

# Public Theology: Its Pastoral, Apologetic, Scientific, Political, and Prophetic Tasks

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## Abstract

This blueprint for a constructive public theology assumes that Christian theology already includes public discourse. Following David Tracy's delineation of three publics—church, academy, culture—further constructive work leads to a public theology conceived in the church, reflected on critically in the academy, and meshed with the wider culture. Public reflection on classic Christian doctrines in a post-secular pluralistic context takes the form of pastoral illumination, apologetic reason, a theology of nature, political theology, and prophetic critique.

## Keywords

public theology – political theology – science and theology – common good – David Tracy

Can public theology become more than merely theology *in public*? Can public theology provide added value *for the public*? For more than a decade now creative public theologians have been constructing a public theology which confidently articulates Christian commitments regarding our gracious God within the church, at the university, and interactively with the wider culture. Reflection on Christian doctrines in the public eye could benefit the public, because it will offer illumination, deepen human self-understanding, and lift up transcendent ideals to guide social aspirations.

Responsibility along with opportunity knocks. The once unifying secularism is giving way to increased pluralism, chaotic pluralism. The ever present webmind is by no means a single mind but rather an ungoverned avalanche

of game playing, photos of somebody's desert, vulgar cartoons, poisonous porn, alternative facts, identity theft, and terrorist recruitment. A single global network unites us all in a single disintegrating chaos. No longer can a secular media establishment control, let alone limit, religious input. Faith-generated discourse has a new opportunity, if not responsibility, to contribute something sane to the wider culture.

The South African theologian and anti-apartheid activist John de Gruchy reminds us that, as our secular society becomes increasingly post-secular, the voice of faith has as much right as opportunity to speak—as one voice among many—to the entire culture, the political domain included.<sup>1</sup> No longer must Christians think of themselves as marginalized into that contrived ghetto known as private opinion or institutional religion. In sum, the public square is opening up to global multi-logue

In light of this emerging post-secular, pluralistic, and global context, I recommend we construct a public theology that takes up five tasks: the pastoral, apologetic, scientific, political, and prophetic. First, public theology could be pastoral if it tenders considered answers to life's ultimate questions regarding meaning, death, and destiny. Second, public theology should be apologetic as well, in at least the limited sense that Christian commitments are rendered plausible, reasonable, and helpful. Third, public theology should be well informed by contemporary science, because within the larger culture science defends a type of intellectual integrity which the larger public needs. Fourth, public theology should be political, because it is the political arena where justice and the common good are publicly pursued. Fifth and finally, public theology can and should be prophetic because it measures today's world situation against the eschatological standard of the Kingdom of God. The prophetic public theologian announces God's promise of a new creation with a future justice that judges today's injustice.

In what follows I will define public theology and identify some indispensable materials that should be incorporated into its further construction. I will give special attention to developing a theology engaged with the natural sciences in the university setting, and I will give additional attention to political theology engaged prophetically with the wider culture. This mode of attention will provide an initial blueprint for a public theology that is conceived in the

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1 'Christian witness in secular democratic society means promoting the common good by witnessing to core values rather than seeking privilege for the Christian religion.' John W. de Gruchy, 'Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre', *International Journal of Public Theology* 1:1 (2007) 28–41, at 28.

church, reflected on critically in the academy, and meshed within the wider culture for the benefit of the wider culture.

## 1 Defining Public Theology

It was University of Chicago's David Tracy who stated the obvious: 'All theology is public discourse.'<sup>2</sup> As reflection on faith, theology dare not limit itself to the private musings of clerics in the sacristy or seminarians in the pub. Theology by its very nature is openly shared, transparent, and available in the church, the university, and the wider society. 'Theology is distinctive among the disciplines for speaking to and from three distinct publics: academy, church, and the general culture.'<sup>3</sup> In short, theology is public discourse on the implications of the faith which takes place where the entire world can overhear. More specifically, I contend, that *public theology is conceived in the church, reflected on critically in the academy, and meshed within the wider culture for the benefit of the wider culture*. This threesome does not describe a temporal sequence; rather, all three occur simultaneously and mutually influence each other in an almost perichoretic fashion.

How shall we proceed to define *public theology*? The immediate background of today's public theology begins perhaps with Martin Marty's introduction of the term public theology in 1974, a period in which Robert Bellah's concept of civil religion was being widely discussed.<sup>4</sup> In our immediate foreground, Katie Day and Sebastian Kim say that 'public theology refers to the church reflectively engaging with those within and outside its institutions on issues of common interest and for the common good. According to this definition, public theology begins in the church and then engages matters of public interest in service of the common good. Tracy's definition would add a third component, the academy as a place where critical reflection is enhanced.

'Public theology,' according to Paul Chung, 'is a theological-philosophical endeavor to provide a broader frame of reference to facilitate the responsibility of the church and theological ethics for social, political, economic, and cultural issues. It investigates public issues, developing conceptual clarity

<sup>2</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> David Tracy, 'The Role of Theology in Public Life: Some Reflections', *Word and World*, iv:3: 230–239 (Summer 1984), 230.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Bellah, 'American Civil Religion', *Daedalus* 96:3 (1967) 3–4; Martin E. Marty, 'Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience', *Journal of Religion* 54:4 (1974), 332–359.

and providing social-ethical guidance of religious conviction and response to them.<sup>5</sup> For Chung, theological prompts are reflected on philosophically and then clarified for interaction with social forces.

Is there an existing consensus regarding the mission and task of public theology? No, at least according to Eneida Jacobson. “There is no univocality in defining its purposes, its theological foundation or the meaning of the term “public theology.”<sup>6</sup> If Jacobson is accurate, then there is at this point no orthodox paradigm to which public theologians must conform. Rather, we work now with an assemblage of existing models. Existing public theologies, according to Jacobson, follow one of two generic models: they are either the theoretical model or the action model. According to the theoretical model, the theologian reveals God to the world typically by presenting theological answers to existential questions. According to the action model, the theologian addresses society—sometimes militantly—in pursuit of transformation. Can these two be combined?

It might be helpful to distinguish between a minimalist and a maximalist model of public theology. The Korean ethicist Hak Joon Lee offers a minimalist definition we may try on for size: ‘public theology advocates for a constructive public role for religious discourse in a pluralistic society, neither suppressing religious expressions nor dismissing democratic values such as human rights, tolerance, and equality.’<sup>7</sup> This is a minimalist definition because it places theological discourse in the public square while avoiding stepping on the toes of rival religious views or democratic values.

The Brazilian theologian Júlio Paulo Tavares Zabatiero offers us a maximalist definition of public theology; he incorporates the prophetic task whereby the theologian addresses the wider society.

My provocative thesis is that theology cannot, in contemporary society, have the luxury of the privatized isolation of individual religiosity, or the ineffective security of denominational confessionality. Theology has to be public to actually be theology. Theology, when in fact it is theology and not merely doctrine, has a public dimension that cannot be denied or hidden; it cannot be restricted to sanctuaries, nor to the new ‘holy of

5 Paul S. Chung, *Postcolonial Public Theology: Faith, Scientific Rationality, and Prophetic Dialogue* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2016), p. 1.

6 Eneida Jacobson, ‘Models of Public Theology’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 6 (2012) 7–22, at 8.

7 Hak Joon Lee, ‘Public Theology’, *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, eds., Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 44–65, at p. 44.

holies' of the temples and their priesthoods. The privileged place of theology today is the public square; the place of the struggle for justice; the place of struggle for the humanity of human beings; the place of struggle for the ecological citizenship of all beings living on planet earth; the place of struggle for the freedom to be, as a counterpoint to the pseudo-freedom to have and to consume more and more.<sup>8</sup>

The prophetic accent in this model addresses the wider public with a divine demand to rise up and embrace social justice, ecological citizenship, and genuine freedom.

Sebastian Kim, former editor of the *International Journal of Public Theology*, extends the maximalist model. He assigns three tasks to today's church. First, in the context of postmodern and pluralist societies, for reasons of justice, the church should oppose any monopoly on power—political, economic, social, and religious—and support the creation of a public sphere with open access and public debate. Second, the church should actively engage in the public sphere, and so the church needs to develop a public theology in order to play an appropriate role in the wider society. Third, doing public theology should be the outcome of interaction in the hermeneutical circle of theory and practice so that the task involves the whole Christian community— theologians, church leaders and ordinary congregations—by actively interacting with other religious communities, NGOs, and the wider society.<sup>9</sup>

Kim along with Day recognize seven identifying marks for public theology: public theology is (1) incarnational, that is, it addresses concrete rather than abstract matters; (2) fluid, that is, it escapes the confines of church and academic institutions to mesh with specific publics; (3) interdisciplinary; (4) dialogical; (5) non-authoritarian, that is, it recognizes that authority is a social construction mediated through social processes; (6) global; and (7) performed, that is, it engages in praxis beyond mere reflection.<sup>10</sup>

What all these models inspire together is courage on the part of the theologian to carry on transparent faith-generated reflection within the public square. In addition, all these models presume that transparent public theology will provide illumination if not inspiration to those outside the theological

8 Júlio Paulo Tavares Zabatiero, 'From the Sacristy to the Public Square: The Public Character of Theology', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 6 (2002) 56–69, at 56. 'Public theology is concerned with how the Christian faith addresses matters in society at large. It is concerned with the public relevance of Christian beliefs and doctrines.' Byron Williams, 'Prophetic Public Theology', *Review and Expositor* 11:2 (2014), 159–170, at 160.

9 Sebastian Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere* (London: SCM Press, 2011), p. 3.

10 Day and Kim, 'Introduction', pp. 10–17.

circle, to an audience in the political domain and perhaps even the larger culture. Hak Joon Lee says it nicely: 'Public theologians argue that Christian doctrines of creation, sin, redemption, eschatology, covenant, and ecclesiology are informative for our understanding of the nature, meaning, and destiny of human life.'<sup>11</sup> The *loci* of Christian doctrine can be illuminating if not inspiring to those outside the church, to the academy and to the wider public. A constructive public theology may be conceived in the church, but it is critically developed in the academy and then co-generated in conversation with the world.

One item missing in all these definitions is natural science. Science today romps through both western culture and global culture like an elephant in a back yard. Its impact is everywhere. One task I wish to add to the public theologian's list is the development of a theology of nature that is informed by science and foundational for environmental ethics, bioethics, and public policy.

## 2 The Problem of Authority

Our post-theocratic, post-Enlightenment, post-colonial, and emerging global public finds itself in a tension between respecting pluralism, on the one hand, and grasping for social unity, on the other. Descriptively, pluralism describes the present situation wherein we swim every day in streams of cultural influence coming at us from multiple directions, sometimes causing us to swirl in eddies beyond our control to manoeuvre. Prescriptively, pluralism is the doctrine that perspectives are culturally relative and that differences of opinion should be respected. Yet intuitively, we all know that neither national decisions nor international policies of global import can proceed without a unifying spirit, without a vision of the common good. Pluralism alone leads to anarchy; unity alone leads to tyranny. Our planetary society must retain both, held together in a creative tension.

What this state of affairs requires of the public theologian is a post-Christendom assessment of authority. The Christian tradition we have inherited could in the past rely on the authority of the church, the bench of bishops, or *sola scriptura*. Such authority still obtains within our church bodies, to be sure. But in the academy, the free exercise of the intellect challenges every authority in the pursuit of critical thinking. And in our wider pluralistic society where various authorities compete for allegiance, the public theologian dare not rely solely on what the Bible says or on church tradition to be persuasive.

<sup>11</sup> Lee, 'Public Theology', p. 50.

Can the public theologian think out loud in this pluralistic public context? Tracy makes it mandatory. 'One must restore a nonauthoritarian notion of authority and norm as well as a non-traditionalist notion of tradition to their legitimate place in all human reflection.'<sup>12</sup>

This assertion implies that the public theologian participates in the communal creation of illuminating theological ideas. Day prescribes a postmodern recognition of the social processes which construct truth and authority in context. 'In a Postmodern approach, theological truth is co-produced; the context is not the recipient of theological claims but the co-generator of them.'<sup>13</sup> Appeals to scripture or tradition which function authoritatively within the church must yield to co-generation of illuminative thinking within each specific public.

In addition to selected specific publics outside the church, the public theologian is concerned about the global public, about planetary consciousness and communication. In our own era, electronic media provides the global medium of exchange where lines are blurred between advertising and news, between alternative facts and factual facts, between reason and propaganda, between scam and charity, between ideology and religion.<sup>14</sup> Like it or not, this is the global eddy within which the public theologian must swim. Culture and communication provide the public theologian with a both a challenge and a venue.

On the one hand, we can see how public theology must be global. The worldwide communications network requires it, just as any vision of the common good or universal justice requires it. On the other hand, existential questions as well as daily human engagement occurs at the local level, within one or another local context. The Australian theologian Clive Pearson employs the illuminating term, *glocal*, demonstrating the public theologian's responsibility

<sup>12</sup> Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> Katie Day, 'Social Cohesion and the Common Good: Drawing on Social Science in Understanding the Middle East', *Companion to Public Theology*, pp. 211–230 at p. 214.

<sup>14</sup> 'We define "fake news" to be fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent ... Fake news overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people).... It is particularly pernicious in that it is parasitic on standard news outlets, simultaneously benefitting from and undermining their credibility.' Davie M.J. Lazer, Matthew A. Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam J. Berinsky, Kelly M. Greenhill, Filippo Menczer, Miriam J. Metzger, Brendan Nyhan, Gordon Pennycook, David Rothschild, Michael Schudson, Steven A. Sloman, Cass R. Sunstein, Emily A. Thorson, Duncan J. Watts, Jonathan L. Zittrain, 'The Science of Fake News.' *Science* 359:6380 (9 March 2018), 1094–1096 at 1094.

to both. 'The prospect of a public theology is polycentric; it is neither mono-centric nor univocal'<sup>15</sup>

Despite the disarray and unreliability of electronic media, people everywhere ask existential questions to which theologians can in non-authoritarian ways tender meaningful answers. This capacity to respond makes public theology pastoral and apologetic right along with being prophetic. All these require of the public theologian argumentation which appeals to general human experience, relies upon demonstrable fact, argues reasonably, divorces itself from ideology or advertising, and edifies all sincere parties in the conversation.

### 3 Public Theology as Pastoral Theology

Pastoral theology listens to, and responds to, existential questions.<sup>16</sup> These existential questions resonate in nearly every human breast. At both the individual and cultural level we human beings ask about the meaning of our existence. Questions well up because of anxiety over death, our struggle for identity, our place in the whole of reality. Facts are not enough. We want truth, inner and universal truth. This is a human thirst that perpetually seeks slaking.

Our human existential thirst goes unquenched at the media watering hole. Webthink is too shallow for deep questions. Cell phones and laptops deluge our consciousness with twaddle, nonsense, rants, disinformation, ideology, perversion and, worst of all, advertising. There is no well drilled deep into earth's foundations. There is no grounding on which to construct a solid self-image, a purposeful life-plan, a vision of eternal truth. Ultimate reality has become like a message drowned out by meaningless clatter. Yet, beneath the swirl of twaddle and fake news, the pastoral theologian can perceive and tease out already nascent questions of existential import.

In addition to existential questions, the public theologian listens to, and responds to, justice questions. The legacy of liberation theology—God's

15 Clive Pearson, 'The Quest for a Glocal Public Theology', *International Journal of Public Theology* 1:2 (2007) 151–172 at 161.

16 'Man is the question he asks about himself, before any question has been formulated ... Whenever man has looked at his world, he has found himself in it as a part of it. But he also has realized that he is a stranger in the world of objects, unable to penetrate it beyond a certain level of scientific analysis. And then he has become aware of the fact that he himself is the door to the deeper levels of reality, that in his own existence he has the only possible approach to existence itself.' Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, (3 Volumes: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963) 1:62.

preferential option for the poor—sharpens the public theologian's pastoral sensitivity. Love takes the form of political action, according to Helene Slessarev-Jamir.

Conceptualizing love as a political act acknowledges that religiously constructed forms of political resistance are predicated on the belief that people can behave in ways that defy the dominant models of rational, self-interested actors found in most current theories of political behavior. I have found that religiously constructed activism can sustain marginalized people in the face of great opposition.<sup>17</sup>

Superficial public discourse functions to hide the plight of the poor and the marginalized, requiring the public theologian to make transparent what is already actual.

The public theologian active in the wider culture can turn our attention toward depth, undercut triviality, bypass banality, and substitute poetry for twaddle. The prophetic value of public theology is that it challenges allegiance to pseudo-ultimates. It directs our attention to the genuine ultimate, the God of grace. The pastoral value of public theology is that it lifts up existential questions of ultimacy, reflects on these questions philosophically in order to find the right language to articulate them, so that in the wider culture we can ask the question of meaning to which divine grace is the answer.<sup>18</sup>

17 Helene Slessarev-Jamir, 'Prophetic Activism in an Age of Empire,' *Political Theology* 11:5 (October 2010) 674–690 at 679.

18 This method is commonly thought of as correlation. We find it in Niebuhr, Tillich, and Tracy. There is a 'positive apologetic task. It consists in correlating the truth, apprehended by faith and repentance, to truths about life and history, gained generally in experience.' Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York: Scribners, 1949), p. 165. 'The method of correlation explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence.' Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:60. Tracy adds mutuality to the correlation. 'Tillich's method of correlation is crucially inadequate,' argues Tracy. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), p. 46. 'The revisionist theologian is committed to what seems clearly to be the central task of contemporary theology: the dramatic confrontation, the mutual illuminations and corrections, the possible basic reconciliation between the principal values, cognitive claims, and existential faiths of both a reinterpreted post-modern consciousness and a reinterpreted Christianity.' *Ibid.*, p. 32. Mutual correlation may require the theologian to change during engagement with the public. What makes public theology pastoral here is not the method of correlation to construct a systematic theology but, rather, simply sharing existential questions empathetically and pastorally as they arise in culture.

When it comes to culture, the public theologian should be aware that there are four principal social drivers which account for the bulk of events we chronicle in daily news and which we presume will determine the course of history. The four are politics, economics, culture, and communication.<sup>19</sup> In modern industrial and democratic societies, the shrinking Christian church is anemic in political influence, flexes almost no economic muscle, and timidly borrows access to a communications network set up by others for other purposes. If the Christian church is going to tender an influence on the wider society beyond its own sanctuary, it will have to plant its seeds in culture and nourish them in communication. Culture provides the garden within which the church can cultivate nutritive beauty and inspiring ideals. Can the church speak culturally amid the global communication confusion?

The worldwide pastoral mission of the public theologian is to address the human predicament in symbols evocative of a self-understanding that ultimately grounds our reality meaningfully in divine grace. 'Reality is finally gracious,' Tracy reminds us.<sup>20</sup> If ultimate reality is finally gracious, the public theologian performs a pastoral service by making this a topic of public discourse. In sum, public pastoral theology asks existential questions within the church, reflects philosophically on those questions in the academy, and gives voice to matters of meaning in the wider culture.

#### 4 Public Theology as Apologetic Theology

The public demands public theology. The global terror of Al Qaeda and ISIS over the last couple decades has led to a worldwide public interrogation of Islamic theologians: what do you actually teach? The same applies to conservative Christians in the United States. America's younger generations register public disgust at evangelical Christians for their rejection of evolutionary science and intransigent resistance to gender equality, racial justice, and LGBTQ rights. The Christian religion is painted in hues of meanness, judgmentalism, and racism. Theologians, among others, have a responsibility to confirm, disconfirm, or modify this existing public image.

What is called for by this situation is apologetic theology. 'It is the task of apologetic theology to prove that the Christian claim also has validity from the

19 It was Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell who identified the three principal social drivers—politics, economics, and culture—in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). It is my judgment that communications should be added to this list.

20 Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, p. 177.

point of view of those outside the theological circle,' writes Paul Tillich.<sup>21</sup> The critical key here is that apologetic theology takes place outside the ecclesiastical circle, outside the church. It takes place in the university and the wider culture.

Classically, our apologetic theologians saw themselves as proving the Christian faith or, at least, rendering the doctrines of the faith rational to reasonable people outside church circles. Apologists spoke to every society's illuminati like the missionary spoke to rural villages and urban centers. The mission of today's public theologian, however, might differ slightly from that of the ancient apologist or missionary. Public theology does not necessarily seek to make converts; it does not focus on persuading students or citizens to convert from their previous belief systems in order to adopt a Christian belief system. Rather, more modestly, today's public theologian seeks to demonstrate to the widest possible public that Christian symbols and doctrines shed light on our common human self-understanding. Christian reflection on issues re-defines, analyses, and proposes alternatives. When the theologian thinks out loud about the *imago Dei* and the fall into sin, for example, the academy and the political arena could be led into a deeper understanding of human nature and better predict the course of future events. When the theologian thinks out loud about God as creator, the university and the cultural arena could be led to a deeper appreciation for Planet Earth and our moral responsibility for ecological care. When the theologian thinks out loud about the Kingdom of God, laborers and investors could be led to new visions of a just, sustainable, participatory, and global society. Public thinking about theological matters leads to theology *for the public*.

'Even if in fact the theologian is a believer,' writes Tracy, '... the theologian should argue the case (pro or con) on strictly public grounds.'<sup>22</sup> Public theology avoids in-house jokes, snobby esotericism, and privileged vocabulary. Rather, the public theologian explicates Christian symbols and doctrines in an accessible way that invites participation outside the ecclesiastical circle.

Within the circle of faith, faith seeks growth in understanding. Within the academy, faith subjects itself to self-critical reflection that leads to formulations judged to be reasonable and plausible. Within the wider culture, the public theologian offers insights that illuminate our shared understanding of the drama in the human condition.

<sup>21</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:15.

<sup>22</sup> David Tracy, 'The Context: The Public Character of Theological Language', in David Tracy and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Talking About God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism*, (New York: Seabury, 1983), p. 9.

## 5 Public Theology as a Theology of Nature

First in the academy and then in the wider society, the public theologian may engage in creative mutual interaction with selected dynamic thrusts in culture. The arts—music, dance, sculpture, painting, graphic design, rap and rock concerts—have become the source of meaning for vast swaths of twenty-first century culture. Sports—baseball, football, basketball, international soccer, the Olympics, taekwondo competitions, parent sponsored leagues for their children—capitalize on human aspiration and even, in many cases, become mini-religions. Economics has become a *de facto* religion in many nations, and certainly at the international level capitalism has come to determine the present world order.<sup>23</sup> Politics dominates global consciousness from time to time, eliciting anxiety when people feel that security, justice, equality, and opportunity are uncertain. These powerful dynamics at work in the contemporary global context cannot be ignored by the public theologian. They must become the very stuff of theological reflection. They must become the medium for the pastoral, apologetic, scientific, political, and prophetic work of the public theologian.

Let me select one cultural dynamic as an example, namely, natural science. Natural science is found preeminently in the university, but its presence and influence in business and government as well as ambient culture is virtually ubiquitous.

The public theologian should attempt to incorporate into his or her academic reflections the worldview within which laboratory science works, because the scientist's worldview has already embraced a level of intellectual integrity the theologian can only admire. The public theologian must draw down the curtain on the embarrassing delusions proffered by creationists and climate change deniers. These renegade movements within both Christianity and Islam appear to be anti-scientific; they unnecessarily appear to pit belief in God against faithful living in pluralistic culture.<sup>24</sup> In place of creationism and climate change denial, today's public theologian should do four things: first, he should defend the integrity of science in the context of fake news and alternative facts; second, she should engage natural science in creative mutual interaction; third, she should construct a theology of nature; and fourth, he

23 See: Ted Peters, 'Demythologizing the Myth of Economism', *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* (May 2017). <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/1211> [accessed 25 May 2018].

24 For a map of the evolution controversy, see: Ted Peters and Martinez Hewlett, *Can You Believe in God and Evolution?* (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 2009).

should become scientifically informed before engaging in public discussions of ethics.

First, let us consider the war against science. Many of our scientists believe they are fighting defensively in a war against science.<sup>25</sup> Who are the enemies of science? The first attack comes from the communications network which has grown to accept false claims, alternative facts, and failure by government to listen to scientific counsel. The second attack comes from deconstructionist postmodernism, which appears to scientists as a forsaking of objective truth.<sup>26</sup> The third attack comes from public refusals to accept scientific data regarding such urgent matters as climate change. A fourth attack comes from recalcitrant religious groups, especially Middle Eastern Muslims and American conservative Christians, who are anti-evolution.

The call to arms has been sounded by *Scientific American*. ‘Scientists around the country are nervous as hell. There seems to be a scientific happening in Washington, DC, and our government’s relationship with facts, scientific reality and objective truth has never been more strained.’<sup>27</sup> This war is a defensive war, apparently. Scientists feel they must rally to defend the objectivity of scientific truth. Because theologians are committed to belief only in truth, the alliance between public theology and natural science in defence of intellectual integrity is as warranted as it is urgent.

Second, let us now consider creative mutual interaction or CMI. Since the publication of Ian Barbour’s groundbreaking book of 1966, *Issues in Science and Religion*, interactions between scientists and intellectual leaders of many of the world’s faiths have engaged in dialogue with scientists and even cooperation on ethical concerns such as genetics and climate change. For the most part, the traffic has crossed the bridge between science and theology in only one direction, from the laboratory to the pew. With CMI, however, the public theologian will look for an opportunity to send traffic back the other direction as well.

25 ‘Vast areas of scientific knowledge and the people who work in them are under daily attack in a fierce worldwide war on science.’ Shawn Otto, *The War on Science* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2016), p. 7. ‘Many findings of science are under attack from a wide variety of social, political, and cultural forces. These forces selectively dismiss, deny, denigrate, and distort legitimate results of scientific research they construe as unwelcome or uncomfortable.’ Kendrick Frazer, ‘Introduction’, in Kendrick Frazer, ed, *Science Under Siege*, (Buffalo NY: Prometheus Books, 2009) pp. 9–16 at p. 9.

26 Astronomer Jeff Hester sounds the alarm. ‘The postmodern assault on science undermines the very notion of truth and robs scientists and scholars of their ability to speak truth to power.’ Jeff Hester, ‘The Hermeneutics of Bunk’, *Astronomy* 45:7 (July 2017), 14.

27 Jonathan Foley, ‘The War on Facts Undermines Democracy’, *Scientific American* 316:5 (May 2017), at 10.

According to Robert John Russell, founder and director of the Francisco J. Ayala Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, the traffic goes both ways. CMI includes 'development of research programs in theology and science that make novel moves from theology to science as well as standard moves from science to theology.'<sup>28</sup>

How might a theologian contribute to a scientist's work? Theological insight into human nature—*imago Dei* and the fall into sin—just might send a geneticist or biologist or neuroscientist back to the laboratory to make predictions about future human potentials. In short, one of the many tasks of the public theologian is to offer to the scientist classical insights which may lead eventually to fertile research programs.

Third is a theology of nature. As Russell says, the standard move is from science to theology. Big bang cosmology and evolutionary biology have already expanded the horizon of the Christian doctrine of creation. Because, as Pope John Paul II has said, 'truth cannot contradict truth,'<sup>29</sup> the public theologian forecasts that verifiable scientific insights must, at some point, become consonant with truth as the Christian believer apprehends it.<sup>30</sup> The world that the natural scientist exegetes is the very world which God is creating and redeeming.

This confessional stance leads directly to a theology of nature and not a natural theology. A natural theology would attempt to demonstrate divine traits by appeal to science. Rather, a *theology of nature* is informed by science while relying upon special revelation: it relies upon Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.<sup>31</sup> A theology of nature, according to Barbour in 1966,

28 Robert John Russell, *Cosmology from Alpha to Omega: The Creative Mutual Interaction of Theology and Science*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 132. The theologian should not give science a free pass. Science, especially when it oversteps its bounds and becomes the ideology of scientism, must be critiqued by the theologian. 'What Christian theology disputes is never science but rather bad science, that is, science that exceeds its finitude and finite location in the world.' Paul R. Hinlicky, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 735–736.

29 Pope John Paul II, 'Evolution and the Living God', in Ted Peters, ed, *Science and Theology: The New Consonance*, (Boulder: Harper/Westview, 1998) pp. 149–152 at p. 149; See: <https://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP961022.HTM> [accessed at 25 May, 2018].

30 See: Ted Peters, ed, *Science and Theology: The New Consonance* (Denver CO: Westview Press, 1998).

31 Paul Chung gets this right. 'What is at the center of theology of nature is God's self-revelation in the cross of Jesus Christ and God's promise in the Easter resurrection of Jesus Christ as a lens through which to view the natural world as investigated and comprehended by empirical research and scientific reasoning. Theology of nature takes into account Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.' *Postcolonial Public Theology*, p. 146.

‘must take the findings of science into account when it considers the relation of God and [humanity] to nature, even though it derives its fundamental ideas elsewhere.’<sup>32</sup> Public theology should incorporate, among many other things, a theology of nature along with CMI.

Fourth, and finally, is the domain of environmental ethics, bioethics, and public policy. To engage the global public discussion regarding the environmental crisis including climate change, the public theologian must first garner the scientific data. The scientific consensus is clear: Earth’s climate is changing due most likely to anthropogenic influence, and this warrants globe wide changes in the use of fossil fuels. The 2013 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reaffirms: ‘Warming of the climate system is unequivocal’ and that ‘it is *extremely likely* that human influence has been the dominant cause.’ By the end of the 21st century, warns the report, the Earth’s surface will warm by more than 1.5° C to 2° C. The 2° mark is widely thought to pass the “danger level”, which means that society would suffer serious consequences.<sup>33</sup>

Katharine Hayhoe, director of the Climate Change Center at Texas Tech University, is a scientist who pursues public theology on the speakers’ circuit.

Whenever I’m invited to speak to conservative audiences—farmers, water managers, experts in the oil and gas industry, Christian colleges and churches—I try not only to anticipate but respect the questions they will have ... I’ve learned ... that most people don’t really have a problem with the science or even the theology of climate change.... They’ve been told that climate change solutions will ruin the economy; that the issue is being pushed by godless liberal atheists, and Christians can’t go along with them.... Here’s the thing: those worries are not accurate.<sup>34</sup>

Presenting facts accurately is the first task of the public theologian.

In his role as public theologian Larry Rasmussen adds: dominant economic interests drive climate change denial and the perpetuation of the very energy and pollution habits which is strangling the fecundity of our planet. ‘To address climate injustice,’ he says, ‘social justice becomes creation justice, for Earth as

32 Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, (New York: Prentice Hall and Harper, 1966), p. 415.

33 ‘The IPCC Gains Confidence in Key Forecast’, *Science* 342:6154:23 (4 October 2013), 23.

34 Cited by Amy Frykholm, ‘How to Talk to Climate Skeptics’, *The Christian Century* 135:6 (March 14, 2018) 24–27 at 25.

a sacred trust.<sup>35</sup> The public theologian, informed by science and armed with economical savvy, could contribute to the planetary debate over what constitutes the common good.

We turn now from the environmental crisis to bioethics. Lisa Sowle Cahill rightly observes that bioethicists have been engaging in public theology for more than half a century. Even before Marty coined the term public theology in 1974, bioethicists were leading the charge for the creation of ethics panels in hospitals as well as setting laboratory research standards.<sup>36</sup> What the public theologian needs here is to become both scientifically informed as well as schooled in the art of moral discernment. My own contributions in recent decades have been invested largely in public policy formulation based on ethical deliberation in genomics, bio-enhancement, stem cell research, and CRISPR gene editing.<sup>37</sup> The message of the bioethicist is derived from dialogue with laboratory scientists and then directed toward the scientific public, the health care public, the political public, and finally to the church.

## 6 Public Theology as Political Theology

Even with commitments to social justice, inclusion of the marginalized, enhancing human freedom and flowering, the public theologian does not begin with antipathy toward contemporary culture or modern democratic society. Rather, the public theologian attempts to work in partnership with the body politic toward the common good. 'While all members of a society have a role in attaining and developing the common good,' note Andrew Bradstock and Hilary Russell, 'the state has the *responsibility* for attaining it.'<sup>38</sup> Being this responsible requires that public theology become political theology.

I recommend that the political theologian draw upon a vision of the Kingdom of God mediated ethically by commitment to the common good.

35 Larry Rasmussen, 'Whence Climate Injustice', *Companion to Public Theology*, pp. 349–368 at p. 349.

36 Lisa Sowle Cahill, 'Public Theology and Bioethics', *Companion to Public Theology*, pp. 369–389.

37 See: Ted Peters, ed., *Genetics: Issues of Social Justice* (Cleveland OH: Pilgrim 1998); Ted Peters, *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2nd ed., 2003); Ted Peters with Karen Lebacqz and Gaymon Bennett, *Sacred Cells? Why Christians Should Support Stem Cell Research* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2008); and Ted Peters, 'CRISPR, the Precautionary Principle, and Bioethics', *Theology and Science* 13:3 (July 2015) 1–4.

38 Andrew Bradstock and Hilary Russell, 'Politics, Church, and the Common Good', *Companion to Public Theology*, pp. 164–183 at p. 174.

This vocation means that the public theologian will begin with a normative political vision and draw middle axioms that could guide and direct the course of human social affairs.

The principal middle axiom would consist of a shared commitment to the common good. The common good supersedes the profiteering of vested interests who sacrifice the welfare of the larger social network for their own aggressive gain. Pope Benedict XVI lifts up the vision.

Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of 'all of us', made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. To desire the *common good* and strive towards it is a *requirement of justice and charity*.<sup>39</sup>

The Lutherans add that the common good includes not merely the human community, but also the entire planetary biosphere.

Today, the meaning of "common good" or "good of all" must include the community of all living creatures. The meaning also should extend beyond the present to include consideration for the future of the web of life. The sphere of moral consideration is no longer limited to human beings alone.<sup>40</sup>

In sum, as the theologian within the church interprets the biblical symbol of the Kingdom of God, justice and the common good contribute to a vision of the future towards which our emerging planetary society should aspire.

Commitment to the common good as well as justice makes constructive political theology prescriptive, not merely descriptive. Conceived in the church and constructed in the academy, this constructive political vision should then be offered as a compass for guiding the wider society.

Here I distance a constructive public theology from the current school of Carl Schmitt's political theology. The problem with Schmitt's legacy is the manner

39 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), p. 7; <[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html)>, [accessed on 25 May, 2018].

40 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 'Genetics, Faith, and Responsibility', (2011), <[http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/GeneticsSS.pdf?\\_ga=1.54478571.232821864.1462997417](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/GeneticsSS.pdf?_ga=1.54478571.232821864.1462997417)> [accessed 11/1/2016].

in which it enables a contemporary political theology to be engaged with a recognizable public. It relies instead upon a description of the tacit theologies of selected political regimes. What is missing here is prescription based upon a religious vision. Schmitt's project in pre-Nazi Germany was strictly descriptive. His purpose was to render the historical 'elimination of all theistic and transcendental conceptions and the formation of a new concept of legitimacy' for the state.<sup>41</sup> One of Schmitt's twenty-first century disciples is Vincent Lloyd; his approach endeavours to provide 'an analysis of the role of religious concepts in political theory and practice—without Christian presuppositions.'<sup>42</sup> Yale's Paul Kahn similarly sees 'political theology, as I pursue it here, ... a project of *descriptive* political analysis'<sup>43</sup> Today's disciples of Schmitt see their task as describing the tacit theology hidden beneath the civil order, which in itself is a valuable academic service. But, note how this brand of political theologian pursues this task without making a normative faith commitment on behalf of any church. Here is the important point to observe: these political theologians describe; they do not prescribe. They do not sit on the solid chair of a classical faith commitment; rather, they sit on a swing making sweeps over the political landscape.

There is a weakness in this brand of political theology. Nothing in this descriptive method stood in the way of Schmitt taking out membership in the Nazi Party. Similarly, neither Lloyd nor Kahn invoke any normative position when they study and describe. Relying strictly on a descriptive method would deprive today's public theologian of the resources necessary to critique the *status quo* or denounce injustice. Hence, I recommend a constructive political theology within a more comprehensive public theology with a commitment to the common good. With the term *prophetic political theology* within a *constructive public theology*, I refer to the theologian's approach to the dimension of civil order within human community. Helpful precedents have been set by Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Eric Voegelin, Jürgen Moltmann, Johannes Baptist Metz, and Max Stackhouse. On the one hand, the constructive public theologian should work in partnership with political powers on behalf of

41 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, tr., George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922, 1985) p. 51. 'Schmitt's approach is sociological, rather than theological, concerned with how theological ideas might be transferred to the social realm of politics.' Stanley E. Porter and Hughson T. Ong, 'The New Testament and Political Theology', *Didaskalia* 25 (Fall 2015) 1–18 at 3.

42 Vincent W. Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 12.

43 Paul Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 25, my emphasis.

justice. 'The relation of nations and of economic groups can never be brought into terms of pure love,' observes Niebuhr. 'Justice is probably the highest ideal toward which human groups can aspire.'<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, the public theologian should also render judgment when political powers exceed their rightful place. 'When the Church is faced with the modern political systems,' observes Metz, 'she must emphasize her critical, liberating function again and again, to make clear that [human] history as a whole stands under God's eschatological proviso.'<sup>45</sup>

The political theology I would like to see constructed goes beyond mere *de*-scription to *pres*cription.

Political theology does not tolerate human suffering, it does not explain it, it does not accept it. On the contrary, it brings suffering, especially the suffering of the innocent, to the fore and questions its right to exist—even to the point of questioning God, of asking God to be God and live up to his promises to us.<sup>46</sup>

The public theologian feels what the body politic feels, and proffers justice from within the shared struggle.

The Christian public theologian need not ride into the political fray like a lone Superhero battling the Zombie Apocalypse. Allies are welcome and readily available. Allies can easily be drawn from leaders among the world's religious traditions which similarly ground human fulfillment in the divine will.<sup>47</sup>

44 Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Must We Do Nothing?', in William T. Cavanaugh, Jeffrey W. Bailey, and Craig Hovey, eds. *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology*, (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012) pp. 259–264 at p. 261.

45 Johannes B. Metz, *Theology of the World*, tr., William Glen-Doepel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 118. Eschatological political theologies based on visions of hope exploded in the 1960s in Europe with the Theology of Hope and in Latin America with liberation theology. These more aggressive social transformers appear to be has-beens, at least according to the new political theologians. 'Political theology is dominated by and even assumed to be Christian discourse. At least, it was. Julie Clague, 'Political Theologies Ten Years after 9/11', *Political Theology* 12:5 (October 2011) 645–659 at 646.

46 John K. Downey in John K. Downey, Maureen O'Connell, Steven Ostovitch, Johan M. Vento, 'The Future of Political Theology', *Horizons*, 34:2 (2007) 306–328, at 308.

47 The multi-religious approach of the journal, *Political Theology*, is robust on this count. 'We present articles by Muslims, Jews and Christians, and by scholars young and old. Theologians and specialists in the study of religion are accompanied by historians, philosophers, ethicists, anthropologists and political scientists. A number of contributors are active in the area of interreligious dialogue and interfaith relations. Some are grassroots activists. The aim is to maximize the expertise and experience gathered around the table, so that a constructive and honest conversation and debate can take place.' Julie Clague,

Allies may similarly be found among scientists who are defending evidence-based facts against the onslaught of fake news, alternative facts, and climate change denial. Truth and fact continue to be highly valued in certain quarters despite the public threat to their preeminence.

To construct such a prescriptive political theology within a public theology, I would begin where Tillich concluded his systematic theology, namely, by analyzing the spirit of human community in terms of its discernible dimensions: morality, culture, and religion.<sup>48</sup> The particular way in which these three dimensions are ordered in a specific historical context constitutes the political order. 'The *political* unities, whether large or small, remain the conditions of all cultural life.'<sup>49</sup> The task of the Christian political theologian is to measure each historical social order in relationship to the biblical symbol of the Kingdom of God, interpreted by the public theologian in terms of justice and the common good.

The superficial split between the religious and the secular prompts in Tillich a reminder that the Kingdom of God is transcendent, eschatological. When culture and religion mutually differentiate and open up a gap, it is a sign that the Kingdom of God is still 'not yet' Tillich avers,

the Kingdom of God has not yet come ... God is not yet all in all, whatever this 'not yet' may mean. Asked what the proof is for the fall of the world, I like to answer: religion itself, namely a religious culture besides a secular culture, a temple besides a town hall, a Lord's Supper besides a daily supper, prayer besides work, meditation besides research, *caritas* besides *eros*

Tillich anticipates a *kairos* moment, the advent of a theonomous age that will conquer 'the destructive gap between religion and secular culture in which we are now living.'<sup>50</sup> This eschatological vision provides the angle of vision by which we see more clearly the substitute ultimates, the misleading myths, the demagogic destruction.

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'Political Theologies Ten Years after 9/11', *Political Theology*, 12:5 (October 2011) 645–659 at 651.

48 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:92.

49 Ibid., 3:311, Tillich's italics.

50 Tillich, 'Religion and Secular Culture', (1946), *Main Works/Hauptwerke*, Carl Heinz Ratschow, editor in chief, (6 Volumes: Berlin and New York: De Gruyter—Evangelisches Verlagswerk GmbH, 1989) 2:197–208 at 201.

## 7 Public Theology as Prophetic Theology

Like Tillich, Niebuhr knifed through false absolutes to render prophetic judgment, especially judgment against the dangers of patriotism and nationalism, where the nation becomes the *de facto* religion.

The most striking, contemporary form of it [the demonic] is a religious nationalism in which race and nation assume the eminence of God and demand unconditioned devotion. This absolute claim for something which is not absolute identifies the possessing spirit as demonic.<sup>51</sup>

It is easy for the patriot to slip into worshiping the nation, and it is the task of the prophet to make this transparent. 'Prophetic religion had its inception in a conflict with national self-deification.'<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the nation, numerous other substitute ultimates have taken recognizable form in the post-World War Two era such as health, wealth, and pleasure. *First Things* editor, R.R. Reno, puts it this way: 'Softer, kinder, secular gods are to rule—health, wealth, and pleasure. These are gods of utility to be ministered to by experts rather than priests and prophets.' This means the world order has been drained of the sacred. It is now collapsing into more primitive impulses such as patriotism, nationalism, and ethnocentrism. 'What we need today are spiritual, transcendent loyalties. Patriotic love, yes, but one tutored by higher loves.' The prophetic theologian pits the ideal over the actual, the eternal over the ephemeral, the future goal over the present situation.

The contextual need for an aggressive prophetic public theology is stressed by Byron Williams.

Prophetic public theology is necessary today to counter the less than prophetic displays of public theology our nation has experienced over the past several decades. Former public theologies have sought access to empire, aligning ideologically with so-called cultural issues that were designed more to titillate emotion and obfuscate important concerns for the larger society. This vapid theological discourse derives its hermeneutic from eisegesis rather than exegesis. Oftentimes the result of this process produces a form of Christianity that is void of the teachings of Jesus. This form of pedagogy under the pseudonym Christianity has allowed a

51 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Gifford Lectures, (2 Volumes: New York, Scribners, 1941), 2:111.

52 *Ibid.*, 1:214.

portion of the church actively to support seemingly contradictory atrocities such as African American chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation, to oppose women's suffrage and gay rights, and to maintain spiritual cataclysms when it comes to the plight of the poor. It is hardly an exaggeration to conclude the fastest growing sect of Christianity is more likely to depend on the country's gross national product as the pathway that leads to resurrection than the hill known as Calvary.<sup>53</sup>

This is prophetic public theology in judgment against both church and the wider society.

The essential structure of prophetic theology is its future orientation. Prophecy begins with a vision of God's future, of the promised Kingdom of God. Prophetic theology then judges the present over against this criterion. Walter Brueggemann reminds us, 'it is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order.'<sup>54</sup> In our era, the prophet lifts up a vision of a just, sustainable, participatory, and global society and then enlists social resources to make this actual. The task of the *political* public theologian is to lift up this vision positively, as an end to which institutional reform is a means. The task of the *prophetic* public theologian is to thunder a negative judgment when empirical society fails to live up to its commitment to justice and the common good.

Like the pastoral task, the prophetic task of public theology gives particular attention to questions of justice. Slessarev-Jamir observes that a

[p]rogressive prophetic activism is characterized by its concern for the other, for those who are marginalized. In the midst of the chaos and pain of the present, prophetic politics envisions an altered future in which human relationships to one another and the natural world are repaired. Within Judaism, this is known in Hebrew as *tikkun olam*, which, translated, means repairing the world. As was the case with the Hebraic prophets and with Jesus, contemporary prophetic activism emerges in response to the myriad forms of injustice found among people who are living in the slums of the world, are hungry, excluded from full citizenship, exploited in off-shore manufacturing plants, are AIDS orphans, child soldiers, or widows who witnessed their husbands and children being slaughtered.<sup>55</sup>

53 Williams, 'Prophetic Public Theology', 163.

54 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), p. 14.

55 Slessarev-Jamir, 'Prophetic Activism in an Age of Empire', 676.

Here I am blueprinting a prophetic political theology within public theology *for* the public conceived in the church, reflected on in the academy, and meshed within the national and international community. ‘Public theology is, above all, theology that is meant to lead to action,’ declares Alison Elliot. ‘It is the meeting point between the perspective and the resources of faith and the detail of a world that is broken and hurting, and in that encounter there is a momentum towards changing the world.’<sup>56</sup>

The political and the prophetic complement one another. The political constructs a positive vision of how our society should be oriented around the common good, and the prophetic renders a negative judgment when empirical reality falls short.

Constructive public theology	Conceived in the church	Reflected on in the academy	Co-Generated with the culture
Pastoral Theology	Existential Questions	Philosophical reflection & re-articulation	Giving voice to meaning
Apologetic Theology	Doctrines and symbols shed light on cultural understandings	Reasonable and plausible articulations	Illuminating shared understanding of human condition
Theology of Nature	Understanding the natural world in terms of creation and redemption	Learning more about nature from science	Creative Mutual Interaction (CMI) between theology and science
Political Theology	Interpreting the symbol: the Kingdom of God positively	Formulating a normative Constructive Political Theology	Constructing a vision of justice and the common good

<sup>56</sup> Alison J. Elliot, ‘Doing Theology: Engaging the Public’, *International Journal of Public Theology* 1:3 (2007), 290–305 at 304. John Gladwin announces that it is time for the churches in the United Kingdom to engage the political order. ‘The old revolutionary slogan, “liberty, equality and fraternity”, can be given depth by the Christian themes of the dignity of the person, the shared humanity of the richly diverse human race, and the essential plurality of neighborliness creating healthy and inclusive human communities. It is the latter that opens the way for a vision of the world in which people live together in peace and mutual respect.’ John Gladwin, ‘The 2015 General Election and Our Christian Contribution’, *Modern Believing* 56:1 (2015) 1–9, at 8.

(cont.)

Constructive public theology	Conceived in the church	Reflected on in the academy	Co-Generated with the culture
Prophetic Theology	Interpreting the symbol: the Kingdom of God negatively	Formulating the distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate	Rendering judgment against injustice and cultural idolatries

## 8 Conclusion

In this article, I have surveyed the landscape of existing public theologies and identified some indispensable materials that should be incorporated into any further construction. I tendered this claim: public theology is conceived in the church, reflected on critically in the academy, and meshed within the wider culture for the benefit of the wider culture. I listed five tasks—namely, the pastoral, apologetic, scientific, political, and prophetic. In order to augment the fine work of public theologians over the last decade, I gave special attention to developing a theology engaged with the natural sciences in the university setting. Also, I gave focal attention to a constructive political theology willing to engage normatively as well as prophetically within democratic societies. The theological engagement with the world is for the benefit of the world, not that of the theologian.

Our twenty-first century milieu should tacitly welcome a Christian public theology into the public square. In our post-truth political climate, public communication is influenced if not dominated by the webmind infected by a relentless bombardment of worldviews, claims, counter-claims, disinformation, and fabricated lies disguised as facts. Inside the webmind we find a free-for-all.

Former distinctions between state, civil society and citizenry are becoming increasingly blurred. The political landscape is one of a ‘mixed polity’ in which models from the legacy of modernity coexist with postmodern novelties to form a welter of jurisdictions, networks and domains, some defined in terms of recognized territories, some defined in formal

institutional terms, some based on interests and affinities, some constituted online, but many defined in hybrid terms.<sup>57</sup>

No one is marginalized in the era of cyberdemocracy. A politically sober church should ready itself to engage in this communications free-for-all with a rational and prophetic message which, due to its own inherent integrity, has a good chance of gaining its rightful attention.

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57 Eric Stoddard, 'Yes, No, Cancel: Clicking Our Way to a Public Theology of Cyberdemocracy', *International Journal of Public Theology* 2:3 (2008) 328–353, at 334.