The Quest for a Glocal Public Theology

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Abstract
Will Storrar makes the case for a glocal public theology arguing that where the practitioner is located matters. The underlying assumption is the need for ‘good partners’ and the possibility of theologies in one site critically informing another. What needs to be negotiated is the extent to which these ‘partnerships’ are uneven. The idea of a public theology surfaced in the established centres of the western theological tradition, but how can the categories of a public theology developed in the United States, for example, inform the shape of a comparable theology in Australia? The benefit of exploring this question is that it enables the history and critical scholarship of two locations to be named. For the more solid establishment of a public theology in Australia this is a strategic task, since the term is being used increasingly, but with arguably insufficient attention being paid to meaning, definition and task.

Keywords
glocal, Australia, shaping

In Search of a Cutting-Edge

Writing on the theme of a public theology for the twenty-first century, William Storrar identifies the need to attend to a particular ‘cutting-edge’. It is argued that such a theology now should be constructed in the meeting place ‘between the local and the global’.1 For the sake of this imperative Storrar draws on Robert Schreiter’s theory of ‘global flows’ and how these waves or momentums of thought to do with feminism, liberation, human rights and environmental concern are interpreted and acted out in specific locations and

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Following Schreiter, Storrar invokes the concept of glocalization—a clunky sounding neologism coined by the British sociologist, Roland Robertson. The concept was imported from Japanese farming and business practices to describe the complex processes at work in how the universal and the particular intersect with one another in a heady mix of accommodation and resistance. The time was now ripe for public theology to go glocal, like those flowing predecessors, and focus upon how the local and the global 'meet in interpenetrative and interactive simultaneity'.

Storrar’s call for a cutting-edge and a ‘kind of glocal public theology’ does not arise in a vacuum. It is an invitation set inside the history of middle to late twentieth century theology. With the benefit of hindsight, the retrospective eye discerns the emergence of contextual theologies, the focus of which is essentially on matters of identity, and a raft of political and emancipatory theologies. The sub-text is one of fundamental criticism and potential subversion. These new forms of theology call into question ‘the dominant Western theological tradition, with its theoretical claim to timeless truth and universal significance’. Its apparent plausibility of the dominant tradition masks ‘the predominantly white, male faces of Western academics and Church leaders … [and] their own local perspective and ideological bias’. This historical description is now familiar and well rehearsed. Where Storrar introduces something new is his consciousness of how the tension between the particular and the universal could stretch a public theology into the danger of two extremes. The ever-present risk is of an atomistic sequence of incommensurable local theologies unable to understand and commune meaningfully with one another and its alternative, the construction of ‘imperialist grand theological narratives’. Storrar leaves implicit what this latter option might mean.

5) Ibid., p. 405.
6) Ibid.
7) Ibid.
8) Ibid.
For those of us who reside on the margins and are often out of sight and out of hearing of the more powerful theological locations of this world, the spectre of what might be is never far removed. The language of a public theology could in turn become the vehicle of exclusion. The right words and sentiments are expressed, but they have been once again shaped almost exclusively in locations and contexts other than our own. The occasional nod might be given to another setting or site, which for the moment is deemed to be fashionable or reckoned to be deserving of notice and attention, but our place at this table of public hospitality is not guaranteed. It lacks the personnel, the funding, the persuasive power and a sufficiently sized book-buying public in order to consolidate our position and resist the grand narratives of a public theology configured in the usual, well-established elsewhere. There is not the same level of traffic and face-to-face encounter that secures immediate attention and memorable recall.

The effect is daunting. The Auckland-based theologian, Neil Darragh, speaks most tellingly of how those of us who live at the southern ends of the earth are so often the receivers of theologies that are crafted elsewhere, both in terms of time and place. Such theologies have been ‘developed in quite different circumstances from the ones in which we find ourselves’. These inherited ways of thinking may now be ‘quite out of tune, inappropriate, even delusory in regard to our circumstances and way of life’ and become, as such, disabling abstractions. ‘There is here an element of the non-fit’. Faced with a cleavage of life and theology, Darragh argues that there are indeed times when these powerful influences must be switched off and we become doers of theology rather than being passive recipients and mere consumers of ideas arising elsewhere.

Darragh’s plea is not peculiar to his native Aotearoa-New Zealand. The globalization language that Storrar modifies is always viewed with a hermeneutic of suspicion beyond the North Atlantic. It lends itself so easily to a seductive homogeneity that can mask the danger of an otherwise alluring imperialist grand narrative of one world and a common humanity. Partly for that reason, Leonardo Boff insists on the pressing necessity to qualify any reference to the global with a sense of perspective. In his case, the way of seeing the new world

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10) Ibid., pp. 17–20 (original italics).
11) Ibid.
order is via a view from ‘the Great South’, by which he means Latin America and the disadvantaged members of planet Earth.12

The issues at stake are clearly evident in how theology might be developed in the liquid continent of Oceania. For a raft of island scholars in the Pacific, seeking to develop an is-landic hermeneutic, the global is an omnipresent threat.13 It has the capacity to subvert traditional culture and well-established patterns of identity and create a fresh form of colonialism. This dilemma is embedded within what Sioeli Kavafolau describes as the relocation process of globalization, making unknown local cultures known on a wider scale.14 The effect of this encounter is to transcend geographical boundaries and situate differences within humanity in terms of time rather than space. This process of relocation represents a form of conversion. Kavafolau argues that globalization lifts up the people from their spatial world (which in this case can be, by tradition, isolated) and locates them more into a global world of temporal uniformity.15 The world is compressed in terms of time and place. The global makes itself felt in vulnerable and now fragile societies, and it reconstructs identity and the business of home and culture. The host society is thus radically altered.

What happens then to God-talk in the midst of such cultural change, where this language and confession is now relocated? How does the local fare with respect to the homogenizing influences of globalization? Kavafolau’s task is not slight. Faced with these pressures, he wrestles with the nagging problem of how God can be expressed in a globalized local context that is remote and plays so little role in informing a global discourse on anything. What hope is there in this particular intersection of the local and global?16

Kavafolau’s thesis is in keeping with Darragh’s emphases on doing our own theology and knowing our context. It is a salutary warning for those tempted to impose a global rather than a glocal public theology. The cutting-edge to which Storrar refers is like a warning device then and a potential corrective. It presupposes a close interplay between the general discourse of a public theol-

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
ogy and the principle of contextuality and how this principle is constructed through the coming together of readings of here and now, time and place. There is a certain sense of specificity required.

Storrar’s concern for the glocal was constructed as a warning in the other direction as well. The rhetoric of doing theology ourselves and the practice of resistance runs the risk of an equally constraining cultural chauvinism, which likewise bothers Darragh. In the circumstances the preferable option was one of balance between doing and receiving. What is really required is a form of reinterpretation and the willingness to enter into theological partnerships with other contexts. Darragh assumes a ‘genuine interaction, genuine give and take, on both sides’. Writing out of an even more vulnerable context, Kavafolau was of a like mind: that hope after which he was aspiring points towards a God who recognizes distinctiveness and isolation, on the one hand, and global neighbours in other differentiated locations, on the other.

An Explosion of Interest

That Storrar suggests the strategy of being glocal should come as no surprise. On account of its growing popularity the term public theology is fraught and somewhat confusing. It naturally generates a handful of easily posed but difficult to answer questions. Who is using the language of a public theology? How? Why? For what purpose? Is it being used in a soft sense where biblical scholars and diverse systematic theologians simply suggest that, of course, all theology is public? Or is more precision and purpose required? There is a resonance of J. B. Metz’ politics of theology embedded in these continuing interrogations. They have a habit of sharpening the focus for the sake of evaluating an historical evolution of this theological newcomer.

From modest and tentative beginnings, invocations of public theology have become relatively common over the past twenty years. Writing in 1991, Linell Cady notices that though there had been a ‘few scattered references’ in previous decades, the term was ‘not a designation that had any wide currency’. There were certainly significant individuals, the most notable being Reinhold Niebuhr, practising what the term purported to describe, but the idea of a public theology was not commonly invoked.

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It was likewise possible to identify pivotal moments like Martin Marty’s advocacy of a public church that was, in effect, a protest against the privatization of belief and the apparent withdrawal from ecumenical engagement in the public and civil sphere. Of a similar clarifying nature was David Tracy’s definition of the three audiences to include the public alongside the academic and the church. The switch in emphasis he made from the origins of a religious discourse to its effects also makes the case for the inclusion of theology as a public resource for a liberal democracy much stronger. The problem of how the particularity of the Christian faith might be overcome is met by Tracy’s idea of the religious classic that speaks to common public matters in a way that is accessible and subject to rational scrutiny. His understanding of how these audiences intersect with one another also allows for the distinction to be made between the privatized individual and the personal, which always has a public and relational dimension to it.

These scattered and occasional references give way to a ‘flurry’ of such. In the light of this ‘explosion of interest’, Cady claims that that the very notion of a public theology attracts to itself a diversity of styles and issues that the matter of naming was fast becoming problematic. The level of diversity of meaning and method ‘threatens to overwhelm the concept, rendering it so fluid, so indefinite, that it leads more to obscurity than to clarity’. Still deeply committed to the concept, Cady prepares to negotiate her way through the problems of its malleable nature. For all its risk of loss of meaning, she insists that its ‘protean nature… is also a source of strength’. The very notion of a public theology has the capacity to ‘bring together and address a number of disparate and related issues’. It has indeed an ‘integrative power’. The idea of a public theology has embedded within itself the potential for being interdisciplinary. One of its functions is to provide an interface between the theological disciplines of the *ecclesia* and those of other branches of specialist knowledge that explore how we organize our lives in the social and scientific fields.

All this was a period in which the purpose of a public theology was under exploration. Marty’s commitment to a public church combined the desire to

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22) Ibid.
23) Ibid.
move beyond the familiar complaint of a privatization of belief to a faith concerned with the *res publica*, the public order. The definition of what is public and what is private and how that might intersect with the claims made by a Christian confession was clearly critical. Is the nature of Christian believing only interested in what 'consenting adults do in private'—to cite Daniel Hardy? Or does it have relevance for the whole of creation?\(^{24}\) Does the economy of God inevitably drag the life of discipleship into the realm of social and political citizenship as well, even if and when the latter goes under the cover of being a residential alien in this world? Across the Atlantic, Frances Young’s edited anthology captures the dilemma of theology’s legitimate concerns under its title: *Dare We Speak of God in Public?*\(^{25}\)

For the sake of a working definition, Michael and Kenneth Himes declare that the purpose of a public theology is to bring ‘the wisdom of the Christian tradition into public conversation in order to contribute to the well-being of society’. It is ‘the effort to discover and communicate the socially significant meanings of Christian symbols and traditions’ and its hermeneutical intention is ‘to interpret basic Christian symbols in such a way that believers can discover the full meaning of those symbols’.\(^{26}\) The ecumenical nature of the public church is likened by the Himes to a ‘zone of shared concerns and beliefs among Christians of different communions’.\(^{27}\) It is thus more of an ethos, a commitment to the public sphere rather than a particular platform or agenda, or indeed an agreed association. In a setting where there is a deepening fracture of any hint of a societal consensus, a public theology would be concerned with the possibility, or otherwise, of a Christian vision of the good society and what constitutes a civil society.

The explosion of interest that Cady signifies has not abated. The period between that then and this now has seen the further development of what might be termed a public theology infrastructure established in publications, degrees, research centres and associations. The malleable nature that Cady identifies has intensified, if anything, and the time is ripe for the construction of a raft of models or typologies similar to the work done by Stephen Bevans

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\(^{25}\) Frances Young, ed., *Dare We Speak of God in Public?* (London: Mowbray, 1995).


\(^{27}\) Ibid., p. 1.
and Peter Scott on a contextual theology and an ecotheology respectively. It might then be possible to classify what is actually being done, how, on what basis and with what effect, under this increasingly invoked rubric of a public theology. It might also be possible then to call into question the not uncommon practice of those whose primary audience is the academy, but who for various reasons clothe their work far too readily with the assertion that all theology is public anyway. We have to ask whether this strategy is now past its use-by date. Does it lack rigour and serve as a kind of well-intentioned deception? Is it really enough for a single sentence here or there to be employed in order to honour what David Ford intimates is theology’s ‘ecology of responsibility’ and which, in effect, includes Tracy’s three audiences?

Faced with the subsequent proliferation of references to a public theology, Mary Doak discerns the need for a categorization of the achievements thus far. The primary focus of her schema is how the ‘public theology project’ has developed in the United States, however, and there are only occasional references to writers like John Milbank and Oliver O’Donovan from further afield. That this should be the case is no surprise insofar as her intention is to bind a public theology to the practice of a narrative method that is respectful of the multi-religious character of her particular location. For all of its obvious specificity, her description nevertheless has the capacity to transcend the local and address this global flow.

Doak argues that the public theology project should be interpreted in the light of ‘five major [though interrelated] areas’. The first stands inside the Marty tradition. Its concern for the public role of Christian churches. It comprises a mix of ‘scholarly contributions . . . [and] an ongoing body of ecclesial statements addressing various aspects of the public witness of the Christian churches’. Doak identifies three basic stances in the first area of witness: opposition to a non-Christian public, a willingness to co-operate and engage with larger social movements and the more recently established case for a ‘new Christendom in which the church marshals its resources to shape public life according to a Christian model of society’.

31) Ibid., p. 13.
32) Ibid.
The second of Doak’s areas is organized along the lines of the public nature of theological discourse. In this instance the focus falls upon the ‘public accessibility of specifically religious languages, texts, and ideas’. It is a matter closely related to the public relevance of theological doctrines and their capacity to move beyond an in-house jargon. The dilemma Doak has identified is how the following tension is to be negotiated: ‘if we speak our distinctly religious perspective, our voice is too particular to be comprehensible beyond our religious community, whereas when we adopt commonly accepted terms, we seem no longer to have anything distinct to contribute’. The pressing question then becomes how can the public theologian be bilingual.

The third area is closely related to the second. Here the interest lies in how a public theology remains consistent with the official separation of church and state. The key question in this area concerns the extent to which a religiously informed politics is consistent with the American Bill of Rights. The wider issue at stake is how a public theology functions inside a western democracy where there are no established churches and churches are in the process of withdrawing, often unwillingly, from an historical and heavily ambiguous de facto position of privilege.

Doak’s fourth category is directed towards the development of a more constructive and substantive public theology. It delves beneath the surface of the tension between public accessibility and the particularity of Christian believing; what form of discourse is then desirable? Are there a number of levels at which a public faith should engage with the received theological traditions and methods of doing theology, for the sake of being bilingual and speaking to both the ecclesial and socio-political contexts? What might a biblical hermeneutic designed for a public theology look like, for instance, and how might that then engage with how a particular theologian balances a reading of social and cultural analysis, middle axioms and a doctrine of the two kingdoms? Doak’s does not deal with these possibilities; instead she confines her category to the prospect of making ‘systematic assessments of the implications for public life of Christian doctrines’. The alternative is to follow the line of the religious critic and embrace the quest for a common national spirituality.

The mere fact that all these issues and options exist is a good index of the extent to which there is no uniform, monolithic public theology. Doak finally draws attention to its diversity and warns against holding public theology captive to ‘a white and middle-class vision of the common good’ that is essentially

34) Ibid., p. 17.
She claims that public theology is pluralist by nature; thus, she draws attention to alternatives that are feminist and black African-American.

Back to Being Glocal

The location of Storrar's call for a cutting-edge transcends the history of terms and practice that Cady and then Doak describe. The anthology in which Storrar writes is mindful of how different places and moments in time inform the method and content of how a public theology is expressed. At the time, he was writing out of Scotland and wished to focus on the relevant work and intention of Duncan Forrester in that particular national context. The majority of authors were still primarily from the United Kingdom but the ‘excluded were blessed’ and there was a healthy reference to ‘unfitting theologies’.

Of more substantial significance were the descriptions of political and public theologies from Germany after Auschwitz (by Jürgen Moltmann), from South Africa during and following the collapse of apartheid (John de Gruchy) and from Argentina (especially José Míguez-Bonino). Even the most superficial of readings made it clear that these kinds of theologies have a discrete history that accounts for their origins and shape in different locations. In the case of both Moltmann and de Gruchy the influences of Metz and Latin American liberation theology are discernible. These informing theologies were, like Darragh’s good partners, not sufficient in and of themselves; they belonged to the elsewhere. This is particularly the case for de Gruchy insofar as Metz was contributing, like Moltmann, to a political theology for Germany. Writing out of South Africa, de Gruchy is conscious of this dissonance and concludes that it is better to think in terms of public theologies in the plural rather than the singular. De Gruchy advises that: ‘There is no universal ‘public theology’, but only theologies that seek to engage the political realm within particular localities’. The specificity of such work is set within an emergent broader ecumenical public theology. What is tried and tested in several places can then critically inform other theologies and be re-worked appropriately to fit specific contexts.

35) Ibid., p. 19.
The call Storrar makes for a more glocalized public theology is consistent with de Gruchy's thinking. The intersection and interplay of one location with a raft of other places makes ecumenical sense conceived in terms of Schreiter's proposal for a new catholicity. The prospect of a public theology is polycentric; it is neither monocentric nor univocal. It is not the preserve of those whose sites were able to use such language before others and for whom a substantial body of critical scholarship on method, models and purpose are now in place. And what is more, this present talk of a cutting-edge or a *kairos* moment in this relative newcomer of a discipline recognizes the place of the other and Kavafolau's differentiated and global neighbour.

**Responding to the Call**

There is nevertheless a complex set of dilemmas for those who have been on the theological periphery which must be negotiated for the sake of becoming part of a glocalized public project. What happens in a particular location where the intellectual infrastructure for such is modest at best and lacks a clarity of intention? What should we expect from a defined context where the rigorous inquiry into the public relevance and signature of Christian believing in that society has not been done and there is no comparable debate among scholars in the field similar to that which is taken for granted in Europe and North America?

The history Cady and Doak identify and strive to place in categories testifies to an explosion of interest and a degree of common agreement over the necessity and vocation of a public theology. It is not confined to the research endeavours of a handful of fairly isolated theologians nor the occasional foray into a Christian perspective on public policy. The way in which Marty sets about the task supposes that the Christian faith, even if posing at times under the more general rubric of religion, has a role to play in the *res publica* for the benefit of the good society. What happens, if and when matters religious, have been deemed to be ‘an embarrassing subject’ and best left in the realm of reticence and silence? How can a public theology be directed towards de Gruchy's interest in 'particular localities' when the history of a contextual theology in that space is relatively recent, spasmodic, and almost invariably the work of individuals? Does a public theology in a given space requires more of a cohort of scholars writing, in effect, with some reference back to one another and with more of a self-conscious concern as to how theology’s public agenda is to be shaped and justified. Is it enough simply to cobble together a collection of
essays on a selection of cultural and social issues without a word of advice on how these writings compose a public expression of theology or relate to a wider body of literature devoted to this theme in this county? Or, is this kind of ad hocery a necessary phase and perhaps a kind of theological humus that will nourish subsequent growth and maturity? If this is so, how will this movement from one stage to another will be effected—and by whom? What kind of habitus is called for?

For all its admirable merits, Storrar’s call for a glocalized public theology has the potential to deceive. It can carry an almost hidden assumption that the different local contexts are equal partners in their self-understanding of the task, but this is not necessarily so. There is some need to explore how this new term in some parts of the world is being used and how its employment not only relates back to an emerging discourse on public theology in general but, in keeping with de Gruchy, critically informs the well-established other as well. Storrar’s cutting-edge is timely, but it should not be received too easily. It requires a great deal of those who are riding the wave of this global flow.

In Search of a Public Theology

For those of us who live in what Roland Boer describes as the last stop before Antartica, the construction of a public theology has been haphazard and rather occasional. The impression is that of a name that was seldom used a decade ago and which has now undergone an antipodean equivalent of Cady’s flurry of references. There has been a marked increase in the description of theology requiring a public audience and relevance. One example of this practice is Bruce Kaye’s call for a Christianity to be lived out and expressed in and through the public square.37 Andrew Murray also identifies why the case can be made against the church speaking in this domain, though he himself is not of this opinion.38 The term ‘public theology’ has become more commonly used for the sake of holding together and naming a theological forum or a loose coalition of those wishing to comment on social and political issues.39 It

39 For example, the Evangelical Alliance of Australia has a theology and public policy department; see <http://www.ea.org.au/Theology/TheologyPublicPolicyDepartment.aspx>.
has seemingly begun to replace or complement allusions to church and civil society and civilizing community.40

This latter tendency suggests that there is growing awareness that the purpose of a public theology differs in several critical respects from the benefits and advocacy of a civil religion. This distinction needs to be made in Australia insofar as the Christian faith can be often used in almost a de facto establishment manner at times of public disaster, the death of an Australian sporting hero or pop music legend, and with particular regard to ANZAC Day and its role as a national icon. Even in a post-Christendom, multi-religious culture there has been little attention paid to any possible tensions between being a citizen and being a disciple. The practice of much writing on church and civil society has been to concentrate upon socio-economic issues and then append a theological reflection or leave the theological connection implied.

Now and then there have been conferences that have pointed towards the possibility of a public theology. The proceedings of the most notable example of such a conference were published under the title Faith in the Public Forum, with the declared purpose to ‘examine the role of religion and theology in public life’ and ‘probe the role of the public forum in sustaining the common good’.41 In this conference the familiar practice of inviting overseas keynote speakers (in this case David Hollenbach and Ann Loades) followed by a range of more domestic speakers was observed. For those who have an interest in mapping the evolution of a public theology in Australia there were several clarifying moments: the conference was in the best traditions of a public faith interdisciplinary; it considered the economic imperatives that might form the bedrock of the idea and practice of the common good; it recognized that the public sphere is a contested space and named the sociological importance of developing civic capital, trust and the quality of a society’s thin relationships.

It was evident nevertheless that the praxis of an appropriate Australian theology was fairly marginal. The point is well made by the editors, Neil Brown and Robert Gascoigne. The possibility of the churches securing ‘philosophically a position for themselves in the public arena’ has been compromised by their own tendency ‘to see faith as more a private, rather than a public matter’.42

42 Ibid., p. vii.
Brown and Gascoigne conclude that this is ‘a situation that the churches, for the most part have acquiesced to and even reproduced in their own theology and practice’. In a variation on a theme, Michael Putney makes several anecdotal references to illustrate the disjunction between private belief and the realm of public employment for many committed Christians in Australia. The dilemma he discerns is how the exclusion of the Christian voice from the national conversation should be met. Was it possible to reintroduce direct reference to God in the public forum of Australia? What strategies might best be used for establishing faith’s ‘right to be heard’? How should this be done in a mode that demonstrates that a Christian theology and ethic is willing to show that ‘it can respond to the real questions of its dialogue partners and treat them with equal respect.’ There was no doubt about the importance of these questions but there was a sense they were left hanging. Yet, the mere fact that they have been posed is a sign of solid theological work to be done. Putney concludes with a sigh of humility every time he hears the ‘voice of an ordinary participant in public debate which unashamedly echoes the gospel’.

For all its merits the conference did not fulfil the role of providing a stimulus that might have generated subsequent momentum. The line of development has been irregular; what is intended by the invocation of the qualifying label ‘public’ is often uncertain. The concept of a public theology in Australia has been as malleable as Cady lamented more than fifteen years ago, but without the accompanying desire for a more precise working definition that will inform what is said and acted out.

The historical detective work that would determine the first usage of this label here in Australia and what shape it has subsequently taken has not yet been done. There is, in effect, no well-rehearsed common narrative in which to set this emerging discipline. There are incidents, events, issues and individuals, but little in the way of a connected narrative or story line. It becomes difficult then to deal in more than impressions and this runs the risk of oversight and exclusion by way of ignorance. The contrary temptation is to place too much emphasis on an apparently prolific writer whose corpus of published material may only be inferentially linked into a public theology.

Yet even that judgement begs another unaddressed question: to what extent is an explicit reference and definition of what makes a theology public required? Writing in his turn of the millennium survey of Australian theolo-

43) Ibid.
gies, Gideon Goosen, for instance, makes no mention of such a theology. 45

There is no hint of this cutting-edge even in his projected future, ‘The Bush Track Ahead’. The body of his text does, however, describe a genre of ‘second theology’ that might otherwise be so regarded. The distinction is taken from Clodovis Boff. A ‘first theology’ is concerned with doctrines; and, a ‘second theology’ deals with the secular realities of work, the environment, gender and sexuality and economics. Goosen may not use the language of a public theology; there may be scant attention paid to method and audience but he does identify some forebears of a more closely defined public theology. The categories he privileges are directed towards the public good.

In the absence of a thorough and historical critical review it is difficult for a public theology to secure its bearings. The problem lies partly in the lack of a significant, formative text. There is none that draws attention to why theology must engage with its several audiences and exercise a proper ecology of responsibility. There is simply no seminal work written with Australia in mind comparable to Marty’s excursion into the idea of a public church.

This relative neglect does not mean that no-one in this country has contemplated the shape of a public theology; it simply posits the point of view that what has been published has either been secreted away out of sight or not been deemed worthy of commanding widespread recognition. Perhaps the timing has not been quite right for this kind of theoretical work even despite the occasional attempt to bind such an inquiry into a reading of practical concrete matters in keeping with Australian custom.

The writings of Marty, Cady, Himes and others have been used by myself in several articles to do with the environment, multi/cross-culturalism and an unprecedented level of media attention on the Christian faith. The aim is to interpret a particular sequence of events or a significant public issue in the light of a disciplined method and intention. It is assumed that a public theology does not just happen, but that the prospective religious and theological subjects of interest are inclined to come to public notice in a more or less ad hoc manner. The presenting case may be any one of a number of public concerns: cultural diversity, immigration, refugees, economic neoliberalism, genetic technology, clerical sexual misconduct, the demonizing of other faiths and war and peace. These matters construct the narrative of a civil society at a given point in time. The task is to discern how engagement with this kind of

agenda from a theological point of view takes place. How should this discourse remain true to its own particularity and originating traditions, while at the same time addressing a social order for which theological language might be esoteric, parochial and worthy of suspicion? What theological doctrines might be hidden away in the matters at hand and how should they be expressed in a manner that is accessible and bilingual?46

What is evident in this work is a desire to let theology fulfil its ecology of responsibility. For Ian Barns the entry point is less explicit in terms of theology itself and more self-consciously interdisciplinary.47 His aim is to secure a constructive Christian participation in public debates in a way that is consistent with the particularity of that religious tradition. For this reason he is heavily indebted to Stanley Hauerwas’ theory that the Christian public vision should not be made on the basis of generally agreed moral principles; rather, the Christian perspective is grounded in a distinctive narrative and social practice. It is better to opt for a specifically Christian discourse being seen as a counter discourse. This tactic is grounded in the moral matrix of ecclesial practice. For Barns, whose primary interest is in policy analysis, such a strategy opens up the prospect of framing and reframing the issues. Here he relies upon the work of Martin Rein and Donald Schon. Barns argues that the modus operandi of a frame reflection persuades Christians to own the narrative sources of their Christian convictions. It thereby calls into question the pretence of liberal neutrality and what has been diagnosed as the democratic policing of Christianity, which leads to the repression of a distinctive Christian language in public. Barns argues for critical engagement with the political logic of the Christian narrative and a probing of the frequently unacknowledged theological sources of secular liberalism. Nevertheless, he resists the criticism that he is running the risk of falling into sectarianism, by focusing on the necessary particularity of a public theology and its possible role in a contested arena.

Barns’ writing on the relationship of a Christian frame reflection to public culture can be viewed alongside Gascoigne’s exploration of the nature of the


public forum and how it might be addressed by a Christian ethic. 48 For Gascoigne, the primary context is how freedom is played out in a western liberal democracy. And here we have another dilemma. There is no reference back to Australia whereas I deal with specific narratives that have a cast of characters and a story that was being lived out in a public here and now. Barns alludes to Australia but, like Gascoigne, was more detached and abstract. The question arises: what makes a public theology Australian as distinct from a more universal public theology and ethic? Gascoigne’s work is of a high order but it is not glocal. The dilemma this poses can be seen in the comparison that can be made with Goosen’s wrestling with the criteria for an authentic contextual theology that is unequivocally Australian. We might ask whether it is enough for a theology to be classified as local and contextual by dint of birth or residence. Goosen argues for a more rigorous definition. Such theologies, he reckons, must be written in Australia; they must articulate themselves in a way that shows that they have taken into consideration the culture of the people for whom they write and they must use the idiom of the language of the people to whom the theology is directed. 49 This schema begs the question how Goosen’s three criteria should be refined for the sake of a public theology.

Shaping a Public Theology

The purpose of this article has been to situate what has been emerging in Australia inside a mix of Storrar’s call for the glocal cutting-edge and the need for good partners and foils. It has been strongly informed by the emphasis that Cady and Doak place on narrative and a taking stock of what has come to the surface. It is like taking a step back from the present explosion of interest for the sake of a distancing reflection. It has assumed that de Gruchy is right with reference to the necessity of what is tried and tested in one place being used for the sake of critically informing the other and playing some part in whatever recasting might be necessary.

While my emphasis here has been on shape and quest, the survey could have been done very differently. The decision to concentrate upon definitions and categories may blunt the sense of enthusiasm and energy that currently is abounding. It has tended to note what has not yet been done and to invoke a

49 Goosen, Australian Theologies, p. 30.
litany of difficulties. The past several years have testified to a remarkable reversal with respect to Putney’s cautious aside concerning whether or not God should be re-introduced into public debate, but the description of that shift has been delayed. The basic concern here has been with what frames of reference should be used in order to clarify and interpret the prospect and practice of a public theology where God is ‘baack’ and the Australian religious institution has become highly pluralist, in search of soul, and increasingly multi-faith. The stakes are high. Is the present a time and place where the terra public is under siege? What kind of public faith and hope can be nurtured in a time where current social and economic policies have seemingly led to a fascination with ‘affluenza’ and the material well-being of persons can be determined, in part, by the postcode of residence?

The logic of going glocal presupposes that the construction of public theologies in one site can never simply be a replication of what has happened elsewhere. Nevertheless, there is some merit in considering how Doak’s five-fold typology might migrate into an Australian context. The purpose is functional. The recent rise in talk of God and government, church and state, theology and public issues and a recognition of competing Christian voices in this territory has led frequently to the bewildered asides. ‘But what is a public theology?’ How does it differ from social responsibility, apologetics, or mission? What is its relationship to a contextual theology and how are the diverse concerns which are somehow brought together under this label inter-relate?

For the sake of shaping an Australian public theology the second and third of Doak’s categories require priority. These are the designated areas to do with the public accessibility of religious ideas and how such a theology stands in relationship to the traditions of a secular western democracy. It is an intersection that simply cannot reproduce the patterns of what might, at face value, seem to be analogous societies.

The common belief is that religion has featured prominently in the lives of most citizens and shaped many of the institutions of civil society. The Chris-

Christian faith has indeed played a formative role in civic responsibility, education and socialization. This claim can be made even if and when this formative influence on national life and citizenship has been largely taken for granted or poorly articulated and recognised.\textsuperscript{54} It can be sustained still in a climate that has witnessed the relative decline of institutional religion, a succession of scandals, and the arrival of the ‘paperback pilgrim’ and diverse forms of postmodern spirituality. This role is ironic, though. Writing towards the end of last century John Thornhill concludes that the Christian faith has an inhibited public presence and constitutes ‘the great untried option in Australian culture’.\textsuperscript{55} Its ‘intrusive voice’ has seemingly seldom found ‘a sympathetic hearing in the public conversation’ of this country.\textsuperscript{56} It is a tradition of reserve.

The reason is historical. Bouma is adamant that the shape of the religious institution in Australia differs in expression from what is to be found in other English-speaking western democracies. The core imaginary here was not one of a ‘pilgrim people’ ready to impose their religious mythology on a new land. There was no history of major renewal movements similar to those found in eighteenth and nineteenth century America and England. The first wave of Europeans were largely convicts with little attachment to a moribund state church ‘back home’ and religion often fulfilled a civilizing function. The received image of God was deistic and mechanistic, ‘a distant and largely deaf god who had left everyday things to run by chance or by luck’. Bouma concludes that, on accounts of its origins, ‘Australia provides a different context for the production of religious belief and practice’.\textsuperscript{57}

For a public theology the implications of this history are a mixture of the problematic and the puzzling. The public forum in Australia has never been organized along the lines of what Rex Ahdar, across the Tasman, identifies as the ‘Constantinian impulse’.\textsuperscript{58} On occasion mainline denominations may have fulfilled the function of being a \textit{de facto} or quasi-establishment, but seldom have they exercised the right to be represented that attends the mere fact


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p. 222.

\textsuperscript{57} Bouma, \textit{Australian Soul}, pp. 38–47.

of being a national church. Time and time again leaders in the church have been advised not to meddle in public affairs, on the grounds that their proper public role is to attend to the spiritual needs of their members and demonstrate pastoral care and social service. In the opinion of Andrew Downer, failure to keep within these limits is likely to go hand in hand with a disregard of orthodox believing. The Australian way is to preserve the democratic system by preventing religion being ‘ballyhooed around in public’.59 The Preamble to the Commonwealth Constitution may make reference to ‘Humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God’, but section 116 expressly prohibits the Commonwealth from establishing a religion, requiring or prohibiting religious practice, or imposing any religious test for public office.

And yet the explosion of interest in public theology has coincided with a surprising level of political interest in religious beliefs and values. The most stunning example has been the passion displayed by the new Leader of the Opposition, Kevin Rudd, for the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.60 This new venture stands inside an emerging body of practice that includes the spectacle of the Treasurer, Peter Costello, calling for a return to the standards of the Ten Commandments before twenty thousand devotees at the annual Hillsong assembly held at the Sydney Superdome. These demonstrations of political religious belief are not isolated.

We have to consider what the role of a public theology might be in this kind of circumstance. Is it at one level to test the merit of the theological claims being espoused? Is it to inquire after the purpose of what is being said and perhaps read how this theological language is being used in terms of laying claim to heritage, national identity, and values in a time and place where the fabric of a civil society is under pressure? To what extent should a hermeneutic of suspicion attend this rhetoric, especially in a society whose character has become culturally more diverse and pluralist in religion? The public arena in which this theological newcomer is situated has changed. What does it now mean to invoke Doak’s fifth category, which strongly argues that the vision of the common good should not be confined to one particular class, gender, race and maybe faith?

This then is the context in which the churches make their statements on climate change, workplace agreements, race relations, indigenous poverty and water management. It is the domain of Marty’s public church and Doak’s first

category. The nagging question that an explicit theology asks of ecclesial praxis is the extent to which statements can address both audiences. The temptation is to opt for a language of social justice without much in the way of an occasional biblical aside that can ground the public claim in Barns’ moral matrix of the church. The policy researcher most conscious of this risk is Ann Wansbrough. Her ecumenical study of Christian perspectives on public policy and the use of middle axioms is exemplary.

The sobering truth is that little has been done in the way of constructing a substantive public theology. The tendency has been to concentrate on how theology is to be done in the light of a particular iconic event, like the detaining of refugees at Woomera. Tom Frame’s exploration of what he perceives to be the imaginary wall between church and state in Australia began with a biblical hermeneutic, but there is no equivalent of the brief ‘politics of Scripture’ to be found in the works of David Fergusson, Michael Hoelzl and Gavin Ward.

The public signature of doctrines to do with God and Christ has been somewhat ignored, and the exceptions are few and far between. Barns certainly strives to recover the narrative primacy and politics of Jesus, while I play with the expletive ‘for Christ’s sake’, in order to develop a ‘down-under’ hermeneutic. Here, a popular, well-used phrase with obvious religious connotations is looped back into the theological tradition, in the interests of an explicit Christian conviction that addresses the environment, the mistreatment of Aboriginals and the diasporic experience. The more common practice is to use God and Jesus as banner titles for sociological and political studies. Marion Maddox writes about God Under Howard and Amanda Lohrey’s chosen theme is ‘Voting for Jesus’. In these two cases the sub-titles are the giveaways. Their

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63) Tom Frame, Church and State: Australia’s Imaginary Wall (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006), pp. 15–19.
real interest lies not so much in what is happening in the theological discourse but in how these beliefs and values are being put to use under the ideology of the Christian right and, in some instances, the lure of fundamentalism.67

Making Room

The comparative nature of this article was occasioned by Storrar’s call for a glocalized public theology. The recognition that it could have been pursued in several ways is a healthy reminder of how tentative this survey has been. Following the line of argument proposed by Barns, this approach could be reframed. Its modest benefit lies in seeking to make some sort of initial sense of the frequent invocations of doing a public theology in a land where theology has always been a fairly marginal discipline and rarely accorded much space in the public arena. It is evident from the work of Cady and Doak especially that the shape of a public theology in Australia requires attention. There is a need for some accountability if theology’s ecology of responsibility is to be well served.

Doak’s categories are not necessarily exhaustive. The writings of Murray and Barns, again, point towards an Australian interest in developing a public faith at a local and congregational level. The recent experience of politicians making use of religious ideas and values for what they deem to be the public good can turn the gaze towards those whose first vocation was religious but who felt obliged to become, in effect, public theologians. Brian Howe and Frank Brennan are two of examples of those whose appropriate theological autobiographies are clearly public.68 In addition, Doak’s schema does not explore how a public theology engages with the media, on whose terms and with what effect. Hence, not only is evident that there is room for more work to be done; here in Australia it is overdue.