

The public role of the Christian community in the work of David Bosch

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Abstract

The article is a response to a recent claim by William Storrar that Bosch's paradigm of mission can be named a public paradigm of mission, and that the creative tension between the elements of Bosch's emerging paradigm of mission might cease to exist in the work of public theology. The development of Bosch's ecclesiology in relation to the notion of the alternative community is examined, and it is argued that this serves as a reminder that, in the work of Bosch, the church should also remain in tension with the public sphere as associated with a particular kind of democracy. While public theology and the creation of an inclusive public sphere are not rejected, within Bosch's ecclesiology the critical distinctiveness of the Christian community continues to be important.

Keywords: David Bosch, public theology, ecclesiology, alternative community.

Introduction

The Global Network for Public Theology was launched in 2005, with William Storrar as its first president. In 2007, the *International Journal of Public Theology* was launched, with the first article authored by Storrar. In the article, which is partly autobiography as well as a reflection on the history of the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Theology and Public Issues, he identified that which led a growing number of scholars to identify with the expression "public theology". As part of this autobiography, he writes (Storrar 2007:11):

Again, for many of us, our commitment to holding together both the ecclesial and the emancipatory dimensions of public theology has found its most helpful articulation in the work of the late South African missiologist and anti-apartheid theologian, David Bosch. In his seminal book, *Transforming mission*, he offers to hold together all aspects of the triune God's mission to the world in creative tension.

In August 2008, Storrar was invited by the Centre for Public Theology at the University of Pretoria to speak in South Africa. In the article based on these lectures, he starts with the words (Storrar 2011:23, 24):

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In this article I ask what it means to do public theology in a global era, how to approach such a large topic, and where to begin. I shall start with the work of the South African missiologist, David Bosch, and his seminal text, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission*.

These quotes serve as a reminder of the continued importance and influence of David Bosch, also in reflection on public theology. More specifically, it is a reminder that, as we continue to reflect on this contested idea called “public theology”, we should dust off the work of Bosch, written in the deeply formative time of the struggle against apartheid. It is a reminder that we should again consider his thoughts on the task of theology and the church within this context, and its implication for our context, twenty years after that famous speech in which F.W. de Klerk, the last president of apartheid South Africa, announced the end of the political system against which Bosch was working.

I will start with the above-mentioned articles of Storrar and the critical responses from the published 2008 conference proceedings. These I will bring into dialogue with Bosch, asking the question: can Bosch be called upon to support the contemporary search for public theology? From this, I further complicate the relationship between contemporary public theology and Bosch by looking into Bosch’s understanding of the “alternative community”. For those working in public theology, talk of an alternative community would likely be viewed as the exact opposite of public theology, as seen for example in Storrar’s reaction to the influential work of Hauerwas and Willimon (Storrar 2007:8, 9).

Bosch and the “public” of public theology

Similar to what other South African scholars have done (Koopman 2011; Bezuidenhout 2007), I will start the reflection with reference to the different notions of “public” put forth by Smit. In a publication of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at Stellenbosch University, Smit points to two broad categories of the notion “public” in relation to “public theology”.² He distinguishes between a narrower and a more general use of the term (Smit 2007:39). The narrower use of “public”, as used in public theology, he describes as (Smit 2007:39):

a normative concept, designating an ideal that developed together with typically Western democratic culture. It refers to a specific sphere of human life together that is distinct from politics, the economy and civil life, namely the deliberate formation of public

² The third category found in Smit’s analysis, that of David Tracy in *The analogical imagination*, receives very little attention in this specific essay, and is of little concern for this argument. I will therefore limit myself to the two categories mentioned.

opinion which has the common good at heart and promotes human dignity and justice. This public opinion is formed when informed citizens have the opportunity to try and find consensus with a view to the common interests and welfare of society. This happens according to practices based on inclusion, mutual respect and procedural justice, by way of rational debate and persuasion, in spaces devoid of coercion.

The second and broader use he describes as follows (Smit 2007:40):

[The] *vaguer, more general meaning* ‘public’ in ‘public theology’ is merely a *descriptive term*. It acknowledges that from the start and through the centuries the gospel has been calling believers to give an account, by way of public witness, of the hope in the Triune God that lives within them. Depending on the social circumstances, the nature of this witness will differ profoundly over the centuries, but in any relatively modern society it will at least imply that there is theological reflection on the implications of the gospel and the Christian life for public life, for economic realities, for human organisation in the numerous spheres of civil life, and for forming a public opinion on common values and the general welfare, especially the care of the weak and the victims in society.

A whole spectrum of approaches can be recognised within each of the uses of the term described above. Recognising the diversity within public theology does not force us to choose between the approaches. Rather, the various approaches can complement each other, and the context should determine how public theology should be approached (Koopman 2011:95). Still, the contribution of Storrar is described as clearly working from the first understanding (De Villiers 2011:13 - 15). Out of this approach, Storrar proceeds to limit “public theology” within the democracy to a normative understanding, which has met with criticism from South African respondents (Maluleke 2011:85, 86; Cochrane 2011:47, 48).

In the essay by Smit referred to above, he concludes that the Global Network for Public Theology, which publishes the *International Journal of Public Theology*, “includes institutions that have very diverse views of their own role and task” (2007:41). In the analysis by De Villiers (2011:18 - 20) on the two South African Centres for Public Theology connected to the Global Network for Public Theology, he observes that in both instances it is not a normative interpretation of “public” that reigns, but rather a broader, more general interpretation.

Again, this does not imply that a choice has to be made, or that these categories should be applied in too strict a sense. However, they do provide a useful lens through which various contributions can be better understood. What is important for the rest of this argument is to note that when Storrar

names Bosch's emerging paradigm of mission a "public paradigm", it is this normative, narrower interpretation of "public" that is meant. We have to ask whether this considers Bosch's contribution in all its complexity seriously, or confines Bosch's emerging paradigm of mission into the folds of modern democracy.

In the rest of the argument, I will pick up one central theme from the work of Bosch, namely the church as an alternative community, and bring this into dialogue with the introductory thoughts on public theology above.

Bosch in tension with public theology

The church as alternative community was selected for a number of reasons:

- It is an important theme in the work of Bosch, identified by him (Bosch 1982:8) and by others (Livingston 1990:11) as being one of the main themes in his work. His relationship with Mennonite theologians was also important to him personally (Kritzinger and Saayman 2011:57 - 60).
- Public theology and ecclesiology are closely intertwined. How we understand the church will largely determine the way in which we approach public theology (Smit 2007:42, 43).
- There is a possible tension with Storrar's claim, which becomes apparent when we attempt to bring into dialogue Bosch's alternative community and public theology.

As already mentioned, while Storrar (2007:11) points to Bosch as the most helpful articulation for public theology, he describes the work of Hauerwas and Willimon as "a very different Christian theological response" (p. 8) compared with his own. Yet at the same time, writing on the challenges for a mission towards Western culture, one of Bosch's (1995:57) conclusions is that: "Part of our mission will be to challenge the hedonism around us, inculcating something of the spirit of being 'resident aliens' in the world". With this, he is referring to exactly the same work by Hauerwas and Willimon that Storrar describes as "a very different Christian theological response".

The above is not but a passing reference to the church as being counter-cultural and thus seemingly the exact opposite of what would be understood under certain normative interpretations of public theology. *The Journal of theology for Southern Africa* came into existence in 1972, and in 1982 it approached a number of theologians in Southern Africa asking how their minds had changed over the past ten years. The subtitle of Bosch's article was "Mission and the alternative community" (Bosch 1982b:6). After first explaining his understanding of mission, he says (p. 8):

Perhaps it would be correct to say that, in the course of time, the essence of my thinking in this area has crystallised in the concept of

the church as the 'alternative community'. The expression was not coined by me; it originated, I think, in American Mennonite circles. What I have attempted to do - not very successfully, I am afraid, judging by the reaction, particularly in the Afrikaans Reformed Churches - was to build on and develop further the intrinsic similarities that I believe exist between Reformed and Anabaptist ecclesiologies.

While Storrar calls on Bosch in the field of public theology, equal appreciation of his work can be found among some Mennonites and those within the broad Anabaptist tradition. We should not find it in the least bit strange that these seemingly contradictory interpretations of the work of Bosch exist. This has been a defining aspect of his work all along: that he was able to bring together apparently conflicting streams of thought in "creative tension" (the title of the 1990 *Festschrift* for Bosch was "Mission in creative tension", a concept he frequently used). If, however, we want to bring Bosch into the dialogue of public theology for the twenty-first century on his own terms, then these apparent contradictions need to be regarded seriously. In following Bosch, we might even say that it is exactly in these seemingly contradictory approaches that we will find a creative tension that opens up avenues for the future.

With this in mind, I take this particular concept, which appears to exist at odds with much of public theology, and through that reflect on some of the possibilities Bosch might bring to public theology.

In a posthumously published essay, Bosch reflects on five ecclesial traditions and the possibilities they offer for relations between church and state. Bosch's main criterion in this essay is whether a particular tradition considers what happens in government and this world to be something that concerns the church. Those traditions that do not consider the formation of this world to be important, he calls "otherworldly", and he considers their approach unacceptable (Bosch 1993:93, 94).

Among the group that Bosch considers to be world formative, he includes Anabaptist, Reformist and Liberationist. Although this is a diverse group, they are all considered acceptable and useful, and the context should determine the approach to be used in relation to the state (Bosch 1993:93 - 95). The line of thought I pick up in this argument is therefore neither the only lens through which to bring into dialogue the thoughts of Bosch and modern public theology, nor necessarily the most obvious. It is, however, a line of thought that Bosch himself identified as of specific importance and one that forces us also to regard the apparent contradiction between Bosch and recent public theology seriously.

1975 - 1982: The alternative community

The church finds itself constantly being both *in* and not *of* this world (Bosch 1975:4). For Bosch there is a need for these two realities to be kept in a delicate tension, but all too often one of these dimensions is forgotten. It is in keeping with this creative tension that Bosch makes use of the concept of the church as “alternative community” (Livingston 1990:11). Constantly, he grounds his thoughts on the alternative community in the life of Jesus, and portrays Jesus as providing an alternative upon which to base the choices available to society. In Bosch’s image of the historical Jesus, he repeatedly sets Jesus against the backdrop of other Jewish groups. The four groups Bosch uses are the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots³ and the Essenes, and he also uses these as analogies for possible choices confronting the church today about how to approach mission (see Bosch 1975:4 - 7; 1979a:56; 1982d:3 - 15; Nicol 1993).

On the one hand, Bosch consistently warns against the church becoming a Christian ghetto (Bosch 1975:5; 1979:224; 1982d:8; 1984:31) and, on the other, he points to the danger of the church becoming either redundant by doing exactly that which any other social organisation could have done or by losing its critical voice through becoming inseparably related to, and sometimes indistinguishable from, the institutions of this world (Bosch 1979:224; Livingston 1990:12). The *alternative community*, as understood by Bosch, provides a way to keep this tension intact. He stresses that the *alternative community* exists not for the sake of the church, but for that of the world. The significance of the church for the world lies in its being uniquely separate. We work on the renewal of the church and, in doing so, also on the renewal of society (Bosch 1982b:8, 9; Livingston 1990:5). Christians may never withdraw themselves from the world, from the tasks of the world or from public life, but must take part in it (be it by serving, not by reigning; Bosch 1979:224). He is critical of radical groups that recognise the need for governments, but that will not participate in them, or an approach that advocates for the creation of an alternative society, opting out of the world (Bosch 1979:226). Political and social factors may never become taboo to the church. At the same time, church and world must always be distinguishable from each other (Bosch 1979:224).

In Bosch’s opinion, the *alternative community* must be understood in relation to eschatology. He speaks about eschatology as a tension between the “already” and the “not yet” (Bosch 1982b:8, 9). This is an unbearable tension (p. 9), but one that needs to be maintained. He distinguishes between putting all our stakes on the coming kingdom because we despair

³ Bosch (1975:4) is aware of the fact that they might not have existed at the time of Jesus, but considers this unimportant within this particular argument.

of the world, and trying to build utopia here and now with our own hands because we have given up hope of a coming kingdom (p. 9). The *alternative community* embodies this tension between the “already” and the “not yet” (Bosch 1982d:18):

She is no longer what she used to be and not yet what she is destined to be. She is too early for heaven and too late for this world. She lives on the borderline between the already and the not yet. She is a fragment of the world to come. She is God’s colony in man’s world, God’s experimental garden on earth. She is a *sign* of the world to come and at the same time guarantee of its coming.

Up to this point, I have kept myself primarily concerned with sources from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s. I will now turn to the text that is the primary focus twenty years after its publication: *Transforming mission*.

Ecclesiology in *Transforming mission*

If we want to talk about the future of the church as envisioned by Bosch, we might start with the simple statement: “In the emerging ecclesiology, *the church is seen as essentially missionary*.” (Bosch 2004:372). *Transforming mission* continues the strong emphasis on ecclesiology. Although the importance of reflection on the *missio Dei* is recognised, Bosch (p. 392) strongly rejects those who would think that this in any way excludes the participation of the church. The continued importance of the church in reflecting on mission is clear (p. 372):

It has become impossible to talk about the church without at the same time talking about mission. One can no longer talk about the church and mission, only about the mission of the church. One could even say, with Shumacher, ‘The inverse of the thesis “the church is essentially missionary” is “Mission is essentially ecclesial”’. Because church and mission belong together from the beginning, a ‘church without mission’ or a ‘mission without the church’ are both contradictions. Such things do exist, but only as pseudostructures.

The way in which Bosch reflects on various metaphors found in both Catholic and Protestant ecclesiologies points to the continuation, although further developed, of his previous thought, confirming Livingston’s (1990:11) observation written shortly before the publication of *Transforming mission*, that, although the alternative community disappears from Bosch’s writing, it does not disappear from his thoughts. He rarely used the explicit phrase “the church as alternative community” in his published writings from the last few years, and never in *Transforming mission*. His thoughts are continued through different metaphors and other choices of words.

Throughout the section on “Mission as the church-with-others” in *Transforming mission*, it is evident that the social reality of the church is in many ways not living up to the grand metaphors. The chastened optimism of a post-modern paradigm, which Bosch (2004:361, 362) described earlier, is also visible in how he writes about the church. “[T]he empirical church will always be imperfect. Every church member who loves the church will also be deeply pained by it” (p. 386). Yet, it is exactly to this broken church that Bosch commits himself too. He rejects the theological ideal that denies the existence of the institutional church, although giving serious consideration to the criticism of Hoekendijk and others against the church (p. 385).

Keeping in mind the reality of the broken church and the fact that the church at times exhibits the same injustices found in the whole of society, Bosch still insists that the church can only continue its existence if it retains its unique character. Similar to earlier writings, he states that the “people of God” is a “pilgrim people”, “called out” of the world. “Foreignness is an element of its constitution”. “It is called to flesh out, already in the here and now, something of the conditions which are to prevail in God’s reign” (p. 373, 374).

Picking up these metaphors from Vatican II especially, Bosch points to the way in which the ecumenical church found meaning in the idea of the church as a sacrament, sign and instrument - with this line being completed in various ways (a sacrament, sign, and instrument of: communion with God, unity among people, salvation and the kingdom). But the sacrament, sign and instrument are not found primarily in the radical way in which the church has embodied these possibilities. Rather, these images remind us that the broken church is pointing beyond itself; it is a sign, but merely a sign, pointing towards Christ.

What Bosch attempts in the first of his elements of an emerging paradigm of mission, not dissimilar from *Witness to the World* (1980) and even his own description of what he attempted to do between 1972 and 1982, is to bring two seemingly opposing views of the church into creative tension. And it is exactly at this point that Storrar’s (2007:6 - 11) initial comment, that the best articulation for those who are committed to holding both the ecclesial and emancipatory dimensions of public theology together can be found in the work of Bosch. Who better to call upon for those who need to find a way of reconciling the evangelical experience of their youth with the political commitment of their later theological development?

In Bosch’s account, the one extreme is those who view the church as the sole bearer of salvation, and mission only as that activity that transfers individuals from eternal death to life. The other extreme is that the church is seen as, at most, an illustration of God’s involvement in the world, and mission only as the participation in the humanisation of the world. For Bosch, the first would rob the Gospel of its ethical thrust, preaching a

Gospel that has lost its commitment to justice, peace and equity, and professing faith in an unhistorical Jesus. The second would rob the Gospel of its soteriological depth, offering complete identification of the church with the world and its agenda, and virtually writing off the church (Bosch 2004:381, 382).

Public theology reflecting on the contribution of Bosch needs to consider seriously both his commitment of service to this world (p. 378) and his criticism against views that would reduce the “church’s” responsibility only to the humanisation agenda of modern societies (p. 382, 383).

The way toward this, as Bosch proposes, is to focus on the church as a distinct community.⁴ “It follows that the church can be missionary only if its being-in-the-world is, at the same time, a being-different-from-the-world. Precisely for the sake of the world, the church has to be unique, *in* the world without being *of* the world.” In following Berkhof, Bosch (2004:386) describes the church as “the experimental garden of the new humanity”, again calling on language important throughout Bosch’s career.

If we start translating this into the language of public theology, we might say that for Bosch the most important role of the church in the world, exactly for the sake of the world, is to be exactly that: church. This acknowledges certain limits. We should apply caution not to exceed the competence of the church, applying ourselves to that in which we have no more competence than other spheres of society (and sometimes less), but, at the same time, the church can never commit itself to any social, political or economic project without reservation (Bosch 2004:387).

Bosch’s ecclesiology, his entire thinking about the role of the church in the world, can only be understood when we again recognise the eschatological nature of the church. The church is an anticipatory community, anticipating the reign of God in history (p. 387, 388), anticipating that which could be, and setting up signs pointing towards this. We do this not as an exercise in withdrawal from reality, but exactly because of our deep commitment to this world and all that concerns it, so that we can contribute thus towards the well-being of all, the common good.

To name Bosch as public theologian

Storrar’s naming of Bosch’s paradigm of mission as a public paradigm of mission for a global era might be resolving the tension too soon. In public theology, Storrar (2011:24, 25) sees that Bosch’s thirteen paradigms of mission cease to be a series of creative tensions and are becoming a coherent style of Christian engagement. Bosch supported attempts at creating a more inclusive public sphere (Kritzinger and Saayman 2011:95, 96), a central

⁴ The word used towards the end of *Transforming mission* (Bosch 2004:517) to describe what is similar to his earlier thoughts on the church as alternative community.

aspect of Storrar's description of the task of public theology (Storrar 2011:29 - 32). However, naming Bosch's paradigm of mission "public theology", in the strict sense of participation in the public sphere, might require that the tension between church and world, always visible in the work of Bosch, be resolved too soon.

Although Bosch (1993:95) was thoroughly convinced that Christians in secular societies could and should contribute to a shared moral vision that could hold society together; the church should continue exactly as a distinct community. However, Bosch's (2004:386) reason for this remains important: it was not simply in fear that the church would lose its integrity, but specifically because the church would then lose the ability to contribute to this moral vision, this vision of a just society.

An important implication for public theology, drawing on the work of Bosch, is his constant reminder that "[T]he church, since it is an eschatological community, may not commit itself without reservation to any social, political, or economic project. As the first front of the reign of God it anticipates that reign in the here and now." (Bosch 2004:387). This included the modern democracy. Writing on the modern state, he says (Bosch 1993:92, 93):

It may be of some importance to reflect briefly on the different political systems we may encounter in our missionary enterprise today. These range from democracies to one-party states, military dictatorships, states where one racial or ethnic group rules over all other groups, a few remaining Marxist states, and some countries that have sunk into chaos and anarchy. Still, almost all contemporary governments share one characteristic: they are all, in varying degrees, *totalitarian*.

Where some in public theology today choose to work within the boundaries set out by our democratic societies (Marshall 2004:12; De Gruchy 2004:54), others have noted that it might be necessary to criticise this very system (De Gruchy 2004:59). On the one hand, acknowledging the importance of government and also that the *missio Dei* may never be reduced to the work of the church, the church, on the other hand, also needs to remain critical of the very system in which public theology attempts to speak. Building on this vision of a distinct and counter-cultural community may never lead to withdrawal from society, to non-participation in government while government is considered a necessity, to a privatisation of faith. Nor may it lead to reducing public witness to specifically religious language about God that does not address the issues of this world.

On what public theology is *not*, Forrester (2004:6) writes:

[Public theology is] ...theology which is not primarily concerned with individual subjectivity, or with the internal discourse of the

Church about doctrine and its clarification, important as these things are. Public theology, as I understand it, is not primarily and directly evangelical theology which addresses the Gospel to the world in the hope of repentance and conversion.

Although talking about social ethics rather than public theology, Bosch (1995:35) makes the call towards theology that is not merely the introduction of religion into society:

In a sense, as I will argue below, there is already very much religion and believing in Western society. What we do not need, then, is to introduce more religion. The issue is not to talk more about God in a culture that has become irreligious, but how to express, ethically, the coming of God's reign, how to help people respond to the real questions of their context, how to break with the paradigm according to which religion has to do only with the private sphere.

Read against the background of Bosch's ecclesiology, this call to "express, ethically, the coming of God's reign" again reminds us that the task of the church is the setting up of signs of the kingdom. The distinctiveness Bosch calls for does not mean being religiously separated from society, but provides a distinctly ethical alternative in constant relation to the context in which this alternative is found.

While Bosch's vision for the mission of the church is not opposed to Storrar's quest for an inclusive public sphere, the continuing importance of the alternative community in the life and work of Bosch is a reminder that the creative tension might not be that easily caught up in a vision for the work of the church as participation in the public sphere as Storrar envisioned this. It is a reminder that the church cannot commit itself without reservation to public theology, committed to the public sphere, as found in the modern democracy.

The alternative community under apartheid

In Bosch's work, the articulation of the church as alternative community, as sign or experimental garden, was never done in the fashion of an eternal ecclesial blueprint. Although Bosch consistently rejects any ecclesiology that withdraws from society, on the one hand, or becomes undistinguishable from society, on the other hand, the constructive argument for a missionary ecclesiology always takes into account the society in which we are to be church.

The similarities between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions, which Bosch formulated in talking about the alternative community, were formed against the background of apartheid. If the church is to be distinct *from* the world, exactly so it could be of service to the world, then the context in which this distinctiveness is reflected on needs to be taken into

account. We need to ask what the distinct community is required to become within this specific society.

The alternative community required under apartheid was a church that could be a sign towards racial reconciliation, and the possibility of a South Africa where the oppressive relation between racial groups would no longer exist. This became a very particular vision of what the reign of God would look like. The sign that the church needed to become was one that demonstrated to society that a specific alternative vision of society was possible. The writings of Bosch reflect this:

- He uses reconciliation between black and white as his South African example of building up the alternative community (Bosch 1975:10, 11).
- His whole chapter in *Die eenheid van die kerk* was devoted to demonstrating how the new community surrounding Jesus, as well as the early church, provided an example of how to bridge the gap between the extremes of society (Bosch 1979a:1 - 5).
- In the Open Letter to the Dutch Reformed Church (of which Bosch was one of the authors) published in 1982, the word “proeftuin” (experimental garden) was used to refer to the alternative community. From the letter (Bosch et al. 1982:15) as well as from Bosch’s own response to Dr P.F. Theron concerning this concept (Bosch 1982c:135 - 137, 141, 142), it is clear that what he had in mind was racial unity and reconciliation.
- In a 1982 paper, entitled *The church as alternative community*, he also stresses the love of enemies and non-believers, and compassion for others, together with reconciliation. Here he also emphasises racial reconciliation (Bosch 1982d:29 - 34).
- Reflecting on his own theological development between 1972 and 1982, he expresses the conviction that we have to work on the renewal of society by working on the transformation of the church. He then explicitly states that his own focus is on the Afrikaans Reformed churches, and the unduly high value they ascribe to racial and cultural differences. In conclusion, he says that his own theological concern, as it developed during the years to which he is referring, is expressed in the Open Letter to the Dutch Reformed Church: “...particularly in the Open Letter’s emphasis on the unity of the Church and its prophetic calling. Both of this flow from the central thrust of the Gospel, which is unconditional acceptance and reconciliation” (Bosch 1982b:9, 10).

Furthermore, in his own participation in the struggle against apartheid, Bosch embodied this approach. Kritzinger and Saayman (2011:87 - 104) describe the approach favoured by Bosch during apartheid. He refrained

from party political activities, but continuously worked as a bridge-builder between various communities. He firmly opposed the apartheid government, but refused to consider responding to violence with violence as inevitable, even in the face of the brutal events of the 1980s.

Public theology twenty years after *Transforming mission*

If we draw on a more general understanding of “public”, as is pointed out above, we may find in Bosch (2004:378) an articulation of a vision for church and world where our action for the sake of society in general is understood as the very essence of what it would mean to be church. A church that creates a situation in which Christians withdraw from society is described as heretical in no unclear terms.

As stated at the beginning, this exploration concerns but one line of thought in the work of Bosch. To attempt to reduce into one single approach the diverse ways in which Bosch posited that the church might engage the society and world of which it finds itself to be part, would not do justice to the strong emphasis that we should always maintain the creative tension among various world-transformative approaches within the church. Instead of attempting to formulate a single vision for public theology, Smit’s (2007:41) observation that “public theology can still have divergent conceptions about public theology itself” is closer to the approach found in Bosch’s work. Having said this, in following the above argument, I would suggest that we also ask what the contribution towards public theology might be when we work with the vision of the church as sign, as experimental garden and as counter-cultural community. I provide two examples of where this approach to ecclesiology might remain important today. The first concerns the continued reality of a racialised society, and the second, the growing questions of economic justice and ecological sustainability.

Twenty years after F.W. de Klerk made his famous speech announcing the unbanning of previously banned political parties, reflecting on the role of the church in a context of racial relations in conflict remains shockingly relevant; or maybe we should not be shocked. Did we really expect centuries of colonialism and decades of legalised apartheid to end in seventeen years? Can the local church become a space in which those on different sides of a historically oppressive divide be reconciled?

Writing from the same white Afrikaner context on which Bosch reflected, but two generations later, his call for a reconciled community as a sign will have to be taken together with full recognition of the continuing injustice found within the post-apartheid South Africa. Racial privilege did not end when the politics and the laws of the country changed. Following Bosch, we would have to add that becoming a community attempting to provide an alternative sign in tension with the normalised process of white

racialisation (for example Steyn 2001 and Sullivan 2006) should be a critical force in society, anticipating possibilities that might be deemed impossible in the world. This vision for church continues directly from the thoughts of Bosch, working for a church that can become a sign of a world in which centuries of racial privilege built on the oppression of others can be challenged rather than maintained in various ways.

To provide another example: In the context of growing economic tension between rich and poor in South Africa and the world, and a looming ecological crisis, is it possible that the church can contribute towards a renewed moral vision (Conradie 2009:217 - 220) by becoming an experimental garden, a practical example challenging the many voices that communicate the impossibility that society can function if not driven by the forces giving rise to vast economic inequalities and ecological destruction?

This does not imply that, in our public theology, we are not also simultaneously contributing towards the public discourse on sound economic policies, laws that will contribute to a healthy ecological future, and a macro-economy that will benefit all. However, the church as alternative community also works towards the common good of society when we form communities that envision the sustainable future required for humans and the whole environment in our life together, an experimental garden of possibilities for the future of the coexistence of humans, and humans in relation to the environment in which they find themselves, a community that, through its very existence, voices criticism of the reigning structures of society.

In both of these examples, we today would have to recognise that we cannot imagine a church that is not also wholly part of this broken society. In both, we are reminded that an alternative community in total isolation from the world in which it is found is becoming increasingly impossible. We recognise that the empirical church will always be imperfect but, more than this, that our fate is inherently tied up with that of the society in which we live. The church can never separate itself from society and the alternative community will always carry in it the signs of the world in which we live, but if we are truly committed to this world, we should also take the call towards embodying in the local church the possible alternatives to that which is killing this world. On behalf of the world, this vision for the church should not be forgotten. This is part of the legacy of Bosch, which should keep challenging us as we move deeper into the twenty-first century: the distinct community is an inherently public community, with the common good of humanity and the whole of creation at the core of its agenda.

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