Although the term ‘public theology’ or ‘public church’ was introduced into theological circles by Martin Marty and Robert Bellah in the 1970s,\(^1\) the concept of theology in the public sphere or the Christian gospel in public life can be recognised throughout church history. Public theology has recently gained wide support from theological circles and churches as is evidenced by the establishment of the Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT), the International Journal of Public Theology and a large number of centres and institutions in universities and church denominations. ‘Public theology’ or ‘theology in the public sphere’ is quite commonly accepted in contemporary theological departments and churches but the understanding of what it means differs from one to another. For the purposes of this chapter, I would like to define public theology as critical, reflective and reasoned engagement of theology in society to bring the kingdom of God, which is for the sake of the poor and marginalised.\(^2\) Throughout Christian history, churches have engaged with the wider society and political institutions both as minority communities and as dominant bodies.

The aim of this chapter is to highlight some key theologians and theological discourses and their contributions to the formation of public theology. I shall limit my discussion to selected writings up to the 1990s by which time the term public theology was starting to become widely used by scholars. The various chapters in this volume are selected to demonstrate the variety of topics and approaches within public theology. Public theology arises out of the engagement of theology in the spheres of politics and economics, which was then expanded to civil societies and other areas of the public life. For the earlier development of theologies of church-state relations, I will examine St Augustine and the Reformers; for alternative approaches to dominant political and economic systems, I shall examine the Catholic Social Teaching, which has made such a deep impact; for wider engagement with the socio-political and cultural, I will discuss ecumenical developments in Europe and the USA.

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I will then go on to discuss some insights from other continents in their engagement in the public sphere; and finally I shall make some suggestions for the future endeavours for public theology.

The Public Engagement of Theology in St Augustine

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) formulated a Christian understanding of the church’s role in social and political life beyond personal morality and religious matters. Although commentators agree that he does not develop a systematic theory of politics and social organisation, mainly through his City of God, Augustine provided an important platform from which Christians could deal with political, social and economic questions, especially relations between the state and wider society, at the time of the dawn of Christendom and the decline of the Roman Empire. Augustine’s major concerns were in what way citizens exercise rational control over their political environment, how society can be organised to enforce order and stability, and the questions of Christian obligations towards civil community and allegiance to the Empire. In fact, in the City of God, Augustine tried to define the kind of civil community that would enable Christians to engage with the Empire. Augustine’s critique of the late Roman Empire was based on the failure of that public life ever to attain a genuine res publica or commonwealth. For Augustine, the city of God was being shaped and guided by the indwelling Spirit of God even in the midst of natural disorders and human weaknesses. It was ‘not a figment of the imagination or a projection of philosophical speculation’ but a reality unfolding.

As to the nature of state and society, Augustine understood that any political power and authority was ordered by God in order to maintain social order and that political authority was not natural but the result of the sinful human condition. Aware of the dilemma of human beings aspiring for peace and yet having serious limitations, he envisaged that the role of human society was to ensure order. Unlike Greek thought which perceived the political framework

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