – on the Theological Logic of Russel Botman's Commitment to Transformation," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1, no. 2 (2015): 607–632, https://doi.org/10.17570/STJ.2015.V1N2.A29.

[107] Dirk J. Smit, "'Making History for the Coming Generation',": 625.

[108] Peter Storey, *I Beg to Differ: Ministry Amid the Teargas* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2018), sec. 4652 of 7927.

[109] Ibid., sec. 4616 of 7927.

[110] Ackermann in Smit, "Does It Matter?," 89; see Ackermann's discussion of public practical theology in Denise M. Ackermann, "Beyers Naudé: Public Theologian," in *The Legacy of Beyers Naudé*, ed. Len .D. Hansen, vol. 1 (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2005), 69.