

Stars and Compasses: Hermeneutical Guides for Public Theology

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Abstract

It is the concern of this article that some definitions of public theology allow apartheid and Nazism to be counted as public theology. According to these, Osama Bin Laden could be our greatest, most influential contemporary public theologian. There are lines that must be drawn outside of which we should not go in defining and promoting public theology. To discuss this, I employ the language of ‘necessary and sufficient conditions’. It is necessary to define ‘public’ and ‘theology’. What more needs to be said for sufficient conditions to be met? In considering this, hermeneutical guides are sought—stars and compasses—so that the thinking and practice of public theology meets the sufficient conditions of peace-making, justice-seeking, opting for the afflicted and honouring all.

Keywords

public theology, hermeneutics, necessary and sufficient

Introduction

When Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza published her book, *Bread Not Stone*, in 1984 she was making a significant contribution to the emerging field of feminist theology. Her speciality was biblical hermeneutics. She began with a poem dedicated to feminists, sisters in the struggle and inspiring friends: ‘You have set sail on another ocean/without star or compass/going where the argument leads/shattering the certainties of centuries’.¹ Since then, Fiorenza has devoted her life to developing hermeneutical guides—stars and compasses—for feminist theology and biblical interpretation. Her four-fold hermeneutics of suspicion,

¹ Janet Kalven, as cited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. v.

retrieval, proclamation and creative actualization are still used as guides for feminist biblical scholarship and theology and have indeed shattered the ‘certainties of centuries’.²

Public theology is an emerging field of theological enquiry as a distinct discipline. It too is setting sail on another ocean and needs stars and compasses to navigate its way. This article is an attempt to address the question of the hermeneutical guides needed for public theology. By this I do not mean a strict method. Public theology is necessarily contextual and already contains a great variety of examples. What one names as an example depends, of course, on how ‘public theology’ is defined.

My interest is in discerning guides for the thinking and practice of public theology that will allow variety to occur, but will also demarcate the lines outside of which we should not go; hermeneutics is therefore closely linked with the definition of public theology. My concern is that some definitions of ‘public theology’ are quite ‘light’ in what they mean by ‘public’: the general public domain; what gets into the media; an audience in a public place. When such definitions are combined with a fairly general understanding of theology—as talk about ‘God’ from any faith—then we have a definition of public theology that allows the worst atrocities to be counted as our best examples of public theology. The slave trade, Nazism, the subordination of women and the justification of apartheid were all grounded in theologically based arguments and practices in the public domain.

This problem in defining public theology is identified by Katie Day, in a paper given at the Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT) conference in Princeton in May 2007. She names South Africa as the country that has ‘produced the textbook examples of both the best and worst expressions of public theology’.³ Day favours Breitenberg’s definition of public theology as:

theologically informed public discourse about public issues, addressed to the church, synagogue, mosque, temple or other religious body, as well as the larger public or publics, argued in ways that can be evaluated and judged by publicly available warrants and criteria.⁴

²) *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³) Katie Day, ‘The Construction of Public Theology: An Ethnographic Study of the Relationship Between the Theological Academy and Local Clergy in South Africa’, paper given at the Global Network for Public Theology, Princeton, USA, 2–6 May 2007, p. 1.

⁴) E. H. Breitenberg, ‘To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?’, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 23:2 (2003), 55–96, as cited by Day, ‘The Construction of Public Theology’, p. 2.

It is from this definition that Day is able to consider the ‘nearly seamless’ identification of Afrikaner nationalism with the Dutch Reformed Church, so that dissidents and critics of apartheid could be denounced not only as unpatriotic but unchristian as well. Day draws the conclusion, ‘It can be argued that this was indeed public theology: theology was engaging public issues, using language which was meaningful to both the church and the public to shape and support specific public policies’.⁵

My question is whether this was indeed public theology in a sense that we wish to own and promote. If not, then we need to work on our definition. While we could add to Breitenberg’s definition by stating that the aim and purpose of public theology is to transform the society of which it is a part, we would still be faced with the problem that, in the examples given above, transformation occurred for the worse. Unless we put some tighter controls on our definition of public theology, Osama Bin Laden might well be deemed the most outstanding example of a public theologian this century.

In reconsidering the definition of public theology it would be naïve to think that one definition will express it all, or even that it is possible or worthwhile to aim for this. Yet I believe it is important that those of us engaging in public theology and promoting its thinking and practice are able to name and define it in such a way as to discount Osama Bin Laden as our greatest contemporary example. When terrorists in Iraq behead a hostage, calling out ‘God is great’ while filming it for the media, must we include that theologically motivated act in our definition of public theology? It is theologically informed (to revisit Breitenberg’s definition), and concerns public issues (the Christian west and its interference in Islamic nations); it is addressed to a religious group as well as the larger public; it is an act that comes from an argued position (from broadcasts, recruitment drives, training camps and other teachings); it can be ‘evaluated and judged by publicly available warrants and criteria’.

However, when God and God’s greatness are put together with cold-blooded violence, I am inclined to snatch back the definition of God, as Gutierrez did in his development of liberation theology: ‘And the people will snatch the gospel out of the hands of their dominators, never more to permit it to be utilized for the justification of a situation contrary to the will of God who liberates’.⁶ Given then that no single definition of public theology will satisfy everyone, and will always remain controversial and ambiguous in any particular place, I nevertheless maintain the need for some boundaries outside of which I am not willing to go.

⁵ Day, ‘The Construction of Public Theology’, p. 4.

⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 21.

One approach to thinking through the definition of public theology more carefully and systematically is to consider what is necessary and sufficient for its definition. We need to establish what is necessary in defining ‘public’ and ‘theology’ in the term ‘public theology’, and what it means to put these together in the term ‘public theology’. Likewise, the definition of ‘public theology’ must be sufficient to render oppression, abuse and violence illegitimate.

In attending to the definition of public theology, it becomes apparent just how slippery the terms are. I am reminded of the baby elephants I saw mud-wrestling in Nairobi National Park; each individual elephant was slippery and when they all got together in the mud, it was very hard to work out which limbs belonged to which animal or where the whole mess was headed. In the following section I will consider what is needed for a necessary definition of public theology (what belongs) and finally offer some stars and compasses for the journey ahead (where the whole mess is headed).

Necessary but not Sufficient

Thinking through the problem of the definition of public theology, in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, gives some clarity to the way different definitions can be discussed. Breitenberg’s definition is neither wrong nor false; rather it is lacking some necessary conditions to make it sufficient.

To give a simple example: a square can be defined as having four sides; this is a necessary condition of being a square. However, it is not a sufficient condition. To be a square, a figure needs to have four equal sides and be a closed figure, with each of the interior angles being ninety degrees. These are the further necessary conditions that make the definition of a square sufficient.⁷

Public theology is more complicated of course. While being ‘public’ and being ‘theology’ are necessary to its definition, we need to determine what else must be said of public theology so that we reach a sufficient definition; that is, a definition that discounts violence and oppression.

Dirkie Smit’s article, ‘Notions of the Public and Doing Theology’ is constructive for our purposes.⁸ Having engaged in the thinking and practice of public theology for many years in his context of South Africa, Smit reviews the

⁷ Norman Swartz, ‘The Concepts of Necessary Conditions and Sufficient Conditions’, Department of Philosophy, Simon Fraser University (1997), <<http://www.sfu.ca/philosophy/swartz/conditions1.htm>> [accessed 26 November 2007].

⁸ Dirkie Smit, ‘Notions of the Public and Doing Theology’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:3–4 (2007), 431–54.

different ways in which ‘public’ has been understood in ‘public theology’ and how ‘theology’ has been understood in ‘public theology’, and what it means to put both of these terms together. His purpose is to point out the variety, controversy and ambiguity already in use around these terms, which cannot be avoided. It is in illustrating his point that he offers some examples of what has been put forward as necessary and sufficient to the definition of public theology.

The term ‘public’, for example, has been used in a normative and prescriptive sense (following Habermas) as that domain in which public opinion is formed and maintained, and allowed free expression. It is in contrast to the state and the market economy which are governed by interests and ideologies. ‘Public’ here refers to the kind of public discourse that is free from constraint, and from which our law and morality are derived, as well as concepts of the common good. It is respectful of difference and otherness. This normative view of ‘public’ values our common life, and is ‘consciously driven by a specific vision, namely the agenda of the public sphere and the common good at the heart of democratic life’.⁹

Smit points out the ambiguities in such a view. For example, we speak of the public arena as the space in which the state has a responsibility to guarantee rights and services such as the public service and public works; yet this ‘public’ is not independent of the state. Further, we are suspicious of public relations/public policy that may be smokescreens for state or economic interests; that is, ‘public relations’ are not necessarily in the public’s interest. The term ‘public’, even within normative understandings and its supporting literature, ‘no longer has any unequivocal technical meaning, but is being used in diverse ways and with different functions’.¹⁰

It might seem as if the normative view is necessary to ‘public’ theology because it carries with it values congruent with Christian faith (liberty, respect for difference, common good) as well as values associated with liberation theology (that the point is not merely to understand society, but to change it). John de Gruchy, for example, maintains that:

public theology is not simply about the church making public statements or engaging in social action; it is rather a mode of doing theology that is intended to address matters of public importance... [It] implies public engagement; which can take at least two forms, that of action and that of debate.¹¹

⁹ Ibid., 432–7 and 441.

¹⁰ Ibid., 437.

¹¹ John de Gruchy, ‘Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:1 (2007), 26–41 at 40.

De Gruchy gives priority to theological convictions and commitments that lead to public engagement, the purpose of which is to influence public policy or shape public values.¹² For him, ‘public’ has to include being ‘a form of discourse accessible within the public square’, but that is not in and of itself sufficient for a definition of ‘public theology’.¹³

Robin Gill also holds a view of public theology that is normative in its engagement with public life. For Gill, the purpose of public theology is to influence public policy, in his case through debates about ethical issues in genetic science.¹⁴ In his recent visit to Canberra for a conference with the Public and Contextual Theology (PaCT) Strategic Research Centre, Gill’s definition was challenged; he was asked whether public theology necessarily engages in influencing public policy. The ensuing discussion was not very illuminating. In hindsight it would have been helpful to use the vocabulary of ‘necessary and sufficient’, in which case Gill might have argued that ‘influencing public policy’ is for him necessary in defining public theology, as are speaking in a publicly accessible manner and acting in public forums. Then his definition of public theology as ‘influencing public policy’ would not be a reduction of other necessary conditions to this one only; rather, he would have given his satisfactory necessary and sufficient conditions (although these conditions do not rule out oppression).

As well as the normative view of ‘public’ engagement, Smit addresses two other views, one being a more general notion of our life together beyond the private realms of family and the local community. This includes our broader history, culture, the creation and the human race. It is from this view of ‘public’ as our general social life together that it can be asserted that the church has always been engaged in public theology. Although often purported to be a value-free description of general public life, Smit points out that the interest of the church in public life is ‘never completely value-free but rather broadly motivated by some concern for quality of life, conception of the good... [which] are mixed always with other social and political ideals, values and concerns’.¹⁵

The third way in which ‘public’ is used refers to the audiences to whom public theology is addressed. This is where David Tracy’s three publics fit in

¹² Ibid., 40–41.

¹³ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴ Robin Gill, ‘Public Theology and Genetics’, in W. Storrar and A. Morton, eds, *Public Theology for the 21st Century* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), pp. 253–65 at p. 253.

¹⁵ Smit, ‘Notions of the Public and Doing Theology’, 442.

(church, academy, wider society). These are not meant as discrete and distinct audiences, but rather, when theologians address the wider society they are also working with and from the church, and examining and testing their ideas in the academy.¹⁶

In turning his attention to what ‘theology’ means in ‘public theology’, Smit continues to point out not only the variety of approaches and arguments, but the ambiguities involved. For example, in arguing for public theology on the basis of ecclesiology, that is, in terms of the nature and calling of the church, he notes:

Whether an appeal is made to the ‘Word of God’ or the guidance of the Holy Spirit; the meaning of baptism or the meaning of the Lord’s Supper; the creedal characteristics of the church or any specific doctrine; whether the call is to serve reconciliation or justice or peace or unity all such appeals have been and still remain controversial and disputed, even within the circles of faith and the church itself. There is no way for the church to escape these positions of ambivalence and ambiguity.¹⁷

When these two terms ‘public’ and ‘theology’ are put together, Smit argues that there is no single, normative meaning, or way of doing public theology. Although he sees public theology as congruent with the Christian faith, through which the church is called to be a public witness to the gospel in words and deeds, the way this is played out remains controversial and ambivalent. Further, even where the church is basically in consensus about the need for public theology in a particular place, the historical and contextual interpretations of specific situations still remain controversial and disputed.¹⁸

Smit has rightly problematized ‘public’, ‘theology’ and ‘public theology’. His scholarship and reflection on practice is deep and wide, and it is sobering to read his work. My concern is still, even with all the disputed terms, that there are lines in the sand to be drawn, outside of which we do not wish to go, in defining public theology.

So far I have been considering what is necessary to the definition of ‘public theology’ to make the definition sufficient. In doing this I have been working on the logic of the sum of ‘individually necessary’ parts that would make a definition ‘jointly sufficient’. As with the example given above of the definition

¹⁶) *Ibid.*, 442–3.

¹⁷) *Ibid.*, 452–3.

¹⁸) *Ibid.*, 453–4.

of a square, the definition becomes sufficient when enough necessary conditions are met to make the definition true. Yet, ‘Sometimes it is easier to specify sufficient conditions than necessary ones’.¹⁹ For example, for me to travel from Canberra to Sydney it is sufficient for me to catch a bus. It is not necessary that I catch a bus, as I could drive, fly, cycle or catch a train. So for me to name what would be sufficient for public theology to be concerned with peace and justice rather than violence and abuse, I need to state the conditions, though each may not be necessary on its own. These are known as ‘jointly sufficient but not individually necessary’ conditions.²⁰

Sufficient but not Necessary

Rather than consider this question directly, I am going to work by way of detour through another discipline—teaching—which sheds light on the task at hand. While attending the 2007 GNPT conference, I bought a book from the Princeton Seminary bookshop entitled *Showing How: The Act of Teaching* by Gabriel Moran, Professor and Director of Religious Education, New York University.²¹ This book struck a chord with me as I was thinking about the question of the sufficient conditions for public theology. Since the founding Centres in the Global Network for Public Theology are University Centres which teach public theology, the individual members who are faculty of these Centres are both theologians and teachers. Similarly, there are cross-currents between the underlying conditions for good teaching as formulated by Moran, and the conditions sufficient for public theology. I will pick up on five points in particular.

The Largest Possible Horizon

In attempting to find clarity in the meaning of the act of teaching, Moran steps back from the classroom where such discussions are usually situated, and embeds teaching and learning in human life, itself situated in the non-human world. He asks whether a mountain or a forest can teach us, and he asks whether we can learn anything from the sea. Moran answers these questions in the affirmative. He sees the human/non-human interplay as the most comprehensive

¹⁹⁾ Swartz, ‘The Concepts of Necessary Conditions and Sufficient Conditions’, para. 3 and 5.

²⁰⁾ *Ibid.*

²¹⁾ Gabriel Moran, *Showing How: The Act of Teaching* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 1997).

context for teaching and learning. A mountain climber can indeed learn from the mountain, if he or she is willing to listen and attend.²²

By starting with the largest possible horizon, one can incorporate into public theology some of the conditions that are sufficient for it to be a work towards peace and well-being. This means our starting point is with our relationship to the universe, characterized by wonder and awe, knowing beauty and goodness, as well as respect for natural forces and our fragile place on this planet for which we have been given care and responsibility.

Charles Gerkin also begins with this view. For understanding human life in narrative form, one needs to situate it in the largest possible story, that of our awe and wonder at the created order. He cites the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel who defines awe as ‘a way of being in rapport with the mystery of all reality’; that is:

The meaning of awe is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation or an era. Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.²³

For public theology, it is important to its definition that it is embedded in a profound respect for the world as God’s, and for the responsibility for this world that was entrusted to us. The first ‘public’ is the human race and its interplay with the non-human world, and the first context in which we learn to care for the planet and for each other is through our awareness of awe, wonder and gratitude at being alive.

Integrity

Within this larger horizon, Moran also points out that we learn in ways that other animals learn, by way of imitation, taught by our parents and by immersion in the larger society in which we live. We are ‘shown how’ to live and survive long before we learn a language or reach a classroom. Here Moran is giving due value to the unintentional and non-verbal cues through which we learn.

²²) *Ibid.*, pp. 46–7.

²³) Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1955), p. 74, as cited by Charles Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counselling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), pp. 61–2.

The importance of the unintentional and non-verbal leads us to reconsider the practice of public theology. The way that we go about our work as public theologians already conveys messages. As Moran puts it, ‘We all depend on human teaching every day, people doing things in our presence which inspire us to believe that there is goodness in the world, that one can say yes to living another day’.²⁴ Moran aligns himself with Aristotle in arguing that the best way to learn virtue is not in a classroom, but by growing up in a virtuous community. ‘Teaching by example means first and mainly living with people and showing, by the way one lives, a ‘way of life’.²⁵

Religious traditions have known and passed on this wisdom in their practices for centuries. It is important for public theology that it be embedded in practising religious communities that will cultivate and support its work. This will not necessarily be easy or straightforward, since there may be dissonance between what a public theologian sees as the kind of people that the church should be cultivating, while the church in that same context may see it differently. However, if so much of our message is non-verbal and unintentional, then we need to have some congruence and integrity about the way we live and act in Christian communities, and the hope that we have for our wider public life, its transformation and healing.

In other words, Christian communities, in living out their vision for human life, give glimpses at least to the wider public of what the church understands and believes to be faithful and hopeful living under God’s reign. To embed public theology in ecclesiology is important, as a matter of integrity. ‘You must be the change you wish to see in the world’, states Mahatma Gandhi.²⁶ If public theologians are concerned in public life with transformations towards peace, justice and reconciliation, then they need to be cultivated and supported by peaceful and just communities exercising the ministry of reconciliation. This will never happen in any ultimate way, but being on the journey, and cultivating others in this way of life, is the important thing.

It could be argued that Osama Bin Laden has integrity. There is congruence between his vision of the world and the way he acts, between what he preaches and what he does. So the issue is not integrity *per se*, but the centre around which one’s life is integrated, what ties talk and action, current life and future hope and the cultivation of a way of life all together.

²⁴) Moran, *Showing How*, p. 53.

²⁵) *Ibid.*, p. 54; Moran’s reference to Aristotle is from *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a33.

²⁶) Mahatma Gandhi, *Peace: The Words and Inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi*, Introduction by Archbishop Tutu, pp. 3–5, Ubuntu, (Sydney: Hachette, 2007), p. 37.

In qualifying what I mean by integrity, I am inspired by David Ford as he reflects on Christian liturgies and their contribution to a way of life. Ford sees the eucharist as a site for the cultivating of thankfulness in its participants through its symbolism and non-verbal character as well as through the words used.²⁷ The habit of thankfulness leads to a habit of blessing, and the people are sent out into the world thankfully and with courage. Participation in the eucharist can, over time, work on one's character, as one shares with others in the greeting of peace, the bread of life and the cup of salvation. The centre of our integrity is peace, thankfulness and blessing.

In the Anglican tradition there is a final blessing sometimes used at the end of the eucharist. It is from the baptismal liturgy, interestingly often an occasion when more of the general public are in church. For me, it sums up in words what we are meant to be learning in a non-verbal way through living the Christian life. It describes the kind of attitude towards the world that contributes to the conditions sufficient for public theology:

Go forth into the world in peace;
 be of good courage;
 hold fast that which is good;
 render to no one evil for evil;
 strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak,
 help the afflicted, give honour to all;
 love and serve the Lord,
 rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit,
 and the blessing of God Almighty,
 the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
 be among you and remain with you always.
 Amen²⁸

The habit of thankfulness and of blessing does not entail so much the saying of thanks and giving out blessings; rather, it speaks of a kind of character whose presence is itself a blessing, a real presence, 'full of grace and truth' (NRSV Jn 1:14). This is the non-verbal and often unintentional way in which Christians in general, and public theologians in particular, may have an

²⁷ David Ford, 'What Happens in the Eucharist?', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 48:3 (1995), 359–81.

²⁸ Anglican Church of Australia, *A Prayer Book for Australia* (Alexandria: Broughton Books, 1995), p. 69. Also at <<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/worship/liturgy/commonworship/texts/hc/presed/furtherblessings.html>>.

influence for good in their public life. To live eschatologically and be the change we wish to see in the world, also excludes violence or abuse as a means to an end. While the role of public theologians in relation to the church may at times be critical, calling the church back to its true mission, the church is also constitutive of the kinds of public theologians that it produces, centred on the peace and goodness of God.

Reflexivity

At this point, a question arises for public theology as it does for teaching concerning the difference between a way of life and the overt act of teaching/theology. It could be claimed that the difference is in the intention. I can intend to teach or to engage theologically in public issues. Moran agrees that intention is a factor, and argues that it needs to be understood in context, not merely as an individual subjectively intending to act. By considering context, one becomes aware of one's historical and social location and the effects of these on others. Importantly, Moran's further comments on intention may apply also to theology:

I think that the emphasis on intention is an extraordinary deficiency and naivete in literature on teaching. Everything that follows in this chapter and throughout the book is based on the refusal to accept the naïve equation of teaching with the intention to teach. Literature on teaching goes its way as if Nietzsche, Freud and most twentieth-century thought had not occurred... The conscious intention of anyone cannot be taken at face value.²⁹

He goes on to cite Nietzsche's claim that what belongs to conscious intention is still only the 'surface and skin—which like every skin, betrays something but *conceals* still more'.³⁰

The move from a 'way of life' to public theology does indeed involve conscious intention, but this needs to be examined for its ideologies and the privileges that it may be protecting. This was brought home to me at a national feminist theology conference held in Melbourne in 1993. Some women from New Zealand attended who were attuned to issues of race and class as well as gender. They critiqued an academic from a western country who had visited Latin America and had subsequently published a theological work using

²⁹) Moran, *Showing How*, p. 36.

³⁰) Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 45, as cited by Moran, *Showing How*, p. 36 (author's italics).

stories she had learned there. The outcome was that this woman gained in academic status and personal kudos because of her moving stories of poverty and abuse, but her work did little to make any difference to the original owners of the stories. She was described as having colonized these stories. This was highlighted as being a temptation for many academics from western countries. Her conscious intentions concealed more than they revealed.

‘For whom is this work being done?’ is a worthwhile question to ask of any intentional work, especially when the work deals with people who are suffering, abused or traumatized. Such a reflective practice needs to be built into the work of public theology, but is not in itself sufficient. I could be entirely happy with the answer, ‘I am serving myself’, or ‘my cause’. However, that would reveal to others what I had concealed from myself; my myopic vision and small world, and my self-serving interests that would not pass any test of good Christian theology, spirituality or ethics.

Reflective practices need to be aligned with liberation theology (and many public theologians do this) as a condition of sufficiency for public theology to contribute to the healing of the nations, rather than to being part of the problem of colonization, suffering and oppression.

Prophecy and Therapy

Still working with the analogy of teaching, and not yet in the classroom, it is interesting to see how Moran raises the question of the languages appropriate for teaching. He argues that people arise in communities whose purpose and task is to teach them the way back to their founding visions; show them where they have failed to live by their founding texts; urge and encourage them to move closer to their agreed goals. This is the task of the prophet. Within this, Moran cites storytelling, lecturing and preaching as examples.³¹ He gives attention to Martin Luther King who began with a text that his hearers knew well, the American Constitution:

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir... It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned... I still have a dream.³²

³¹ Moran, *Showing How*, pp. 83–102.

³² Martin Luther King Jr, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), pp. 101–6, as cited by Moran, *Showing How*, p. 101.

The prophet is concerned with what is good and right for the community, and calls it to account according to its founding documents and vision. Micah is a biblical example of a prophet calling the Israelites back to its foundations with a question, ‘What does the Lord require of you?’ (NRSV Mic. 6:8).

The other main forms of language that are appropriate to teaching at the community level, and appropriate for public theology, are the therapeutic languages. The appropriate use of these languages is in communities that are fractured and in need of healing, and for individuals in need of ‘freeing from their egocentric predicament’.³³ Examples include the language of praise for things that are right and good, and condemnation for what destroys these; thankfulness, confession and forgiveness, mourning and comfort. These parallel the kinds of language employed for public theology, and raise the question for further discussion whether there are more languages, or other languages, appropriate for our task.

Description and prescription of the language appropriate to public theology is helpful, especially when it includes both prophecy and therapy; a calling to account and a healing of wounds. In and of itself, prophecy is not sufficient to preclude the dangers we need to avoid, since Osama Bin Laden would probably fit the bill of being a prophet for his cause, but put together with a concern for healing, the danger is somewhat ameliorated. What is also needed is an understanding of the ethics of power in the public role of teachers/theologians.

The Ethics of Power

Eighteenth and nineteenth century assumptions in the classroom were that the teacher exercised power in order to maintain obedience or to enforce dutifully servile behaviour in children. Moran describes as ‘shocking’ the idea that students should be dutifully servile.³⁴

As with many other disciplines, teaching has had to re-think its understanding of the power relations between teacher and pupils in the classroom, whether the pupils are children or adults. For Moran, the moral problem arises when a teacher walks into a room and asks why the pupils are present. Moran argues that a teacher must consider what license s/he has from those present and what form of speech is therefore appropriate in this situation.³⁵

³³) Moran, *Showing How*, p. 112.

³⁴) *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁵) *Ibid.*, p. 83.

This moral question also belongs to the relations developed between public theologians and members of various groups with whom they work considering what it is that they are doing together, and what license they have for doing it; what agreements have been forged and what formal or informal contracts negotiated.³⁶ Unless it is for reasons of safety (such as stopping a child running on to a busy road), a proper use of power is negotiated power. It involves treating others as subjects of their lives, not as objects of my desires and intentions. Abusers do not negotiate with their victims whether or not they would like to be violated. The question of the use of power is becoming a matter of public discourse in Australia and other parts of the world in relation to child sexual abuse by clergy and other church leaders, and the consequent response by the church for child protection, professional standards and mandatory reporting. We can learn much from this discourse about the appropriate use of power; namely, respecting boundaries, codes of good practice and creating safe environments.

Stars and Compasses

From the previous discussion we have found some clues that may help public theology to construct hermeneutical guides along the way, giving us clues to where the whole mess is headed. I recognize that other people may arrive at this point—a theory and practice of public theology that discounts violence and injustice as central to its task and purpose—from different routes; whether we have travelled by bus or plane, the question is whether the transport has been sufficient to get us to the destination.

Hermeneutics as a discipline has a long and complicated history;³⁷ here I am using the term to mean the theory or art of interpretation. Developed in relation to the reading of texts, it has been expanded to include the reader of the texts and the fusion of horizons between text and reader out of which meaning is made. It includes the hermeneutical circle whereby the whole and the parts are read and re-read in relation to each other. Hermeneutical theory has also expanded since Schleiermacher to include people as ‘texts’. As mentioned previously, Charles Gerkin refers to people as ‘living human documents’,

³⁶ See Elaine Graham, ‘Power, Knowledge and Authority in Public Theology’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:1 (2007), 42–62; De Gruchy, ‘Public Theology as Christian Witness’, 37–9.

³⁷ See Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

understood through their relation to the stories of which they are a part.³⁸ The meaning of their lives is understood in relation to others who ‘read’ them (such as a counsellor or friend), and this process can offer possibilities for re-scripting into new stories, and new possibilities for being.³⁹

A particular hermeneutic can be described as a noun, such as the hermeneutics of suspicion. I am heading towards this, but would like to express the hermeneutics in their imperative form, based on the blessing quoted earlier. In this way, public theology is tied closely with church liturgy and with a way of life.

Go Forth into the World in Peace

I maintain that the underlying conditions for a peace-making public theology belong in the broadest possible horizon. The imperative to go forth into the world in peace constitutes Christians as peaceful characters and peace-makers in the world. It does so in a two-fold manner. First, by keeping in mind the larger story of the universe and the full range of human and non-human life on this planet, we are better able to transcend the limited horizons of gang mentalities and tribalism, which work from an ‘us against them’ attitude, often leading to violence. Rather, within a larger horizon, what was conflictual and divisive in one context may be overcome from a greater vision of oneness: one city, one church, one nation, one world. Peace-making is enabled by an alternative vision of, ‘we are all in this together’.

Secondly, going forth into the world in peace is in keeping with our greatest possible theological horizons. From creation to redemption, the determinative biblical trajectory is shalom, peace and wholeness. This trajectory from beginning to end is the whole within and against which we read the parts.⁴⁰ It is good to be reminded that peace was proclaimed at Jesus’ birth, taught in his

³⁸ Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, pp. 61–2.

³⁹ ‘New possibilities for being’ is a reference to Ricoeur’s hermeneutics; Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas University Press, 1976); *Rule of Metaphor*, trans. R. Czerny with K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁴⁰ This idea of peace as a trajectory from the beginning to the end of the Bible, via the Jesus story, which informs the way we read the parts, was given in a paper by David Neville, ‘Faithful, True and . . . Violent?: Christology and Divine Vengeance in the Book of Revelation’, at St Mark’s National Theological Centre, Canberra, 7 November 2007. See also James Haire, ‘Public Theology—a Latin Captivity of the Church: Violence and Public Theology in the Asia-Pacific Context’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:3–4 (2007), 455–70.

beatitudes, offered during his ministry and resurrection appearances and promised as a gift to come. Peace is constitutive of the character, way of life and theology of Christians in the world, well expressed in Christian liturgies.

Hold Fast That Which Is Good

The imperative to hold fast that which is good incorporates the work of prophecy and the language of accountability, of calling people back to their vision when they have gone astray, and condemning and resisting the anti-God forces in the world. It incorporates the blessed rage for justice; however, such outrage remains under the imperatives to go forth in peace and to render to no-one evil for evil.

In defining good public theology, John de Gruchy acknowledges the importance of local congregations as nurturing communities, and the cultivation of a spirituality ‘fed by a longing for justice and wholeness and a resistance to all that thwarts wellbeing’.⁴¹ Such communities and spiritual practices fulfil the conditions sufficient for public theology, giving rise to people who hold fast that which is good.

Help the Afflicted

To give help to the afflicted is the therapeutic role of public theology—compassion for the weak and vulnerable, healing for the wounded, help for those who are suffering. This imperative is also governed by the call to peace and goodness, and therefore cannot settle with charity but must also call for and work towards justice in terms of public policy. Since its work is broader than liberation theology’s ‘preferential option for the poor’, public theology may want to name a ‘preferential option for the afflicted’ as its hermeneutical principle.⁴² Without such a hermeneutical guide, public theology will lose its way.

⁴¹ De Gruchy, ‘Public Theology as Christian Witness’, 40. In this article, de Gruchy outlines ‘seven theses on public theological praxis’ (39–40). Although helpful, his theses are merely listed without any connection or relation between them. The language of necessary and sufficient conditions may give a way of discerning what is necessary to a definition of ‘public theology’ and what belongs to the underlying conditions sufficient for the work of public theology.

⁴² See Rudolph von Sinner, ‘Brazil: From Liberation Theology to a Theology of Citizenship as Public Theology’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:3–4 (2007), 338–63.

Give Honour to All

To give honour to all is to ensure that the people alongside whom we work as public theologians are seen as subjects of their own healing and justice work, not as objects of analysis, charity, public theology or statistics in a problem. Rather, those involved in the issues with which public theologians are engaged are living human documents with their own stories to tell, and with them we find the meaning of the problem and possible solutions.⁴³ This involves a fusion of horizons between the theologian, representing the Christian theological tradition, and the stories brought forward in discussions around a social or political issue. It is to see people as having histories, being parts of multiple stories now and having open futures that we may be able to affect for the better with new possibilities for being.

The hermeneutics of living human documents challenges us to work with others in the public domain in naming the larger story within which the people involved in public issues are being read. In the public domain, it may not be in 'Christian' terms or use much God-language, but, as mentioned earlier, we may be able to ensure that the story is large enough to cultivate a 'we are all in this together' attitude that may help to avoid conflict and violence.

To give honour to all involves the public theologian being familiar with the ethics of power. It is the work of public theology to disclose the misuse of power, not to legitimate or practise it.⁴⁴ A hermeneutics of giving honour to all makes room for asking questions about how power and agency are being exercised in society and in the process of doing public theology.

⁴³ Will Storrar and Andrew Morton testify to Duncan Forrester's commitment in public theology to face-to-face dialogue with the people involved in a particular public issue, in order to facilitate respectful listening (Andrew Morton, 'Duncan Forrester: A Public Theologian', in Storrar and Morton, *Public Theology in the 21st Century*, pp. 25–36 at p. 27 and William Storrar, 'Where the Local and the Global Meet: Duncan Forrester's *Glocal* Public Theology and Scottish Political Context', in Storrar and Morton, *Public Theology in the 21st Century*, pp. 405–430 at p. 411).

⁴⁴ See John de Gruchy, 'Christian Humanism: Reclaiming a Tradition, Affirming an Identity', *Reflections*, 8 (2006), at 59. In making this point, de Gruchy refers to the work of Frits de Lange, 'A Particular Europe, a Universal Faith: The Christian Humanism of Bonhoeffer's Ethics in its Context', in Guy Carter, René van Eyden, Hans-Dirk van Hoogstraten, Jurjen Wiersma, eds, *Bonhoeffer's Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers*, Proceedings of the Fifth International Bonhoeffer Conference, Amsterdam, 1988 (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1991), pp. 81–96.

Conclusion

In this article I have questioned definitions of public theology that allow violence and injustice to be counted as forms of public theology. In doing so I have suggested that one approach to thinking through this question is to employ the language of necessary and sufficient conditions. In public theology, in the question under discussion, normative views are involved. What is sufficient is a public theology that promotes the common good, cares for those who suffer and is involved in justice, peace and reconciliation. The norms for this kind of public theology come in part from the theories that theologians use to define 'public'; from philosophy, ethics, sociology, economics and social psychology. Theology carries its own norms, derived from the Christian tradition, its Scriptures and liturgies or other faith's Scriptures and practices. As a Christian theologian my norms for public theology come from my tradition, and I have suggested that we recover what can be gained in this regard not only from Scriptures and systematic theology but also from liturgical traditions. Liturgies are formative and are more clearly and less ambiguously concerned with peace, justice and well-being in our engagement with the wider world beyond the church.

By looking at the conditions that are sufficient but not necessary, I have attempted to show that certain underlying conditions are needed for public theology to be sufficient but each one of these conditions is not necessary on its own. A person from another denomination or faith tradition could have travelled in their own vehicle to the same destination; it is getting to the destination that is the necessary thing and how we get there is open to a variety of methods. To decide on when and how sufficient conditions have been met is a continual task for good public theology.

I have then offered some stars and compasses to guide us on the way as we set sail on another ocean—go forth in peace, maintain a blessed rage for justice, exercise a preferential option for the afflicted and give honour to all—which, taken together work dynamically, informing and critiquing each other. When these stars and compasses are taken together with 'public' and 'theology', they ensure that the necessary and sufficient conditions for public theology are met.