Doing urban public theology in South Africa: Introducing a new agenda

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This article serves as the introductory, first contribution to a special collection of articles on the theme, 'Doing urban public theology in South Africa: Visions, approaches, themes and practices towards a new agenda'. The aim of the article is to set the conceptual and hermeneutical framework for undertaking urban public theology as a very intentional, new agenda in South African theological scholarship. The authors assert that public theology in South Africa has, despite its established position today, not embedded itself in, or intentionally engaged itself with, the contextual challenges of South African cities and urban environments by and large. This assertion leads them to pay attention to the urban as a distinctive but contested development concern in present-day South Africa, to the way in which current public theological practice is lacking behind in engaging itself with this development concern, and to the important hermeneutical question of what it would entail to make an authentic, theological contribution towards meeting the challenges of the urban in South Africa in response to the current neglect. Although by no means intended as exhaustive and all-encompassing in terms of the subject matter, the authors end by appreciating the rest of the articles in the special collection as a first offer to the anticipated urban public theological agenda that they have started to identify in this article.

Introduction

In post-apartheid South Africa the field of public theology has unmistakably established itself as a prominent specialisation in the academic theological landscape (see e.g. De Villiers 2011a:1–4, 2011b:5–22; Koopman 2010b:123–138). Whilst we want to acknowledge this theological focus, this article and the rest of the articles in this special collection are motivated by an analytic understanding that recognises a distinctive gap or neglect in the existing South African public theological enterprise. In contrast to what is already beginning to happen in public theological scholarship elsewhere in the world (see e.g. Graham & Scott 2008), we want to refer to this gap or neglect as the lack in South African public theological scholarship of a dedicated, concerted and systematic development of theological discourse that arises from, engages with and responds to the specific incarnation(s) of the urban public.

This article and the rest of the present collection of articles want to make a concerted first contribution towards addressing the above-mentioned deficiency in South African public theological scholarship. As the introductory article in this effort, our aim is to set the conceptual and hermeneutical framework for such a new agenda. In a very important way we want to begin by arguing that the necessity of taking on the task of doing urban public theology in South Africa derives from our concern to take our context even more seriously than public theologians in South Africa have hitherto been doing. In this regard, we will be arguing that such deepening attention to context should inevitably involve a far more pointed concern with the reality of the urban and the way in which this reality will increasingly hold the key to the dreams and hopes of a more flourishing and inclusive South African society. In the words of our country's National Planning Commission, which we could well quote at this point for the support it renders to our own sense of context:

> South Africa's towns and cities are now home to more than 60 percent of the national population and account for 80 percent of economic activity … with these percentages expected to increase. The future of the urban centres is of enormous importance to national development. Rapid urbanisation has exacerbated all of the socioeconomic challenges that were already present, from widespread poverty to alarming levels of youth unemployment and infrastructure backlogs. It is possible that by 2025, the country's urban areas will be bigger, poorer, more congested, more polluted and more socially fractious. (National Planning Commission n.d.)

Whilst we are relying on an institutional agent such as our country's National Planning Commission to raise our sense of context, we at the same time want to remind ourselves that our agenda is a theological one, driven by an inclination to contribute to a mode of knowledge and idea production that will do justice to our discipline's own authentic contribution to a normative concern with the challenges of the urban. Yet, as Elaine Graham and Peter Manley Scott have made the point so aptly in their editorial to the special issue on 'Public theology and the city: Urban theology as public theology' some years ago in *International Journal of Public Theology*, such a theological concern does not imply business as usual. For them instead, what is fundamentally required by a 'theology of the urban' is:

> … the expansion of theology: 'the 'inflating' of theology in the phenomena of the urban, the theological 'aeration' of the city's meanings, structures and possibilities, the prompting of 'vernacular' theologies that reflect the rhythms of everyday experiences of the city's inhabitants. (Graham & Scott 2008:1)

We want to be under no illusion regarding the complexity of the 'task of expansion' ahead of us and the fact that intensive reflection about the nature and topical ingredients of such expansion should be foundational to our own endeavours towards establishing urban public theology as a viable focus in South African theological scholarship. From the point of view of an anticipated own authentic theological contribution, we are in full agreement with Graham and Scott who, in their own framework, identified a new engagement with the theological question of God's incarnation in the city and spaces of the urban as central to the task of doing urban public theology (Graham & Scott 2008:2–3). And in addition to this, we are also equally in agreement with them regarding the fundamental practical theological dimension of the task ahead of us, which should prioritise a concern with the agency role of church and other religious communities – albeit not in isolation from a concern with the agency role of other actors in the city and spaces of the urban such as the state and groups and associations in civil society – in the struggle for 'more habitable, more sustainable ways of living in the city' (Graham & Scott 2008:3).

Of considerable importance, however, our insistence on an envisaged authentic theological contribution to a normative concern with the challenges of the urban in South Africa should by no means be understood as a claim to disciplinary detachment or seclusion. Whilst hinted at by Graham and Scott as a further dimension of the 'task of expansion' (see Graham & Scott 2008:3–4), foundational to our own approach is a yearning to not only learn from, but also become an active interlocutor in and contributor to an already distinguishable alternatively orientated inter- and transdisciplinary discourse about the urban. Indeed, we want to appreciate this discourse for the way in which it appeals to our own disinclination for the technocratic, state-centred, privatised and neo-liberal worldview that underlies much of the thinking about the urban offered by mainstream actors from the state, private sector and academia. From a constructive point of view, we are therefore particularly adjusted to learn from, but also

contribute to what is through the growing contributions of participants in this discourse becoming the counterpoint in scholarly production concerned with the urban, both locally and internationally: a way of thinking that is overtly normatively inclined, as evident from the applications of new working concepts such as the 'good city', the 'imagined city', the 'postcolonial city', the 'sustainable city', and the 'postsecular city'; a way of thinking, accordingly, that is particularly geared towards alternative epistemological productions and practices; and finally, a way of thinking that (re)prioritises the political, motivated by an idea framework of rights-based, anti-technocratic, anti-authoritarian and anti-neoliberal discourse that in view of inclusive and sustainable urban alternatives wants to include the agency role of ordinary, poor and marginalised occupants of the urban as inherently part of the envisioned drive towards alternative epistemological production and practice.

We could at this point well restate our aim with this special collection of articles as to inspire and set an agenda for doing a mode of public theology in South Africa that is intentionally preoccupied with the context of the urban and that, in this process, strives to contribute from the part of theological scholarship to the counterpoint in scholarly production on the urban both in the context of South African and international scholarship. In charting our way towards this agenda, in the following discussion we will for the sake of our own orientation begin with a cursory identification of the urban as a distinctive but contested development concern or focus in present-day, post-apartheid South African public and intellectual discourse – that is, both from the side of the mainstream and what we are identifying as the counterpoint. This identification will secondly lead us to indicate more pertinently how we in contrast perceive a concern with the urban to be noticeably lacking from the side of existing public theological scholarship in South Africa today, amidst what we perceive is a preoccupation with more abstract paradigmatic, epistemological and methodological concerns by scholars from this field of specialisation. Thirdly, from the vantage point of such closer observation and by drawing on debates and perspectives from a relatively small selection of scholarly literature that we have identified as relevant to our cause, we will thereupon start to draw some important lines or contours along which we would like to propose an urban public theology in South Africa should be developed hermeneutically. This proposal of a hermeneutical framework will then lead us to end our discussion with a brief appraisal of the rest of the present collection of articles as a collective first offer to the agenda that we have attempted to set a framework for in this article.

A distinctive but contested development concern

In terms of our own orientation in this article, it may be worthwhile to start our discussion here by alluding to the fact that the South African city has long evoked diverse discourses, visions and narratives in attempts to make

sense of it. There has never been a singular discourse, as evident from the way in which public, intellectual, civil society, cultural, religious and popular discourses have all depicted the city through diverse narratives and visions. As a result, whilst the different discourses have at times complemented each other, they have more often also given rise to contesting images and ideas.

Historian Gary Baines (2003), in an article written some years ago, meaningfully indicates how South African cities were already an important object of discourse in literature and films as early as the 1940s and 1950s. Yet, as Baines importantly continues to point out, 'competing narratives' were already by then part of this discourse, with the lines between 'real' or 'imagined' city often being unclear. He explains:

> According to discourse analysis, then, the city resembles a text. However, it is not simply textual. It is a gathering of meanings in which people invest their interpretations and seek to create their own (hi)story. While the practices involved in the production of meaning are not confined to the realm of ideas and discourses, they are certainly significant. These meanings compete with one another, with certain interpretations emerging as part of a hegemonic discourse. And these discourses are recoverable from both cinematic and literary representations of the city. (Baines 2003:36)

Against the backdrop of Baines's observation, in more recent times a range of different and contesting readings of 'the city as text' have likewise been produced in a noticeable corpus of South African literary works, fictional and documentary (see e.g. Harber 2011; Holland & Roberts 2002; Mda 1995, 1998, 2009; Mpe 2001; Vladislavić 2001). Yet, whilst these texts focus more on urban cultural shifts and less on explicit development concerns, it is especially in the last decade or so that the urban has been established as a socio-economic and political priority in public, intellectual and civil society discourses.

We have already started to point out in the introduction of this article how the issue of the urban is today highlighted as a central concern by the members of South Africa's National Planning Commission who have authored the country's new National Development Plan. In this high-profile document, entitled *Our future – make it work*, most specifically in the eighth chapter, a vision is presented for South African urban communities to become 'more functionally integrated, balanced and vibrant' (National Planning Commission 2011:260). This is done through a more pertinent identification of the spatial challenges (urban and rural) confronting South Africa, a national vision for spatial development, the instruments needed to achieve such a vision, and the capabilities accordingly required 'in the state and among citizens' (National Planning Commission 2011:260–292).

Representing perhaps the most prominent public articulation to date of the South African city's importance in the post-apartheid dispensation, the National Development Plan's prioritisation of the urban should be welcomed against the backdrop of urban expansion, and the necessity to facilitate spatial restructuring of South African cities. At the same time, however, such an appreciation may also well be extended to a more recent discussion document that was tasked by the national Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (DCGTA 2013), entitled 'Towards an integrated urban development framework'. Having brought together a panel of people combining authors of the National Development Plan, and urban scholars standing more critically towards dominant discourses, the panel sought to facilitate dialogue between different stakeholders and the public, in order to build a broad consensus on issues faced and priorities to be dealt with in local urban communities (DCGTA 2013:5).

Yet there seems to be important scope to remain critical of both the above-mentioned documents, despite our appreciation. This concerns the way in which the National Development Plan still seems to be rather technocratic in its outlook, which is suggestive of an approach to the city that outsources solutions to technocrats, consultants and the private sector, often at the expense of local communities and people, and the local knowledge they represent. But it also concerns the second of the two documents, which, despite its more pronounced emphasis on the role that both the private sector and civil society should play as partners with government to secure effective programme design and delivery (DCGTA 2013:28), rather fails to clarify just how, when, where and with whom, such dialogue and collaboration should materialise. In not doing so, it clearly reduces the value of what it sets out to do: building broad consensus.

Whereas public discourses on the city, such as the National Development Plan, often offer visions and solutions 'from above', this stands in noticeable tension with and could be contrasted with those critics from the left who emphasise the fact that the neo-liberal framework of such discourses will fail to realise the goals of narrowing social inequalities (Bauer 2013; Congress of South African Trade Unions [COSATU] 2013; *Engineering News* 2013; National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa [NUMSA] 2012; Terreblanche 2014:149–157). Yet, even more articulated in this regard are those intellectual and civil society discourses that promote urban visions 'from below' and, as such, can be associated with the notion of 'southern urbanism' or 'right to the city' approaches.

Important think-tanks in this regard are the African Centre for Cities (ACC) at the University of Cape Town, the Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies (CUBES) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), and the Sustainability Institute at Stellenbosch University. As a collective, and as for instance well illustrated by recent prominent publications from their ranks (Huchzermeyer 2011; Parnell & Pieterse 2014; Parnell & Oldfield 2014; Swilling & Annecke 2012), these are established centres of idea production that are today all contributing significantly to urban thought, in particular to urbanism from the global South, urban informality and urban sustainability (cf. also Pieterse 2014; Swilling 2004). Not least, however, these established centres are today also joined by

new initiatives such as the recently launched Capital Cities Research Project at the University of Pretoria, which could be upheld as an example of an institution-wide research project on the nature of space, justice and belonging in capital cities of the global South (see University of Pretoria 2013).

But it is also at the organisational level of civil society that a number of initiatives can be upheld as important examples of the alternative vision 'from below'. We may mention the example of the Isandla Institute, which does research and knowledge-sharing that support urban development and transformation, but from the specific vantage point of advancing 'a right to the city' discourse (see Görgens & Van Donk 2012; Isandla Institute n.d.); the Social Justice Coalition, which gives concrete expression to the 'right to the city' approach through its advocacy work around sanitation and access to toilets in the Cape Town Metropolitan area (see Pieterse 2014:12–18; Social Justice Coalition n.d.); and, last but not least, Abahlali baseMjondolo, a social movement that was originally based in Durban but today represents informal settlements around South Africa, advocating 'against evictions, and for public housing' (Zikode 2013; see also Abahlali baseMjondolo 2006; Zikode 2007).

Apart from these better-known organisations, countless other responses to urban challenges in cities and towns all over the country, often much more *ad hoc* in nature than the initiatives mentioned before, in similar ways advance a right to the city, with or without participation in or knowledge of the broader urban discourses argued by public or intellectual documents. Examples are service-delivery protests, opposition to the illegal evictions from buildings and illegal demolition of informal settlements, and initiatives to work for the integration of homeless people into the city.

Faith-based organisations and churches all over South Africa likewise struggle to discern appropriate responses to urban changes and challenges. This finds expression especially in the way in which new churches are emerging in response to urban migration patterns; in the way in which some traditional churches are rethinking how church buildings and church land can be used for poverty eradication and community development; and in the way in which many faith-based organisations seek to meet different social challenges through early childhood development programmes, child care and educational projects, HIV and Aids interventions, and homeless shelters.

Yet, if still only in some cases, faith-based organisations in the country are today also seeking to develop more elaborate community development strategies and sophisticated organisational infrastructure. In this way they are not only in their own right responding to local need, but they are also informing policy, creating an urban consciousness among their members, and physically changing the face of the city.

However, faith-based organisations and churches, generally speaking, seem to be disengaged from the broader urban discourses taking place in present-day South Africa, thereby reducing their own awareness and possible depth of impact, but also denying themselves the opportunity to offer the local knowledge that they generate to inform and shape policies, strategies and discourses (cf. Winkler 2008a:47–69, 2008b:2099–2116). Over against such disengagement, the only known local attempt at being intentional about advancing and doing theology that is consciously and deliberately located in and reflecting upon the urban public, is the work done by the Institute for Urban Ministry, based in Pretoria, City of Tshwane. It has sought to do this through Biennial Consultations on Urban Ministry since 1996, the development and promotion of curricula and course material focusing on urban ministry, and more recently, attempts towards the creation of an Urban Theology Cluster, with scholars and practitioners from the University of Pretoria, the University of South Africa, and the Tshwane Leadership Foundation participating in the Cluster (see De Beer 2012:270–274). These attempts remain marginal in the local theological landscape, however, given the lack of recognition to date on the part of the mainstream in South African public theological scholarship.

Lacking behind in doing urban public theology

The concern of this article, as already noted, is that much of existing public theological scholarship in South Africa has its focus on questions of definition, methodology and epistemology, in other words the paradigmatic (see e.g. Hansen 2007). Whilst this focus is in itself not problematic, our concern rather lies with the fact that little has been done to contextualise public theology in relation to the specific, ever-changing, and ever-mounting urban challenges as introduced in the previous section, and as attended to by the articles in this special collection. In this sense, current undertakings in public theological scholarship in South Africa are not only lacking behind some of the global counterparts in their own discipline, but they importantly also lack behind distinguishable scholarly and research communities from other disciplines, as well as some activist communities, which are often very innovatively engaged with urban challenges.

Nico Koopman (2010b), for instance, describes the 'agenda' of public theology in theological terms as reflecting on:

> [T]he contents, rationality, and implications of God's love for the whole world, especially for those whose dignity is violated and who suffer exclusion, exploitation and expendability, and for a creation that is killed by greed and consumerism. (p. 137)

For Koopman such growth in knowledge about God 'not only helps us to understand reality better', but it also helps 'to transform reality so that it can increasingly reflect the redemptive, renewing, and dignifying impact of God's love'. In this sense, public theology can be said to consistently reflect upon the contents and rationality of God's trinitarian love, and 'the exciting implications that this … love has for South Africa, the rest of Africa, and the rest of the world with all its joys and sorrows' (Koopman 2010b:137–138).

Regarding the concrete 'engagement' of such a theology, Clint Le Bruyns describes public theology in turn as 'being in contact and conversation with concrete realms of public life – political, economic, civil society and public opinion'. For him, '[*t*]here are thus inevitable implications for understanding the agenda and mode of public theology', which he thereupon defines as 'a way of understanding and practising theology which must contribute in constructive, dialogical, enriching and transforming ways to "the public good"' (Le Bruyns 2012:3). He suggests that *kairos* theology contributed to the common good in the struggle against apartheid but that it fell conspicuously short in providing theological resources for meeting the public tasks of reconstruction and transformation in the societal struggles post-apartheid. For Le Bruyns, then, it is the rectification of this deficiency that subsequently becomes the task of public theology (Le Bruyns 2012:3–4).

The examples of Koopman and Le Bruyns could be upheld as attempts at defining public theology and articulating its task in South Africa today. Our assertion is simply that such public theological task needs to find much clearer and more concrete roots in the South African urban public(s), and that the complex, unique and challenging urban contexts of South Africa be sites of engagement and interrogation in doing or constructing overtly 'urban' public theologies.

When defining public theology in South Africa, it is furthermore suggested by someone like Koopman that public theology should be distinguished from existing particularistic theologies such as liberation, political, black, African and feminist theologies. He admits that there may be resemblances between public theology and these theologies, in the sense that they all 'strive to make a transformative and redemptive impact on society' (Koopman 2003:7). For Koopman, (2003) however, whilst all these theologies may be considered as public theologies in one way or another, the agenda and scope of public theology proper includes but 'also transcends the agenda of each one of these theologies'. He further explains:

> I would suggest that public theology does not only differ from these theologies in terms of breath of agenda, but also in terms of mode of theologising. Public theology has more of a dialogical, cooperative and constructive approach that does not imply Constantinianism or patriotism. Most representatives of public theology would not, for instance, reject the market-economy with the same passion and conviction that some representatives of liberation, political, feminist and black theologies do. (p. 7)

Koopman's qualification may rightly be met with considerable resistance on the part of certain black and feminist theologians, who regard themselves as public theologians in their own right through the way in which they practise their theology in public spaces from their particular historic and contextual vantage points. Added to this, it is our own contention that the perspectives and insights from particularistic theologies such as black and liberation theologies are often offered from much more concrete engagements with particular urban challenges than what is generally understood to be public theology. Although likewise too often preoccupied with the

paradigmatic – definition, methodology and epistemology – these theologies sometimes have a clearer 'locatedness' or 'embeddedness' from within which they do theology. From our point of view, it is through such 'locatedness' or 'embeddedness' that particularistic theologies – notably, such as black and feminist theologies – present an important 'corrective' to the practice of public theology more generally (cf. Ackermann 1996; Chimhanda 2010; Haddad 2013; Tshaka & Makofane 2010; Tshaka & Mogashoa 2010; Van Schalkwyk 1994, 2008, 2012), but also more specifically where such practice would seek to construct an urban public theological discourse (cf. De Beer 1998, 2008, 2012, 2013; Hankela 2014; Maluleke 1995; Manala 2010; Vellem 2014).

Indeed, what particularistic theologies offer public theology in South Africa is the concretisation or embodiment of 'interlocutors' (cf. Ackermann 1996; Haddad 2013; Hankela 2014; Van Schalkwyk 1994, 2008, 2012; Vellem 2012, 2014), which we argue should also apply very concretely to the city and in particular the city in its vulnerability. As such, it is through the potential assistance of particularistic theologies that public theology would be better able to meet the fundamental challenge of identifying appropriate 'urban interlocutors', a 'community of interlocutors' – that is, different, often silent, sometimes vocal voices that need to be retrieved, or invited, or encouraged, to participate in and accompany processes of prophetic discernment.

Despite the inclination to exclude other theological practices, it nevertheless remains helpful and important to observe how a claim to conceptual differentiation constitutes an important dimension of public theological self-understanding in South Africa. Different approaches, distinctions and meanings are applied and adhered to by different people in different institutional settings (see De Villiers 2011b:17–22; Koopman 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2010b; Smit 2007), where claims are laid to intradisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary modes of scholarly practice (Koopman 2010b:126–131); to an engagement with different topical foci, such as the economy, health, racism, xenophobia, sexism, crime, ecology, culture, faith and social identity, human dignity and human rights, just peace-building, globalisation and justice, and moral formation and public life (Koopman 2007a:189–196, 2007b:286–289); to an engagement with and operation from within different locations or 'publics' of public theological practice – the academy, the church and society at large (Koopman 2003, 2007a:196–204, 2007b:282–286); to an identification of different forms of public theology, from a Christological perspective, namely prophetic public theology, priestly public theology and royal servant public theology (Koopman 2008:251–253, 2009:120, 2012a:1); to an execution of different tasks of public theology in the areas or spheres of politics, economics, civil society and public opinion (Koopman 2003:9–19); and to a practising of different modes of public theological speaking, namely envisioning of the 'good life' or 'good society', prophetic criticism, story-telling, technical analysis, and policy-making (Koopman 2009, 2010a).

The contribution of public theologians in South Africa to establish public theology paradigmatically – and in this sense to also provide some valuable foundation from which the conceptual and hermeneutical framework for a South African urban public theological agenda may emerge – cannot be underestimated. However, the time has come to move beyond this prior conversation, whilst always assessing, refining and correcting it, and to engage in actual immersed urban public theologising, with 'communities of interlocutors' (cf. Vellem 2012, 2014) and 'people of new habits' serving the vision of the 'common good' and 'a redeemed and new society' (cf. Koopman 2012a:1, 2012b). Indeed, if public theological practice in South Africa continues to recycle paradigmatic, epistemological and methodological conversations, without embedding itself more concretely in local urban contexts by doing theology from within such contexts, it runs the risk of becoming new orthodoxies without doing real justice to urban particularities. Perhaps this could be seen as a weakness of public theology in general, not only in South Africa, as compared to more particularistic theologies.

Thus, similar to the South African theological context, it is our observation that North American public theologians – on whom the mainstream public theological endeavour in South Africa strongly relies – also seem to neglect the particularities of the urban. In distinction to this neglect, however, it becomes significant to note how vast amounts of theological reflection on the urban have in fact been published by North American scholars who mostly hail from the field of missiology and, as such, do not explicitly refer to themselves as public theologians (cf. Bakke 1997; Conn 1987; Gornik 2002; Greenway & Monsma 2000; Linthicum 1991; Rocke & Van Dyke 2012; Villafane, Jackson & Evans 2001; White 2006). This has often led to a renewed missional interest in and engagement with vulnerable parts of North American cities, in particular inner-city areas, but also vulnerable urban places in other parts of the world, which has led to the creation of Christian community development corporations, intentional missional communities, and other fresh expressions of Christian faith.

However, in his consideration of the value of the aforementioned North American contributions, South African missiologist and black theologian Tinyiko Maluleke has reacted quite critically. One of his points of critique has been the overreliance of these contributions on 'urban statistics – as if these were the most important issues at stake' (Maluleke1995:183). Moreover, Maluleke has also found it necessary to stand critical towards the preoccupation of many proposals for a 'theology of urban mission' or 'a theology of the city' 'with the question of "proving" God's love for the city – as if that was either in doubt or ultimate' (Maluleke 1995:183). For him, this emphasis pointed to a weakness in much current urban missiologising, of not connecting 'to the debates of the 1950s and 1960s about secularisation and urbanisation' and, in the process, of lacking the 'more comprehensive analysis' of those debates. As a result, this has led to the hermeneutical deficiency where much theological reflection has shown a tendency to take the shortcut from a particular urban situation to the Bible, without taking account of the perspectives that arose from the debates of the 1950s and 1960s – as manifested by the depths of argument plumbed by scholars such as Lesley Newbigin and Harvey Cox (Maluleke 1995:183).

Although there is important substance in Maluleke's critique, we want to contend that the contexts in which these urban theologies emerged need to be considered, and, as such, that those contexts are not altogether different from our own South African contexts. White flight, black middle-class flight and the flight of capital from inner-city areas in North America, and the theological equation of such disinvestment with the absence of God, even if not consciously but subtly and in actions, require a re-assertion of God's deep theological, methodological, social and political concern with and priority for the city, and in particular the most vulnerable parts of cities. Urban missiologists such as those quoted by Maluleke have contributed to such a re-assertion.

British and European authors such as Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe (2009; also Graham 2008, 2009), Andrew Davey (2001), Chris Rowland and John Vincent (Vincent 1992, 2000; Rowland & Vincent 1997, 2013), Graham Ward (2000, 2003) and Dieter Georgi (2005), have more deliberately presented their work as 'public theologies of the city', or attempts at doing theology that is located rather intentionally in the urban public. In the case of John Vincent and the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield, they have been very deliberate in doing urban theology from a contextual or liberation theological perspective, much different from their North American counterparts. The Urban Theology Unit offers postgraduate courses in urban, contextual and liberation theologies (see Urban Theology Unit n.d.), whilst Vincent also initiated and co-edited, with Chris Rowland, the 'British Liberation Theology Series', developed from within challenging urban contexts in Britain (see Rowland & Vincent 2013; Urban Theology Unit n.d).

There is much to be drawn from such North American and British-European urban theologies, even if they are not without criticism. The reality of these investments in and attention to the urban public and urban missional theology needs to be acknowledged and honoured. In comparison, very little has been done in such systematic ways in South Africa, and in the global South as a whole, although the urban revolution in many ways is happening in the global South. Where urban public or contextual theologies are done in the global South, it often appears sporadically and in scattered ways in local contexts across the South.

Graham and Lowe (2009) propose urban theology as public theology. We would dare to go even further, suggesting that the entire enterprise of doing theology should consider the urban in a very central way (De Beer 2012). Accordingly, it is our conviction that public theology in South Africa should develop a clear urban focus if it is to do justice to South

African dynamics and developments. The following recent pronunciation by one of us is appropriate at this point, which although directed to theological education, should apply to the complete activity of doing theology:

> I speak here not only of what can be conveniently relegated to 'urban' theological education, but also of exploring possibilities for urbanising the whole enterprise of theological education, without excluding suburban, rural or other realities, but understanding the ever-increasing interconnectedness of these realities. I speak of theological education that takes the whole of the urban, and global reality, and its implications for local communities and people, seriously as its locus for theological reflection and action. (De Beer 2012:251)

Very few scholarly publications with the city as 'locus of theological reflection' have been published in Africa in general, but also in South Africa in particular. Articles, popular publications and doctoral dissertations have sporadically appeared on the topic (cf. De Beer 1998, 2008, 2012, 2013; Hankela 2014; Maluleke 1995; Vellem 2014), but this output in no way does justice to the priority the city should take in theological engagement. When South African public theologians refer to urban realities, they do so mostly coincidental and in passing, but not as a systematic and coherent exploration of the urban from a theological perspective.

And yet, there are many local expressions of faith – incarnated in and through urban social movements, faith-based and non-profit organisations, intentional communities, new expressions of ecclesial formation, and traditional churches holding their ground in difficult, changing and/or diverse urban neighbourhoods – that could be seen as sites where forms of urban public theology are being practised. In almost all such sites theology is being done organically, on the run, so to speak, often by activist communities seeking to relate their faith as best as they can to concrete local issues. Much work needs to be done to help retrieve the stories of such communities, to help articulate the theologies already at work in these places, and to welcome the reflections and actions taken place from below to inform emerging urban public theological discourses.

Last but not least, what further illustrates the vacuum in South African theologies, and particularly in public theologies, with regard to the urban, is that one of the most significant reflections in recent years on a local urban church was a non-theological, non-fictional publication, *Sanctuary* (Kuljian 2013), on the work of Paul Verryn and the Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg, in response to the massive challenges of migration. Similarly, Tanja Winkler's research on the role of faith-based community development in the inner-city neighbourhood of Hillbrow, provides an important critical resource for theological scholarship, albeit offered by someone from the discipline of Town and Regional Planning (see Winkler 2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2008b). But so is also the prolific research work on Pentecostalism and the Pentecostal churches that were executed by an independent policy research and advocacy organisation such as the Centre

for Development and Enterprise in different urban settings in South Africa (see Bernstein & Rule 2010); as well as the focus on religion that is today visibly accommodated in the research work and publications of an important think-tank such as the already-mentioned African Centre for Cities (see Rakodi 2014). The fact that some of the best and most comprehensive work on the urban church and religion in the urban sphere are today done by people outside the field of theology, indeed raises serious challenges for a public theological engagement with the city in South Africa.

Making a theological contribution

We have already emphasised the point that we have an agenda in mind that will be essentially 'theological' in terms of the contribution that it will strive to make in meeting the challenges of the urban in South Africa. From the vantage point where such an agenda is accepted and actively taken to task, we deem it necessary and important to as part of the ongoing challenge of conceptual development continue a hermeneutical debate on what it in fact means to make a theological contribution towards meeting the challenges of the urban; that is, in the sense of doing urban public theology and making a contribution that is 'authentic' in terms of what Christian theology and actors from the Christian faith can offer from a normative point of view.

We by no means pretend to present an argument or perspective here with the intention to settle the aforementioned hermeneutical question. Whilst recognising the complexity of addressing this question, and the fundamental task of ongoing debate in this regard, we, however, find it meaningful to take as our departure for ongoing discussion a contribution by British theologian Angus Paddison to the recently published anthology, *Postsecular cities: Space, theory and practice* (2011).

Although we are not at ease with the eventual outcome of Paddison's argument – in his essay contribution significantly entitled 'On Christianity as truly public' – we nevertheless find it useful to observe how, from the point of departure of urban public theological reflection, his concern likewise lies with the question of Christian theology and the church's authentic contribution to the urban. He states at the beginning of his essay:

> Unless we wish to commit the unpardonable folly of supposing that people of late modernity are devoid of any good, both the church and theologians should encourage all who seek to improve the experience of those who dwell in cities. Nevertheless, such co-operative sentiments should not be allowed to obscure a series of key questions. Why should the church and, more particularly, theologians care about cities? What risks lie with the church's participation in so-called public projects? What is the church's distinctive politics which it can offer to city dwellers? Answers to these questions, I submit, will not be adequately generated from the perspective of *political* theology but from a resolutely *theological* politics, a resolve to view politics through the church's faith and practices. (Paddison 2011:223; [*original italics retained*])

We do not have the space in this article to go into the full details of Paddison's argument. Importantly, however, one could well uphold the distinction made in the last sentence of the above quote between the existence of 'political theology' and 'theological politics' as capturing the essential thrust of his argument. Related to the reality of the urban, and more specifically his own British context, for Paddison, political theology represents the more conventional approach or practice of (urban) public theology whereby such theological enterprise commits itself on behalf of the church to the discourse and agenda of the state. Yet, for Paddison the fallacy committed in such cases is to welcome the new initiatives of government to incorporate faith groups as a move towards postsecularism. Instead, he regards it as nothing less than 'a new twist in the story that is secularism' – 'the project required by liberal democracy which advocates a neutral state among religious differences, and in the process ends up re-shaping … [and] deforming religion itself' (Paddison 2011:226).

In continuing his problematisation, Paddison points to the irony inherent in the political theological position. Whereas it is motivated by 'a clear desire' on the part of public theology 'to de-privatize Christianity', the result is that Christian theology and the church still find itself 'bound by the confines and logic of secularism' (Paddison 2011:226). Moreover, for Paddison the great risk involved is 'an uncritical alliance' with the powers of modernity that want to dictate to the church what it should deem 'private' and what it should deem to be 'public'. In effect, however, by subjecting the church to such a position, public theology 'assumes, or at best does not challenge, the assumption that faith is a series of private, religious commitments'; instead, the actual state of affairs is one where public theology now 'privileges the politics of the state and civil society as the public for which theology has to change its register if it is to have relevance' (Paddisson 2011:226).

From the vantage point of this problematisation, Paddison proceeds to defend his preferred notion and position of a 'theological politics' by juxtaposing it with what he perceives to be the effective second-hand if not irrelevant status of a church that has subjected itself to the politics of the state. According to him, under conditions where the church is subjected to the political and rational framework of the state, 'it will not be long before people work out that there are others who can say better what the church is only echoing' (Paddison 2011:227). In other words, for Paddison, by subjecting itself to the political and rational framework of the state, a situation is effected where the church (one could well add theology here) is forced to conduct a discourse that by and large falls outside its own competence and jurisdiction. And, by finding itself in this position, the church (one may here again add theology) in actual fact finds itself in a situation of 'decline towards irrelevance', where 'the only role left for faith is to motivate or inspire public action in the name of the nation's interest' (Paddison 2011:227).

Thus, the gist of Paddison's argument should start to become clear at this point. For him, the real possibility exists where the Christian faith and its practices might hold 'an interpretative leverage' over the powers of the state and civil society (Paddison 2011:226–227). However, this could only become possible where 'the thickness of the Christian narrative and the church's life' (Paddison 2011:230) is adhered to, which Paddison finds well motivated in the work of Stanley Hauerwas, the distinguished American theological ethicist. He further explains, in line with the argumentation of Hauerwas:

> For Hauerwas, when a Christian speaks of justice or love, these are realities that can only be filled out by specific attention to the gospel – attempts to render them intelligible by appeal to external criteria might be palatable to certain forms of liberal political orders, but will naturally end up presenting a distinctively flaccid version of the gospel unable to help Christians see how their convictions have the capacity to re-shape the 'real' world presented to them. Justice finds its content and meaning from within the narrative (Scripture, which tells the story both of God and the people of God) in which the church is inscribed and is now extending. (Paddison 2011:230)

It is from such a foundational position, then, which captures the essential meaning of a theological politics, that Paddison foresees the real possibility where the church will make an authentic contribution to the well-being of the city. Whilst it is also at this point that the notion of 'public theology' seems to completely disappear from his own discussion – doing theology in this case seems to completely dissolve in ecclesial discourse and practice – the implication of Paddison's argument is nevertheless far-reaching for doing urban public theology. In dealing with the question of the church's primary (or authentic!) political contribution to the city (Paddison 2011:231), urban public theology should take its point of departure from established theological thinking about the role and nature of the church. According to such thinking (as for instance reflected in the classic thinking of Karl Barth), it becomes important to reflect on what the church has to offer, politically, as a witness to other 'possibilities, not merely in heaven but on earth, not merely one day but already' (K. Barth, quoted in Paddison 2011:231). Yet, even more concretely, it becomes important to once again think of the church as a 'worshipping community' and how it could, through its different worship practices – not least through the act of prayer – be a political sign of 'the new community', of what it 'holds to be true and good' in the context of the city (Paddison 2011:231–232). In the words of Paddison, with specific reference to his prioritisation of prayer:

> Praying is political because it is a habitual outworking of the conviction that God is involved in the transformation of this world and that our resources alone will not be sufficient. Samuel Wells, a theologian with considerable experience of urban regeneration projects, points to prayer as a key contribution to building the good city. (Paddison 2011:232)

As already said, we find the contribution by Paddison to be a meaningful starting point for hermeneutical consideration on what it would mean to make an authentic, theological contribution towards meeting the challenges of the urban. In so far as our answers to this question will in a fundamental way determine the kind or mode of contribution that we will be conceptualising – by implication also the different

manifestations thereof – we can very much associate ourselves with the critical argument developed by Paddison on the notion of political theology. Whilst the concept of political theology might mean different things to different people, Paddison's point of critique of a situation where the state and other forces of modernity rather exclusively determines the discourse and agenda is certainly a very real and possible one, to that extent that theology and an actor such as the church forsake its critical and independent voice.

We could continue by pointing out how the dangers of uncritical silence and withdrawal to the private, of co-optation and the loss of an independent and critical religious (public theological) voice, have in fact become noticeable features of the post-apartheid socio-religious landscape shaped and being dictated to by the new democratic political dispensation (cf. Kumalo & Dziva 2008; Kumalo 2009, 2013; Lategan 1995:218; Le Bruyns 2012:4–8; Maluleke 2010; Mkhatshwa 2007:129–130; South African Council of Churches [SACC], The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa [TEASA] & Kairos Southern Africa 2012; Storey 2012; Vellem 2013; West 2009:81–84). Not least, as one of us has continued to argue with regard to that topical interest that has important relevance for an urban public theological agenda – the post-apartheid religious, theological and ecclesial concern with development – in post-apartheid South Africa the alluring and perhaps unavoidable absorptive power of a partnership agenda with the new democratic state in the sphere of development has led to a gradual serious erosion of critical and conceptually rich religious and theological discourse (Swart 2010, 2012, 2013). As the essence of this problematisation has been argued:

> One cannot but conclude that in post-apartheid South Africa the religious social development debate … has followed the dominant ideological trend rather than persisting in its initial challenge to it. Thus this debate appears to be so absorbed by a concern with partnerships between actors of the new status quo, that is, between all sectors, that little has remained of the initial debate … Certainly one would have expected a debate of a far greater polemical nature if those ideas that informed the initial debate had been sustained and further developed in the ongoing debate. These are ideas with a people-centred ideological inclination that determined the initial debate, ideas which highlighted the problematic nature of the country's shift to a neo-liberal economic paradigm of development and economic organisation, and which revealed a far greater consideration of the impact of the neo-liberal arrangement on the actual achievement of social development. (Swart 2010:25)

We have already started to make it clear in this article that we do not want to follow the route of co-optation and subjection, as reflected in our statement on our disinclination for mainstream technocratic, state-centred, privatised and neo-liberal approaches to the challenge of the urban in present-day South Africa. This, clearly, is a stance that strongly conforms to the argument of Paddison in his problematisation of the notion (or concept) of political theology. At the same time, however, it is also at this point that we find it very difficult to go along with the corrective proposed by Paddison.

We want to make it clear from the outset that we do not have a problem with Paddison's preferred notion (or concept) of a theological politics, so much so that we find it a promising concept to, from a hermeneutical point of view, direct a South African urban public theological agenda. But having said this, we are considerably critical of the way in which he subjects this concept to 'hermeneutical simplicity' and 'conservatism'. Clearly, here we have, in a bid to save the Christian church from 'the confines and logic of secularism' (Paddison 2011:226), a case of extreme 'preoccupation with the "truth claims" of Christianity and their defence' (Lategan 1995:224; cf. Conradie 1993:38). Driven by the concern (or fear!) that any attempt towards translating Christian beliefs 'into categories more familiar and congenial to the public sphere … can only lead to the loss of the specifically Christian or theological character of such discourse', the solution also in Paddison's case is that 'Christian truth claims should rather be described within their own frame of reference if one is to serve their persuasive power and if they are to have any value outside the community of faith' (Lategan 1995:224; cf. Conradie 1993:40).

We find Paddison's ultimate argument to represent church theology at its worst, to that extent, as we have already observed, where doing (public) theology basically completely collapses into what the church says and does, and, strikingly, where Paddison's own commitment to interdisciplinary conversation in the context of the modern university (as expressed in the initial stages of his argument) (see Paddison 2011:224) evaporates into thin air. Yet, having stated this critique, we want to make it very clear that we do not disregard the integral value of those aspects of Christian practice that Paddison prioritises – worship, prayer, faithful witnessing – for spiritual deepening, sense-making and devotion to the common good in the context of the city, nor that those aspects should rightfully be presented and worked out more fully from within the established tradition of Christian theological discourse. To the contrary, our problem rather lies with the way in which insistence on the latter leads to the kind of hermeneutical simplicity that is marked by a noticeable inability to relate and translate what is prioritised and presented in the theological discourse more explicitly in terms of the contextual realities of the city.

We unequivocally want to argue for the opposite, where the principles of 'hermeneutical flexibility' and 'complexity' will guide a South African agenda of doing urban public theology in a fundamental way. This, indeed, should already have started to become clear from how we have so far been developing the discussion in this article, by taking account of existing public and intellectual concerns regarding the urban in present-day South Africa, as well as by our critical reflection on public theology as an existing, diverse enterprise in the South African theological landscape. At the same time, however, we consider this discussion so far to be only a small beginning towards giving momentum to an appropriate South African urban public theological agenda, and it is at this point, consequently, that we want to close our discussion in this section by aligning ourselves more pertinently with two related scholarly articulations – or positions – in contemporary public theological scholarship.

Firstly, after all that has been said so far in this section, we draw inspiration from a proposal for an 'interactive, constructive mode' of post-apartheid public theological discourse put forward some years ago by the eminent South African scholar of theological hermeneutics, Bernard Lategan. Whilst his proposal has not been met with the greatest of enthusiasm by the mainstream in South African public theological scholarship (see e.g. Smit 2007:41) and has by and large been ignored, it is in Lategan's proposal that we encounter the kind of hermeneutical flexibility and recognition of complexity that we find most desirable. In short, his proposal recognises the existence and importance of different modes of discourse within the full scope of theological activity, in which none of the existing modes will be replaced by 'a "superior" form' or alternative modes be devaluated by other modes. Instead, each of the different modes should be rendered its rightful place in the course of theological interpretation and its suitability and effectiveness will be determined 'in direct relation to the purpose for which it is employed' (Lategan 1995:225). In this sense, therefore, the different modes of discourse will play a 'supporting' role in relation to each other and not compete for recognition and space. Lategan, in this regard, continues:

> Intra-textual analysis, rediscovery of the tradition, reformulation and re-affirmation of dogma, describing the world of the text in its own terms, narrating the story of Biblical texts for their own sake, explaining and defending the truth claims of theology, prophetic resistance and confrontation, uncompromising witnessing, and apologetics of a more subtle or more aggressive kind, all have their validity and function. The issue is to take into account which public one is dealing with, and to decide on which mode or modes would be suitable for that purpose … The different modes are complementary to each other and should be valued for their supportive contribution. (Lategan 1995:225)

Of crucial importance, however, for Lategan (1995:225) the post-apartheid South African context in addition also called for 'a different type of discourse'. The essential contribution of this mode or type of discourse would lie in the way in which it would alongside other modes contribute 'to the establishment of a new public ethos in civil society' (Lategan 1995:225). Yet, to make such a contribution the important qualification would be that 'a change of style' would be required, characterised by a willingness on the part of theology to move beyond its preoccupation with itself, the validity of its own truth claims, its defensive attitude, its experience of marginalisation and its submission of not being able to influence civil society (Lategan 1995:225–226). As a result, therefore, such a change of style would lead to a willingness to explore 'the possibilities of a form of language that is not primarily interested in preserving the integrity of theology, but to serve a wider cause' (Lategan 1995:226). It would be a discourse focused on concrete issues deriving from the public arena, with the added dimension 'of taking responsibility' for what is proposed in the discourse (Lategan 1995:226).

In conclusion to his proposal, for Lategan it would be very important to realise that very specific characteristics would be required in order for the kind of public theological discourse that he suggests to succeed. Amongst others, it would be characterised by a willingness to be non-prescriptive and open to other ideas, to adopt an interactive and participatory style of discourse, and to adopt a serving and constructive mode in the sense of being willing to reach out, to build, to take responsibility, and to with others jointly map out possible courses of action. Not least, however, in the context of a pluralistic public environment, such a discourse would also give evidence of 'hermeneutical competence', which would (in following Robert Bellah) not only imply the kind of bi- or multilingual skills that would enable a familiarity with different discourses, but also the ability to move between the different discourses in order to mediate and interpret the different issues arising from different contexts (Lategan 1995:227).

Secondly, then, it is from the vantage point of our appreciation of the relevance of Lategan's articulation for developing an appropriate approach towards doing urban public theology in South Africa that we, closer to the home of existing urban public theological scholarship, draw further inspiration from the hermeneutical position that has been articulated by Elaine Graham. A prominent practical theological scholar from the United Kingdom whose landmark contributions towards the establishment of urban public theology as a recognised field we have already started to acknowledge in this article, Graham's own position could well be appreciated by us for the way in which it resonates sentiments similar to that of Lategan.

Thus, amongst her different contributions to the field of urban public theology, we take as our point of reference Graham's own article contribution to the special issue on 'Public theology and the city' that we have already alluded to in the introduction of this article. Having been written on the basis of the experience that she has gained as a member of the Church of England's Commission on Urban Life and Faith (CULF) in the period February 2004 to May 2006 (Graham 2008:8), we find in this article a striking parallel with Lategan in the way in which the notion of 'bilingualism' functions as a recurrent theme throughout the discussion under the title heading, 'What makes a good city? Reflections on urban life and faith' (see Graham 2008:15, 20, 23).

For Graham, then, any theological engagement with the normative question, 'What makes a good city?' could only be justly done by adhering to the principle of 'bilingualism'. In this regard, she sets out to develop her argument by upholding the work of CULF and the eventual report emanating from it, *Faithful cities: A call for celebration, vision and justice* (Graham 2008:8, 11–26), as exemplar of exactly such an approach or style of doing urban public theology. More specifically, she begins by meaningfully pointing out how some members of CULF had been 'greatly influenced' by a new wave of urban geographic scholars from such fields as urban planning, sociology and geography. In particular, this new wave of scholarship could be appreciated for the way in which it newly challenged:

… the rationalism and reductionism of modernist urban planning in favour of a bottom-up, grass-roots approach, in which participatory models of urban design and community development are preferred to the centralized, technocratic planning of an earlier generation. (Graham 2008:14)

For Graham, this new theorisation on the urban and the meaning that theologians and ecclesial leaders could derive from it, serves as an important reason why 'a sensitivity to the language of values and spirituality' could today by no means be regarded as the exclusive prerogative of theologians or faith communities (Graham 2008:14). It is exactly this realisation, she argues, that represents a forceful contemporary argument why the need exists for (urban) public theology to be bilingual – 'in terms of being "eloquent in its own biblical and theological language"', but also in terms of being able to speak a language that is accessible to a 'wider audience' (Graham 2008:15).

We could at this point well appreciate the way in which Graham and her fellow commission members' attraction to 'the new wave of urban geography' strongly resonates with our own inclination to what we have referred to at the start of this article as the counterpoint in scholarly production concerned with the urban. Yet, we importantly take notice of how, in terms of Graham's indication, members of CULF's own inclination to the counterpoint did not prevent them from also prioritising an engagement with the mainstream. Instead, Graham continues to stress the point that, as part of CULF's adherence to the principle of 'bilingualism', the work of the commission was never directed at the churches alone, but was always 'intended as a catalyst for the churches to involve a range of policy-makers, government, civic and corporate institutions in a wide-ranging … [*public*] debate' (Graham 2008:15). However, once again, this was always done by holding in the balance CULF's preparedness 'to defend the foundations of its own principles whilst ensuring that its own internal discourse is accessible and comprehensible to a wider constituency' (Graham 2008:15).

In drawing our discussion here to a final close, it might be argued that Graham, in her further appreciation of the work of CULF, comes dangerously close to succumb to what we have highlighted earlier in this section as the pitfall of co-optation and subjection to the language and agendas of others. As illustration not only of CULF's adherence to the principle of bilingualism but also its openness to interact with the mainstream, Graham continues to point out how the commission found important inspiration in the social science concept of 'social capital' to coin its own concept of 'faithful capital' in order 'to bring to the notice of the Government' the unique features and contribution of Christian faith group in city contexts (Graham 2008:17–18). Yet, whilst it could be argued that this comes close to instrumental discourse aiming to be welcomed by the state, one may nevertheless again appreciate Graham's own caution against the danger of co-optation at this point (Graham 2008:19).

More specifically still, Graham lays claim to the fact that in the case of CULF and its report, *Faithful cities*, the danger of co-optation was in fact avoided by the critical, independent and value-centred mind-set inherent in the conceptual apparatus of 'faithful capital' (Graham 2008:18–19). It was this conceptual apparatus, she argues, that led CULF and its report to, amidst sentiments about 'the importance of a critical solidarity with other planning and regeneration agencies', sustain arguments about the 'alternative priorities' of (Christian) faith-based organisations, as well as their long-term, durable commitment and presence in contexts where others withdraw 'when things get difficult' (Graham 2008:19). Not least, however, for Graham the alternative orientation inherent in the conceptual apparatus of 'faithful capital' was perhaps most visible in the way in which CULF and its report found continuing relevance in 'motifs from Liberation Theology' to politicise the church and call it to address structural injustices (in the contexts of the city). In the words of Graham, which contain a direct quote from *Faithful cities*:

'Our struggle for God's reign involves acting as advocates for those whose voice is rarely heard, and empowering the excluded. We are compelled to stand alongside them and to form alliances with them and with others who work for the same purpose' … This is consistent with the emergence of Black, feminist and post-colonial theologies over the past twenty years which privilege the ways in which ordinary people – often on the margins of Church and society – are articulating important theological values in their own ways, in their own words. *Faithful Cities* therefore talks of 'theology in the vernacular', adopting the 'everyday' or popular speech; of listening to those at the grass-roots and of paying testimony to the vitality of expressions of faith to be found at the margins. (Graham 2008:21)

Doing urban public theology in South Africa: A first offer

Our sole aim in this article was to set the conceptual and hermeneutical framework for undertaking 'urban public theology' as a very intentional, new agenda in South African theological scholarship. This was done against the backdrop of our assertion that public theology in South Africa has, despite its established position today, not yet imbedded itself in, and intentionally engaged itself with the contextual challenges of our country's cities and urban environments by and large. Our argument simply has been that these challenges require new, dedicated and robust theological engagement with the urban public in particular. And it is in view of such engagement that we have found it necessary to pay attention to the issue of the urban as a distinctive but contested development concern in South African intellectual and public life today, to the way in which current public theological practice is lacking behind in engaging itself with this development concern, and to the very important hermeneutical question of what it would in response to the current neglect entail to make an authentic, theological contribution towards meeting the challenges of the urban in South Africa.

Following on our framework, we now want to close this article by briefly appreciating and introducing the rest of the

article contributions in this special collection as a first offer to a new agenda of doing urban public theology in South Africa. In appreciating their collective contribution, it becomes important to mention for a start that none of these articles have been written from the vantage point of being intentionally informed by our framework. Instead, we could look back at a cumulative process during which the contributing authors have at different stages responded positively to our call for contributions to this special collection, based on their own interest in or scholarly focus on the urban, as well as their collegial relationship with either one or both of us.

Importantly, then, readers of this special collection of articles may find little evidence of an intentional or overt response to the issues and concerns that we have raised in this introductory article. At the same time, however, we want to propose that each of the remaining 16 articles in this special collection could be appreciated for the way in which they each in their own right seek to advance a language that is overtly urban in its public engagement. As a result, what they offer us as a collective is a rich layer of perspectives and idea production informing and laying a foundation for doing urban public theology in South Africa from an orientation and locatedness in different disciplines and focus areas in those disciplines – notably missiology, practical theology, systematic theology, liberation theology, black theology, eco-feminist theology and, significantly, in two respective cases also the non-theological discipline of Town and Regional Planning and, closely related to this, a more philosophical and broader interdisciplinary, social scientific concern with the urban.

Over and above the question of the other articles' relation to our introductory article, we by no means want to claim that our offer as a whole (including our own article) sufficiently and exhaustively addresses all the aspects indicated in the topic of this special collection: 'Doing urban public theology in South Africa: Visions, approaches, themes and practices towards a new agenda'. Instead, we have formulated the topic in this broad and all-encompassing way to give as much scope and opportunity to the contributing authors to respond in a creative way to our topical concern. And, in these terms, one could well appreciate most if not all of the articles for addressing more than one of the aspects indicated in the overarching topic.

In the light of our preceding statement, our attempt to place the following 16 articles in a logical sequence according to the different aspects indicated in the overarching topic should therefore be relativised. Nevertheless, as a collective contribution, and as allowed by the broadness and inclusivity of the hermeneutical position that we have given evidence of in this article, the readership may find some kind of progression in our placement of articles, from a more pertinent emphasis on visionary ideas, to a more specific emphasis on different approaches and thematic concerns, to ultimately a more pertinent concern with particular applications and practices.

Acknowledgements

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