Editorial: ‘Meanwhile ... in the Lead Up and in the Background’

The preparation for this edition of the journal has taken place in the most extraordinary of times. The pandemic beginning in Wuhan has spread across the globe creating a new vocabulary of social distancing, lockdown, zooming, cardboard home offices, unmute. The number of deaths and cases has been recorded on the equivalent of a league ladder by John Hopkins University. The wealth as well as the health of nations has suffered: travel has been severely circumscribed and the political life of nations has been exposed through a lack of preparedness and the assignation of blame and responsibility. Here in Australia the pandemic was preceded by unimagined fires, extreme heat, hazardous air quality, drought and then floods—all over a huge area. The climate emergency has been deepening. And then there was the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis and marches calling to account police brutality and the realities which lie behind the slogan, ‘Black Lives Matter’.

It takes time for articles to be written and submitted and pass through a peer review process. It is difficult for an academic journal—even one committed to public theology—to reflect the immediacy of the times in the ways in which media and social media can. And yet the articles which are to be found in this edition intersect with these signs of the times in diverse ways.

One of the aims of a public theology is to inculcate hope. **Julio Adam’s** wrestling with the promise of hope in the midst of vulnerable life in Brazil is timely. The article was written and submitted prior to the disturbing statistics surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic; in a time of social distancing and lockdowns in many parts of the world the policies pursued by President Jair Bolsonaro place those dwelling in the shanties of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo at considerable risk. Through an interdisciplinary work of homiletics and pop culture Adam aspires after a message of hope in the midst of daily life. What is rather intriguing about this approach is the way in which the preaching of a sermon in some contexts—like Brazil and South Africa—can more readily function as a vehicle for a public theology. In so many liberal democracies the preaching of a sermon has become more of an ecclesial practice for members. Adam’s interest is in hope and thus the future. There are various models of hope expressed in and through the Christian faith, of course, ranging from the otherworldly

to the revolutionary. Adam turns to cinema and literature in order to explore the kind of hope that might enliven a lived religion. The narratives are 'deeply rooted in the reality of poverty, suffering, vulnerability, in the power disputes so common in Latin America'.

One form of hope is for a world aspiring after a Just Peace. **Anthony Rees** weaves ecological imagery taken from the prophetic books of Isaiah and Micah into an imagined world at peace. This biblical work is designed to complement Rees' indebtedness to Daniel Philpott's practices of a Just Peace. The very name presumes an alternative to the way in which the Christian tradition has advanced theories of a Just War. Rees draws upon Philpott's six Just Peace practices—the building of socially just institutions, the acknowledgement of injury, reparation, apology, restorative punishment, and forgiveness. The way in which these dyad partners—justice and peace—relate one another needs to be teased out. Rees observes that these two are not always 'comfortable' with one another. The prophetic oracles he draws upon suggests 'images' of what a Just Peace might look like: what is especially noticeable is the manner in which they embrace that which is non-human—hence the title of 'patting snakes' and 'sitting under trees'. The images 'provide a corrective' to an otherwise 'heavily anthropocentric view of peace'.

The heightening awareness of the climate emergency which immediately preceded the onset of the pandemic is evident in the articles by **Jan Hasselaar** and **Eva van Urk**. The former mirrors Rees' turn to Hebrew Scriptures. In this instance Hasselaar draws upon the Exodus narrative which is interwoven with Jonathan Sacks' reading of hope. Unlike van Urk Hasselaar makes no reference back to the Anthropocene and the dawning of the age of humans. The prospect of climate change, nevertheless, lends itself to the principle of radical uncertainty. The dilemma Hasselaar concerns himself with, then, is what kind of hope might speak into this grim prospect. He takes from Sacks a number of assumptions emanating out of the Exodus story: a change of identity, the need for time, the motivating force of compassion, and the process of transformation represented by the Sabbath. Hasselaar imagines the Sabbath to be a 'public institution' which attracts the benefits of embodied action. It allows him to argue for a transformational response to climate change on the basis of a mix of contemplation and activism.

Van Urk is more self-consciously situated within the Anthropocene and for a purpose. Her point of entry into this potential theological game-changer is Elizabeth Kolbert's theory of the sixth mass extinction. In this respect van Urk stands inside the initiative taken by Tim Harvie some editions ago to expand the idea of the public to include the whole of creaturely existence. Like Harvie, van Urk has a deep concern for non-human creatures, for the fate of animals,

within a largely anthropocentric worldview. Van Urk situates herself, then, inside ‘the turn to the animals’. Like Hasselaar and Rees, van Urk seeks to read the Bible in the service of as public theology—in her case, ecologically. Her case studies are designed to demonstrate the bilingual nature of a public theology: with an appropriate biblical hermeneutic a public theology ‘can speak back into the life of the churches and inform a Christian consciousness regarding the beauty and diversity of creaturely life’. It also possesses the capacity to stimulate ‘an ethical conversation in public spheres during a period in the Earth’s history that is facing the possibility of Kolbert’s sixth mass extinction’.

The preparation of this edition of the journal has coincided with the publication of *African Public Theology*, edited by Sunday Bobai Agang, Dion Forster and H. Jurgens Hendriks (Langham, 2020). Forster argues that there is more than one public theology, hence the title is a little misleading. There is a particularity to public theologies even within what Agang terms a ‘groaning Africa’. In the context of Ethiopia that groaning embraces war, civil war, natural disasters, poverty, as well as ethnic and religious tensions. **Wondimu Legesse Sonessa** argues the imperative for rethinking a public theology for this troubled land. Like Hendriks, Sonessa sets out to build a public theology, a public identity, on the basis of a theological anthropology. It is done so with a difference, though. Sonessa’s public theology exemplifies a habit of a world Christianity: the confessional claim of the *imago Dei* (and its defilement) is set alongside the traditional beliefs of the Oromo people. The case he is making is for the Mekane Yesu church to recover the holistic theology which lay behind the activism of one of its early General Secretaries, Gudina Tumsa (‘the Bonhoeffer of Africa’) and its legacy of ‘Serving the Whole Person’. It seeks to do so in a way which is inclusive of the non-human creation.

The ethnic and religious tensions to be found in Ethiopia can sit alongside the increasing number of articles on public theology coming of what is the world’s largest Muslim majority country in terms of population. The public space in Indonesia is not arranged along the lines of a conventional western liberal democracy. The state is built upon the five principles known as Pancasila. Those five comprise a belief in Almighty God, a just and civilized humanity, unity, citizens led by collective representation and social equity. The foundation of the state upon these principles does not necessarily remove ethnic and religious tensions in and of itself. **Francisco Hardiman** examines the work Franz Magnis-Suseno initiated for the sake of interreligious dialogues in a pluralistic democracy. Of particular interest is the way in which Magnis-Suseno established the case for dialogue on an ethical rather than a theological basis. In writing about Magnis-Suseno Hardiman is able to draw out differences between how a religion functions in a Pancasila-based state

like Indonesia compared with what John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas expect in a western democracy. In view of the very nature of Indonesia interreligious dialogue must necessarily be a crucial dimension to the practice of a public theology.

The collective witness of these articles to look towards a world that is different. There is no use of that problematic term, 'the new normal'. There is instead a frank recognition of the 'dirty' demands that lived life places upon the academic study of a public theology. There is also a deep yearning for peace, justice and hope. And, if these articles are to be believed, there is a place for the Bible, the church and preaching.

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