

On reading Karl Barth in South Africa today: Karl Barth as public theologian?¹

Martin Laubscher

Department of Systematic Theology

University of Stellenbosch

Abstract

This article investigates the specific nature by which Karl Barth could be considered as a public theologian in post-apartheid South Africa. The aim is to enrich the debate in the current field of public theology in post-apartheid South Africa, and to demonstrate especially how it is understood and practice at the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at Stellenbosch theological faculty.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that Karl Barth said on numerous occasions during his life that a theologian is supposed to read his or her Bible in tandem with the daily newspaper. What is the exact meaning of this statement? We know that Barth had a real interest in politics, history and life in general, but does this imply that we may consider him as a public theologian? On this particular question theologians seem to be divided.

The well-known English Barth scholar, John Webster (2004:x), states in the preface of his *Barth* study: “Barth was very much a public theologian, because the gospel is not an intra-mural exercise but the truth of the world’s reconciliation”. In the early nineties the Harvard theologian, Ronald Thiemann (1991:74-95), argued in his *Constructing a public theology* for the significance of Karl Barth in constructing a public theology.

However, there have also been very critical voices on whether Barth may be considered a public theologian or not. In the mid-eighties there was the influential study of Robin Lovin (1984:42) from Chicago, *Christian faith and public choices*, in which he concludes that “for all its theological integrity,

¹ This is also the title of my Master thesis that was completed in June 2005 at the Free University in Amsterdam as part of *IRT*'s “Living Reformed Theology” program.

On reading Karl Barth in South Africa today

Barth's position is impossible for a public ethics." More recently there was the work of Dutch ethicist Gerrit de Kruijf who said the following on Barth:

... Karl Barth, who proclaims the Christian confession as universally valid and demands that the Christian community discovers moral and political choices that correspond to God's acts, but who wants to avoid religious arguments in public life and wants to confine the discussion to "objective," "practical" (*sachliche*) argumentation. In practise, then, it is difficult to see how Barth is reasoning from his confession to his conclusion in a moral matter. He too can only count as a public theologian because of the framework for which he is known, not because of the religious (let alone "revelation" bound) argumentation one might expect from him.

(De Kruijf 2003:143)

Thus, on the matter whether Karl Barth may be considered a public theologian, there seems to be different emphasises and conclusions. What complicate matters even further, is that the topic of public theology itself is a broad and complicated field with many different varieties. In a recent article by North American ethicist, Harold Breitenberg jr (2003:55), has shown that "it is not clear that public theology's advocates and critics always refer to the same thing."

It is against this particular background that our particular question is launched. Given the complexity, it is obvious that we are forced to make specific choices and to demarcate the field of study and focus on a particular problem. Though related to the above discussion, our question is specifically related to the current South African situation. I want to know whether Karl Barth may be considered as a public theologian in post-apartheid South Africa where the field of public theology recently was accentuated with the founding of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology (BNC) in 2001 at the theological faculty of Stellenbosch University. In the past Barth's political theology was used by some of the anti-apartheid theologians in their struggle against apartheid,² which makes one wonder whether, and to what regard, Barth's first decade of post-World War II theology may contribute to theology in the public domain of post-apartheid society.

The first part will look into the particular framework of the BNC, showing the historical developments and shifts it has undergone which inevitably led to its founding. Seen that the Centre and the New South Africa (post-apartheid) is still young and up against unique challenges, the second part will look for specific impetus in the first decade of Barth's post-World War

² Cf Villa-Vicencio (1988).

II theology. Looking into various different elements of Barth's theology in this period, we shall conclude in the third and final part with the particular reading of Barth in post-apartheid South Africa.

2. THE BEYERS NAUDÉ CENTRE AND PUBLIC THEOLOGY

In December 2001 the senate of the University of Stellenbosch accepted the bylaws of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, followed by the official opening on the 21st of November 2002. To understand what the BNC entails we should start with the historic events and developments of the past forty-five years in South Africa that eventually led to the founding of the BNC.

Reformed theology in South Africa has a history in which it was very active in the public domain during the time of the apartheid political rule – whether it was used to give the system theological sanction and support, or to strengthen the struggle's cause of resistance and opposition against it. On the one hand the stories of Beyers Naudé,³ the *Christian Institute* (CI),⁴ *The Message of Message to the People of South Africa*,⁵ the *Belhar Confession*,⁶ and *Kairos Document*,⁷ are all very important markers along the way that show the particular important role theology has played in the public domain,

³ To view the personal story of Beyers Naudé (1995), see his autobiography, *My land van hoop*.

⁴ The CI was founded by Beyers Naudé in August 1963. In many respects the theology in the struggle context of the sixties evolved around the CI. Initially it started out only to provide ecumenical support for dissident DRC members in opposing apartheid and furthering the Cottesloe resolutions – but its agenda soon broadened in scope, making itself a nation-wide movement of ecumenically committed Christians engaged in the struggle against apartheid (cf J W de Gruchy 2004b:12).

⁵ Issued by the CI (in collaboration with the South African Council of Churches) in 1968. (To view the "authorised summary" of this text (cf Naudé 1995:167-169).

⁶ The *Belhar Confession* is noteworthy for our purposes in three regards: firstly, its content had clear implications on public life as it confesses living unity, real reconciliation and caring justice; secondly, its theology was coming from within the DRC family to emphasize exactly the opposite of what was maintained by the DRC regarding the theological foundations of apartheid; and thirdly, the leading figures at the BNC (Russel Botman, Nico Koopman and Dirkie Smit) are all from this particular background and tradition. In sum, *Belhar's* history and content is an important part in the framework of the BNC.

⁷ The *Kairos Document* of 1985 brought a new distinctive flavour to the theology of the mid eighties in the struggle context. Although not Reformed in origin, it is an important marker of the public role theology had fulfilled in this particular period and setting. Its content not only attacked the heresy of "state theology," but it also attacked the attempt by what it called "church theology" to try and find a middle "third way" – distinctively now known as "prophetic theology" with the key issue of the correct political strategy. Despite the critique on its content that came from various fronts, the *Kairos Document's* prophetic theology "became nonetheless the dominant political theology of the final phase of the struggle, and it laid the foundations for the theology of transition that led to the debates about justice, reparation and reconciliation that have surrounded the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (TRC) (cf J W de Gruchy 2004a:51-52).

On reading Karl Barth in South Africa today

contributing to end the apartheid government's rule. On the other hand, it was especially the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the route it took after Cottesloe that represents the other opposite role theology was fulfilling in the public domain by their official support and sanctioning of the apartheid system.⁸ Thus, on the side of theology there were both *opponents* as well as *agents* with regard to the functioning of the political system of apartheid in the public domain.

In fact, what we realize from this history is that although theology was very much public during the rule of the apartheid government, it was primarily defined as a political theology because of the central place apartheid had on the agenda with regard to the public domain. Despite the fact that the term "public theology" was first introduced in the latter part of the previous century,⁹ it was not necessary to coin it as such because of the generally accepted kind of "political theology" that was practised. That theology was public in this era, was somehow a given and people were much more concerned about the specific political functions and roles it was fulfilling – as it varied in the struggle context from either the "confessional theology" (like in *The Message* or in the *Belhar Confession*), or African "black theology" (consequently with the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement in the late sixties whose influence was felt in the CI during the seventies) and "prophetic theology" (of the *Kairos Document*) (De Gruchy 2004a:51). In sum, on a primary and conscious level the theology in the public domain during this period was a political theology, and on a secondary-unconscious level it was presupposed that theology was public.

The end of apartheid by the early nineties and dawn of the first democratic elected government and liberal constitution in 1994 inevitably also meant there were influential challenges ahead regarding theology's identity, positioning and approach in and towards the public domain. The first challenge that immediately came to mind was regarding the *necessity* of theology in the public domain, as the main defining element of apartheid was no longer present. The struggle to overthrow or to support was clearly a thing of the past. On both sides of the previous "public theology" it was not clear whether it was still necessary to be active in the public domain, because on the one hand the struggle theologians had successfully completed their

⁸ Since Cottesloe (December 1960) the DRC fully withdrew from other ecumenical circles and structures, and sided with the apartheid government. The 1974 report *Ras, volk en nasie en volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif (RVN)* is a classical document that illustrates how influential theology was for the general sanctioning of the ideology of apartheid (cf *RVN*, approved by the General Synod of the DRC, Cape Town, 1974).

⁹ The term "public theology" was only coined for the first time in 1974 when it was used in the USA by Marty Martin to describe the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (cf Marty 1974:332-359).

primary aim, and on the other hand the majority of the DRC theologians had learned a costly lesson, that of not being too closely involved with politics in the public domain.

Moreover, besides the necessity-question, the *possibility* to do so was also questioned. One immediate consequence of the new liberal democratic dispensation was that it immediately set a process in motion of introducing the values and features of modernity into South Africa.¹⁰ All of a sudden they had to consider the idea that one is not supposed to bring one's own religious convictions into the public domain (Smit 2003a:39-42).

What complicated matters even further, were that there were some influential changes concerning the content and method of theology in the public sphere. Concerning the *content*, it was clear that theology could no longer only think in terms of positioning itself over against the public of politics (government). There were also other publics, namely those of the economy, civil society and public opinion, who were playing an increasingly more important role concerning life in general in the new liberal democratic context (Koopman 2003:9-10, 15-19). The scope of theology in the public sphere was now broadened and more diverse.¹¹

Also with regard to the *method* and approach of theology in the public sphere (now towards more than just one public) there were influential changes on the verge. Whereas previously it was about protest and resistance, or support and upholding of the political system of apartheid in the public sphere, it now had to change towards *critical solidarity* with the government's agenda of national reconstruction and democratic transformation.¹² As South African theologian Piet Naudé (2003:200) argues:

... the rules for "being heard on the public square" have irrevocably changed as they shifted from an assumed prophetic role for theology and the churches to one where "prophecy" – if not replaced by a more "priestly" mode – is tied up with the art of democratic processes and lobbying at all levels of government, often in the context of inter-religious rather than exclusively Christian negotiations.

(Naudé 2003:200)

¹⁰ Cf Durand (2002); De Villiers (1995:558-567).

¹¹ To complicate the matter even further, there was now the influence of globalisation. "Suddenly South Africa has been swept into the mainstream of globalisation with all its pitfalls and promises, became a major player in African and regional politics and a significant one in international affairs" (J W de Gruchy 2004a:56; cf also Botman 2004:317-327).

¹² Cf Koopman (2001:135-146).

On reading Karl Barth in South Africa today

Since the dawn of the new era in 1994 in South Africa, the playground and its rules regarding theology in the public domain has changed considerably. Looking in retrospect at the past decade on all the different responses and developments, it is quite a diverse picture. On the one hand the question regarding theology's identity and role in the South African public domain was further complicated by several indifferent responses and developments within Reformed theology and churches. The response and involvement from the churches towards the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) have been severely criticized.¹³ Their indifference towards matters of reconciliation is further underlined by the lack of unity both within the Christian church itself and amongst the different so-called members of the DRC family.¹⁴ Together with this, it also seems that interest in ecumenism has lost all of its former impetus and enthusiasm (Smit 2003b:306). The implications of this for any possible public witness on the part of churches are disastrous. What complicates matters even further, is that there seems to be, especially again among certain circles within the DRC, more interest towards an other-worldly and even charismatic spirituality, worship and life – than an interest in its prophetic calling towards matters in society (Jonker 1999:220-221). This kind of disinterest in the socio-political challenges of the South African society also seems adamant among certain Reformed theologians' academic interest (Naudé 2003:204-208). One detects different symptoms showing that Reformed theology in South Africa (still) is partly isolated towards the challenges of the broader South African context.

On the other hand, the picture that was portrayed so far also led to a development responsible for the founding of the BNC. Reformed theologians Russel Botman, Nico Koopman and Dirkie Smit, who were active in the struggle against apartheid, personally experienced the challenges and indifferent developments, and therefore initiated a process for the founding of the BNC that could "assist Christians in fulfilling their public responsibility in society ... by Beyers Naudé's example of responsible citizenship and involvement in society on the basis of Christian theological convictions ..."¹⁵

Hence, whereas Reformed theology was previously very much a political theology and unconsciously public, it had reached within a few years into post-apartheid South Africa a stage of believing the necessity to

¹³ Cf Krog (2003:245-249).

¹⁴ Reformed theologians who come from the struggle context believe that "the final proof that the DRC wants to move away from apartheid will be church unity; and no commitment to any other ideal will ever be able to replace this acid test" (cf Smit 2001:124).

¹⁵ Cf The Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology (2002:3).

consciously show the inherent public nature of Reformed theology. There is a constant need for new creative arguments concerning the necessity, possibility, content and approach of theology and the new public domain of the South African society. Therefore we propose a specific interlocutor who may be of some help to strengthen the future of the BNC with a critical appraisal, and *vice versa*.

3. IN SEARCH OF KARL BARTH'S "PUBLIC" THEOLOGY: READING BARTH IN THE POST-WORLD WAR II YEARS OF 1945-1956

There are several reasons why we now turn our attention towards Karl Barth's first decade of post-World War II theology. We know that Barth had a lively interest in public life. He is known for the famous one-liner that one is supposed to read the Bible in tandem with the daily newspaper. Moreover, Barth's influence was especially felt during the time of apartheid regarding the formation of most of the so-called confessional theologians.¹⁶ Seen that it was especially his earlier theology in the struggle and resistance context of the 1930s in Germany that was of potent relevance for the South African context during the time of apartheid, we are curious about what significance Barth's post-war theology might have as a possible impetus with regard to the future of the BNC in post-apartheid South Africa.

There is a lot that comes to the fore regarding the public *intention* of Barth's theology in the post-war context. Looking into various different distinctive elements of his theology in this period, we see that all the main elements have inherently a driving force towards and into the public domain. Investigations with regard to elements concerning "Germany's reconstruction" and "The East-West Drama" show on Barth's public interest towards the political and socio-economic issues. Although he clearly distinguishes between the divine and secular realms, he does it in such a way that negates any stark separation between the two. In fact, he states the impossibility thereof, because both spheres have at its core Jesus Christ (Barth 1954:21). Characteristically he often refers to the "joint responsibility" the Christian community has towards the secular realm (Barth 1954:25, 170). More importantly even is how subjugated it is in his more dogmatical writings with the particular assumption in the post-war context that if we get God wrong, we shall get everything else wrong.¹⁷ He always looks at and thinks about the

¹⁶ Cf Villa-Vicencio (1988).

¹⁷ Noteworthy is to see how Barth in his open lectures of 1946 and 1947 in Bonn, each time addressed the question regarding Germany's reconstruction with in-depth analysis and commentary on the classics of the Credo (*Dogmatics in outline*, 1966) and the Heidelberg Catechism (*The Heidelberg Catechism for today*, 1964).

world from the position of how it actually *is* in Jesus Christ (Webster 1998:122). Therefore he often says that all changes stand in the light of the great change that has happened in Jesus Christ (Barth 1954:79). The state, the secular, and the public out there, all of it has a place solidly within soteriology, and not in an isolated manner rooted in the doctrine of creation.¹⁸ The entire creation is epistemologically for Barth rooted in Christology, and with a particular teleological element between the two. In Christ Barth sees the whole of the ethical reality claimed – a truth that summons – and which inevitably has and wants public interest and consequences. The debate with Bultmann on the project of demythologizing shows how Barth sees Christology as concrete and in no need of translation (Barth 1973:85). As elsewhere, Barth's motivation is that the whole of our present reality lies within Christ's presence. Also his famous "The Humanity of God" lecture of 1956 has the aim of showing that God is a "God *for us*." God and theology has a particular interest in man and his life, and to talk about God we should inevitably address man and his life (Barth 1961:45). The public intention of his entire theological framework is also evident in the specific interest he shows towards the concrete visible Christian community (congregation) over the institutional church (Barth 2003:82-83). Christianity for him is about being visible and concrete in the world. We also see that he emphatically argues against any forced option between the political decisions and the unity of the Christian faith, and that the tension between the two is of a creative kind that inherently belongs within the Christian faith (Barth 1954:159). The church is for Barth not a state but an event with a specific teleological aim that can never be indifferent to what happens in the public domain. In short, a survey into the first decade of Barth's post-World War II theology inherits a clear and definite public intention. His theology cannot be but public, because he sees everything from the viewpoint of how it *is* in Jesus Christ.

However, to be clear and certain about this, we need to comment on one specific question the above brings to the fore, namely the particular nuance there is between Barth's public intention and his theology in general. Or to phrase it slightly different: Is Barth maybe not more of a public commentator who happens to be a theologian – or is he rather a theologian who happens to be deeply interested in public matters? Let us address this important question by saying firstly, that for Barth (following from the above) there is a close and intimate bond between public and theology. In fact, following from the definite public intention his theology has, any forced option between the two would be a false one. Thus, it is not a matter of choosing

¹⁸ This particular point is not only evident from the "Christian community and civil community" lecture, but also from Barth's "Church Dogmatics on Creation" where it is not about creation *per se*, but specifically orientated to come to know God's heart as revealed in the particular revelation of Jesus Christ.

between the two. For Barth they belong inherently together. Yet we need to proceed by discerning where the primary emphasis is in the nuance relation between the two concepts. It seems quite clear that for Barth there is only one-way traffic from the theological to the public, and not the other way around. In his views on the reconstruction challenge he deliberately began with God, because if we get God wrong, we will surely get it wrong elsewhere. Characteristically he approaches the problem of poverty by specifically taking the line of divine reconstruction that he describes in terms of grace rather than oppression (Hunsinger 2000:42-59). Barth was also quite clear on emphasizing that the Christian community should at all times have their own mission – a third way between the power blocs (Barth 1954:143) – where they are living from their own sources (the Word of God only) and speak the language Canaan from a critical distance in the public domain (Barth 1966:31). Their participation is not an end in itself, but should always be stamped by its own mission. Another aspect that accentuates this argument further is the manner in which everything Barth has to say is derived from Christ's worldly presence. It is only from the centrality of Christ that other secular truths may be affirmed, and not the other way around.¹⁹ Anthropology does not have its own foundational grounds over against Christ, but is derived from Christology (Webster 2004:101).²⁰ Human freedom has no axiomatic status, but is corollary only from Christ (Webster 1998:122). The movement in his thought is characteristically always from the particular (Jesus Christ) to the general (public life), and not vice versa. He is clearly not interested in providing objectified theories about how a Christian should live in the public domain, but rather wants to give a spiritual description of how he sees reality in Christ. Barth is a theologian who believes one should rather have a definite intention towards public life, than being a public commentator who happens to be a theologian.

Nevertheless, concluding with this, it begs the question whether Barth is not actually “too public”? Or, phrased differently, is Barth not, despite all the

¹⁹ What Barth is actually doing in this particular instance, is reconfiguring humanism by subjecting it to Christ, than rather subjecting theology to any form of humanism. “We shall not be able to conceal the fact that with the Christian message it is not the case of a classical humanism nor of a new humanism which is to be rediscovered today, but rather of the humanism of God. Further, we shall not be able to conceal the fact that this divine humanism on the one hand only exists and can only be comprehended in a definite historical form, and yet in this form it is the same yesterday and today, and thus has not only a temporal but also an eternal validity” (Barth 1954:184).

²⁰ We are much in debt to John Webster who shows that this concept of “derivation” is of fundamental significance for not only understanding Barth's anthropology, but also his dogmatics as a whole – because we see in Barth's thought the particular conviction that as creator and creature God and humanity are neither identical nor absolutely unrelated but rather realities which exist in an ordered relation of giver and recipient of life and grace.

On reading Karl Barth in South Africa today

above reasons, actually manipulating and reducing theology to serve public interest? Once again it seems not to be the case, because from his theological point of departure – how reality *is* in Christ – he cannot be but interested in public life. Moreover, the intention of Barth's theological framework is not in terms of a theology "for" public life, but rather one that "is" public theology. Barth does not want to reduce or manipulate theology "for" public interest, but sees theology as being inherently public. Therefore he also clearly argues – as with the method of analogy – for the need that Christians should participate unconsciously and anonymously in public life (Barth 1954:42, 49). The moment one is not anonymous and unconscious in public life, one sees that public interest and participation will become an end in itself and that the theologian gets more driven by public issues than to speak theology in and towards public life. In sum, it is definitely first and foremost the theological label, and only thereafter the public label for Karl Barth.

This inevitably brings Barth in discussion with the BNC with regard to theology's public intention. We do still need to hear about the public *manner* of Barth's theology – and therefore are looking forward to what the BNC might reveal in this regard.

4. ON READING BARTH IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

We now eventually enter the part of our article where we can have a fruitful dialogue between the BNC in post-apartheid society and the post-World War II theology of Karl Barth. The dialogue is structured in a two round form where the one is reading the other, and vice versa. We shall conclude in the end with a few open questions with regard to the theme of "Reading Karl Barth in South Africa Today" our discussion has brought forward for further investigation.

Starting out *on Barth reading the BNC*, the first question that comes to mind is whether Barth would agree on the founding and existence of such a centre for public theology. Concerning the founding of the centre itself, one does not get the impression from Barth that he would *per se* be against it – however, he surely would have something to say on how it should operate and function.

We know that Barth was very much opposed and outspoken against the idea of founding a Christian political party after the war (Barth 1954:49). For Barth it is important that Christian participation in the political domain should not become an end in itself, but rather be solely stamped by the own unique mission the church has, where they are unconsciously and anonymously partaking in the political realm from their "jointly responsible" position Christian faith presupposes. This objection itself Barth cannot raise

against the existence of the BNC, because they are not a Christian political party who are set up consciously in the public domain over against other Christians and allying faith to their specific party's ideals and agenda. Barth would rather appreciate the fact that the BNC is there to assist Christians on various different places and manifestations of the church in the world, who believes that their faith makes them jointly responsible for what happens in the public domain.

However, I believe there are also definite and specific objections Barth would raise with regard to the BNC's functioning. First, concerning the title of a "centre *for* public theology," Barth would ask whether they are doing their own legacy as well as theology and church any good to phrase it in this manner. The BNC's legacy is one in which they were primarily public in an unconscious manner, being explicitly more interested in the practice than the methodology of public theology. To say we have a centre "for" public theology might create the impression that the primary interest is more towards the methodology of public theology, than in the actual practise of being public. A centre "for" public theology may easily create the idea that the centre is more interested in creating and facilitating dialogue between various different public voices as the primary motive, and thus in the process actually neglecting a historical legacy where its primary motivation was to confess Jesus Christ's significance in the public domain. There seems to be a definite tension between the prophetic-confessional past, and the current priestly-apologetic mode of theology in the public domain.

Moreover, a centre "for" public theology indicates too much a loss to some extent of the critical space that is so essential for theology to actually really be public. We know the centre wants to assist Christians in the various manifestations of their lives in the public, but does the preposition "for" not reveal something of a functionalism and instrumentalism in their identity? Is the preposition "for" not too strong an indication of "the conscious public theology *through* the church," and thus a devaluation of "the unconscious public theology *in* the church?" (Koopman 2005:149-164).²¹ Is a centre "for" public theology not creating an idea that faith is used for specific reasons (like its correlation with the general spirit and faith of the new South Africa), and thus losing an essential critical distance in and towards the public domain? Is

²¹ In this article Koopman makes the distinction between public theology "in" and "through" the church. Concerning the first, he draws on the work of Stanley Hauerwas that assists churches in discerning what the meaning of their identity and formative narratives are for the society in which they are called to be church. Concerning the latter, he draws on the work of Max L Stackhouse who believes the first will not suffice alone, but that we also need to make our narrative based convictions rationally accessible and engage in dialogue with people of other disciplines, religious and nonreligious traditions. Koopman believes South African churches can learn from both.

On reading Karl Barth in South Africa today

it not eventually opting more towards the solidarity element, moving away from the critical element it proposed in the critical-solidarity approach? In sum, is a “centre *for* public theology” not (still) leaving the door open for theology to be trapped in the legitimate role of certain undercover ideologies in the public sphere?

Thus, I propose Barth would suggest they rather omit the preposition “for” in the title and only name it “The Beyers Naudé Public Theology Centre.” Of course it is not just about changing the name, but also changing its mode of functioning and orientation in this way. By doing so the implication is that they may regain the necessary critical distance from all the different power blocs to speak their own unique confessional language. The nonconformity ethic of Barth for the sake of solidarity may just be what a young developing democracy may need from theology to serve not only the public interest as good as possible, but also to witness to the unique otherness of Christ in our midst. In a time and context when people are questioning theology’s usefulness and relevancy for the public domain, theology should not respond in an anxious manner to proof the opposite, but rather stay calm in a free and joyful manner by spelling out the implications of their confession that Christ is actually present in our midst.

Secondly, and inevitably following from his objections of the preposition “for” in the title of the BNC, Barth would object if the BNC became more interested in being primarily the facilitator of dialogue, than actually taking specific positions and confessing clearly to others in the public domain. The greatest contribution the church and theology has to give is not only to provide space and being open towards other, but also by particularly speaking from their own unique point of departure. It is good to bring different groups together and participate in dialogue, but it should always be clear that their point of departure is firmly rooted in Christology. Jesus Christ has foundational status and therefore the centre’s work should in all regards be rooted in the primary rubric of Christology, and not in morals and ethics. In sum, Barth’s concern is that the centre should rather be confessional than apologetic in and towards the public domain, assuring that Christ’s presence is made clear and not pushed into the background.

Thirdly, concerning that both are interested to have an ecclesiological public theology, Barth would agree if they could assist the public *in* the church, but object to the approach that public theology should also be *through* the church. Barth’s objection in this regard lies in the fact that he believes Jesus Christ has set the church free from being imprisoned from all the dominating forms of imagination, so that an ecclesiological public theology should be interested to give a clear theological reading of the social and political reality,

and not to play a mediating role within the given social-cultural forms of imagination. The only basic reality is the church, and it should only speak as it is formed and shaped by the Christian imagination. The danger in a public theology through the church – over against a public theology solely in the church – is that the current South African political project may become part of the starting point which is meant to be exclusively Christological. Being church will inevitably affect life in the public domain, and therefore it is not necessary to give the church and Christians the self-described and conscious role of being public theologians. A public theology through the church not only provides space for the wrong starting points and motivations to express the inherent public intention of theology, but it will also assure the wrong results for both theology and public life. The church's participation in public life should never become an end in itself – and a public theology through the church creates that idea.

Now from the side of *the BNC reading Barth*, they have – besides Barth's strength with regard to the definite public *intention* theology has – serious questions with regard to whether the particular public *manner* he proposes is of any help to them; especially within the liberal democratic context. The BNC surely agrees that the prophetic manner has its time and place,²² but whether theology should always function in this particular mode is questionable. Is Barth's proposed manner of "ever being against the stream" not also another form of natural theology (Metzger 2003:193)? Are there not some instances in which the BNC would ask Barth when theology should rather be more priestly orientated in listening and working together with others in the public domain? Besides that this particular approach finally reveals that he drew the wrong conclusions in the East-West drama,²³ it also asks the question whether the church in democratic context really can "separate" them from other role players in civil society with their language that is always to be over against and in opposition towards others. Is the danger not that the church thinks she is the only one who knows what "good" is? Is it not a too authoritarian way for the church to participate with others who also want to

²² Cf Koopman (2002:240-241; 2003:10-15; 2004a:441-445; 2004b:612-614).

²³ Barth was right in pointing out towards Brunner and Niebuhr that they were not critical enough on the West's position, but surely he also did not hear their critique on the East when he said the following: "It would be quite absurd to mention in the same breath the philosophy of Marxism and the 'ideology' of the Third Reich, to mention a man of the stature of Joseph Stalin in the same breath as charlatans as Hitler, Göring, Hess, Goebbels, Himmler, Ribbentrop, Rosenberg, Streicher, etc." (cf Barth 1954:139.) Moreover, Barth is wrong in arguing that the atheistic state of Communism (over against Nazism) did not use religion for camouflaging its own ends, because "atheism itself is a form of belief, namely the belief in no God. Moreover, when the atheistic state disowns the church or institutional church, it is only a matter of time before it replaces the church, becoming itself a religious institution" (cf Metzger 2003:186-187).

On reading Karl Barth in South Africa today

cooperate in the public domain? Will a prophetic manner really assure others (non-Christians) that Christians take their views seriously? Moreover, is a prophetic language like Barth's whose primary aim is confession rather than explaining, really accessible and understandable to the others who do not share the same point of departure? Is he not making the distinction between ecclesiology and democracy too closely – seeing the democracy actually as an ecclesiocracy (De Kruijf 1994:40-52)? And finally, with regard to the polemical nature in many of his writings, one wonders whether Barth's theology, and the way he embodied it, is really helpful for fruitful dialogue (Ritchl 1986:90)? Thus, there are some serious questions for Barth's prophetic manner in the public domain.

Besides the above objections on Barth's proposed prophetic manner in the public domain, there is also another related aspect that is questionable. Barth does not provide descriptive concretion in his ethical thought, and nowhere does he use normative ethics, casuistry or rationality as moral aids in terms of theology's public intention (Biggar 1988:117). We see this in the method of analogy he proposes which has no concrete guidelines and alternatives to discern what the correct analogical results would be.²⁴

In conclusion, we saw towards the end that both Barthian theology and the BNC have learned from and questioned each other's theological framework for the public domain. Barth surely had something important to say for the BNC concerning the definite public intention theology should have – of which the most important was the serious questions it has raised about the preposition "for" in its title, with the necessary effects it has either way. I suggest that the BNC should seriously take note of this objection. But so had the BNC also some serious questions for Barth concerning his particular public manner – of which the most important was the serious questions concerning the prophetic manner he proposes for theology in the public domain. I suggest that this particular area in Barthian theology necessitates serious further research.

Works consulted

Barth, K 1954. *Against the stream: Shorter post-war writings 1946-1952*. London: SCM.

Barth, K 1961. *The humanity of God*. London: Collins.

Barth, K 1964. *The Heidelberg Catechism*. London: Epworth.

Barth, K 1966. *Dogmatics in outline*. London: SCM.

²⁴ For the critique on Barth's method of analogy, see the following works: Herberg (1968:35); Yoder (1970:100; 1986:170); Biggar (1993:182).

- Barth, K 1973. *Modern theology, 1 – Karl Barth: Selections from twentieth-century theologians*, edited with an introduction and notes by E J Tinsley. London: Epworth Press.
- Barth, K 2003. *Routledge Classics*. London: Routledge.
- Biggar, N (ed) 1988. *Reckoning with Barth: Essays in commemoration of the centenary of Karl Barth*. London: Mombray.
- Biggar, N 1993. *The hastening that waits: Karl Barth's ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Botman, H R 2004. Human dignity and economic globalisation. *NGTT* 45, 317-327.
- Breitenberg, E H 2003. To tell the truth: Will the real public theology please stand up? *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23(2), 55-96.
- De Gruchy, J W 2004a. From political to public theologies: The role of theology in public life in South Africa, in Storrar, W F & Morton, A R (eds), *Public theology for the 21st century*, 45-62. London: T & T Clark.
- De Gruchy, J W 2004b. Political landmarks and the response of churches in South Africa, 1936-1994. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 118, 3-26.
- De Kruijf, G G 1994. *Waaksaam en nuchter: Over Christelike ethiek in een democratie*. Baarn: Ten Have.
- De Kruijf, G G 2003. The challenge of a public theology, in M E Brinkman et al (eds), *Theology between church, university and society*, 139-148. Netherlands: Van Gorcum.
- De Villiers, D E 1995. Die Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk en die nuwe situasie in die samelewing. *NGTT* 37, 558-567.
- Durand, J J F 2002. *Ontluisterde wêreld: Die Afrikaner en sy kerk in 'n veranderende Suid Afrika*. Wellington: Lux Verbi.
- Herberg, W 1968. Introduction: The social philosophy of Karl Barth, in Karl Barth's *Community, state, and church*, 11-67. Gloucester: Peter Smith.
- Hunsinger, G 2000. *Disruptive grace: Studies in the theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Jonker, W D 1999. *Selfs die kerk kan verander*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg.
- Koopman, N N 2001. Tussen die duiwel van Konstantinisme en die diep blou see van sektarisme – kerk-staat-verhoudings in die teologie van Stanley Hauerwas. *NGTT* 42, 135-146.
- Koopman, N N 2002. Freedom of religion and the prophetic role of the church. *NGTT* 43, 237-247.
- Koopman, N N 2003. Some comments on public theology today. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 117, 3-19.
- Koopman, N N 2004a. Let the plight of the voiceless be heard: Prophetic speaking about poverty today. *NGTT* 45, 440-451.
- Koopman, N N 2004b. Defence in a democracy: A church perspective on the post-apartheid defence review process. *NGTT* 45, 609-619.
- Koopman, N N 2005. After ten years: Public theology in post-apartheid South Africa – lessons from a debate in the USA. *NGTT* 46, 149-164.
- Krog, A 2003. The Truth Commission: Public debate and the role of religious bodies (Afrikaner/DRC). *Scriptura* 83, 245-249.
- Lovin, R 1984. *Christian faith and public choices: The social ethics of Barth, Brunner and Bonhoeffer*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress.
- Marty, M E 1974. Reinhold Niebuhr: Public theology and the American experience. *Journal of Religion* 54, 332-359.

On reading Karl Barth in South Africa today

- Metzger, P L 2003. *The word of Christ and the world of culture: Sacred and secular in the theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Naudé, C F B 1995. *My land van hoop: Die lewe van Beyers Naudé*. Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau.
- Naudé, P N 2003. Constructing a coherent theological discourse: The main challenge facing the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa today. *Scriptura* 83, 192-211.
- Ras, volk en nasie en volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif (RVN)*, approved by the General Synod of the DRC, October 1974. Cape Town: NG Kerk Uitgewers. (For the English translation, see *Human relations and the South African scene in the light of Scripture*, 1975.)
- Ritschl, D 1986. How to be most grateful to Karl Barth without remaining a Barthian, in D K McKim (ed), *How Karl Barth changed my mind*, 86-93. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans,
- Smit, D J 2001. Has there been any change?: On the role of the Dutch Reformed Church 1974-1990. *Scriptura* 76, 119-126.
- Smit, D J 2003a. Openbare getuienis en publieke teologie vandag?: Vrae oor verskeie vanselfsprekende voorveronderstellings. *Scriptura* 82, 39-48.
- Smit, D J 2003b. Unity in church and society?: Theological reflections on an ongoing challenge in South Africa today. *Scriptura* 83, 305-314.
- The Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, 2002. *Background information*. (unpublished)
- The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church: A theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa*. 1985. Braamfontein: Springs Advertiser.
- Thiemann, R F 1992. *Constructing a public theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.
- Villa-Vicencio, C (ed) 1988. *On reading Karl Barth in South Africa*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Webster, J 1998. *Barth's moral theology: Human action in Barth's thought*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.
- Webster, J 2004. *Barth*. London: Continuum.
- Yoder, J H 1970. *Karl Barth and the problem of war*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon.
- Yoder, J H 1986. Karl Barth: How his mind kept changing, in McKim, D K (ed), *How Karl Barth changed my mind*, 166-171. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.