CHAPTER 3

Does it Matter?
On Whether there is Method in the Madness

Dirk J. Smit

Method in the Madness?

There is hardly any agreement on what constitutes public theology—but does it matter? Those 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? Confusion seems to abound. But does it matter? Does it matter that this growing field, already widespread and popular, has not (yet) developed a definite and normative methodology? Or is there after all some method in the madness?

These questions are not new either. In South Africa, the late theologian, ecumenical figure and public intellectual Russel Botman already during the 1990s described the state of the country’s public theologies (in the plural) as one in which they found themselves in what he called ‘a pre-paradigmatic mode’ in his still helpful and instructive essay called ‘Theology after Apartheid: Paradigms and Progress in South African Public Theologies.’ He meant that these diverse and often competing theologies, all responding to the shifting political, cultural and economic realities of the time, were all searching, following different images, pursuing different metaphors, making different proposals, holding conflicting viewpoints, and raising new questions.

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1 Even the notion of public theology developed according to different narratives in different contexts. For an account of six such narratives, see my account in ‘The Paradigm of Public Theology—Origins and Development’, in H. Bedford-Strohm, F. Höhne and T. Reitmeier, eds, Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2013), pp. 11–24.

For him, there was enough commonality in what these theologies were all attempting to do in order to describe them as public theologies—in a broad and vague use of the word—but not enough which they shared in order to be able to describe them (yet) as representing a new paradigm of doing theology, as a distinct form of public theology—in a particular and precise use of the word—that would both define their own distinct methodology and normatively distinguish them from other forms of doing theology. For him, public theology was not (yet) a paradigm in the singular: a new form of doing theology, a new methodology, describing the state of the art, the rules to be followed, the method to use, the best practices known and available.

Of course, paradigm may also be used in a different, almost contradictory way, namely to refer to classic examples, to the specific, the particular and the contextual, to concrete examples and representative figures in their uniqueness, even their strangeness. Paradigms are then seen as the paradigmatic, as instructive examples from whose specificity and singularity one cannot deduce general rules or methods. Perhaps this is the sense in which the term public theology first came to the fore in the North American discourse, when it described the very different roles of public figures, like Martin Luther King Jr and Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, when it referred to theologians and their public contributions rather than to a kind of theology? Perhaps this was also the sense in which theology became public in South Africa, in the lives of people like Desmond Tutu, Manas Buthelezi, Beyers Naudé, Allan Boesak, Frank Chikane, Tinyiko Maluleke, and Denise Ackermann—even if no one of them used the expression to describe their own life and work? Perhaps this is the meaning intended by Will Storrar, now from the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton—who initially envisioned and then organised and co-founded the Global Network for Public Theology—when he described reflection on


5 On the occasion of the celebration of Beyers Naudé’s centenary, on 5 May 2015 at the Beyers Naudé Center for Public Theology in Stellenbosch, his friend of many years and leading South African feminist theologian Denise Ackermann reflected on the question whether he was a public theologian and came to a very hesitant and ambiguous conclusion. He would probably also have rejected the use of the term, she says. See her ‘Beyers Naudé: Public Theologian?’, unpublished paper.