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Review

African Public Theology:

Sunday Bobai Agang (General Editor), Dion A Forster and H Jurgens Hendriks (Associate Editors), Hippo Books, Bukuru: 2020, ISBN 978-1-78368-766-4, 422pp

Review by Dr Gideon van der Watt (Department of Practical and Missional Theology, University of the Free State, South Africa)

This seminal book on African Public Theology appeared early in 2020, a year disrupted by the Coronavirus pandemic that – together with other crises of economic, political and ecological nature – is severely impacting the African continent. More than ever this exceptional year laid bare the vulnerabilities of African countries and societies. All of this underscores the timely appearance and great importance of this book.

Several renowned theologians of Africa contributed chapters on a wide variety of relevant themes. The chapters on different themes all make a unique, but also correlating contribution to the discourse on a distinct *African Public Theology* on the one hand, as well as a Public Theology in the *African context* on the other hand. The challenges faced by most African countries and societies, and also the trials posed not only to the church in Africa, but also to confessing believers working in all spheres of life, Christians and church leaders and theological institutions, are put on the table and rigorously analysed. The book is linked to and builds on *Agenda 2063: The Africa we want*, a “blueprint” for transforming Africa recently adopted by the African Union.

The book makes a convincing argument for the urgency and necessity of an authentic African Public Theology in the current predicament of Christianity in Africa. Although Africa is saturated with churches and Christians make up the majority in most countries, there is an apparent lack of Christian influence or impact on the prevalence of destructive

issues (irresponsible leadership, conflicts, poverty, corruption, injustice, violence, crime, etc.) resulting in Africa “groaning” under the weight of all these seemingly unresolvable matters. The book therefore focuses on the disconnect between believers’ devotional and their everyday life, between the sacred and the secular world. Public theology calls each believer to take up the threefold task that the church everywhere is called to do: “1) proclaim the word which God has spoken, 2) demonstrate the way of Christ, and 3) work hard for the healing of our nations” (p4).

The book is divided into three sections:

Part one describes the crucial need for Public Theology in Africa. It reflects on a biblical foundation and a definition of Public Theology, a theology reflecting on, in Nico Koopman’s words, “the meaning, significance and implications of Trinitarian faith for public life” (p19). It also focusses on the nature of Public Theology: being biblical, multilingual (contextual), interdisciplinary, providing political direction, prophetic and inter-contextual. Public Theology cannot but remain a deeply Trinitarian theology, and it challenges Christians to deliberately live out their identity as image bearers of the Triune God within their communities.

Part two reflects on Public Theology’s role in and relevance to different spheres of public life. It ranges from citizenship, economy, community development, education, environment, science, health, arts and the media, gender- and intergenerational issues, to land issues, interfaith relations, etc. An important focus is on leadership and the training of a new generation of leaders. Indeed, there is no terrain of public life on which a Christian Public Theology could or should not make some contribution, albeit from its particular, even often peculiar angle. The coming of the kingdom of God has implications for the whole of our present life; it is not just an eschatological expectation for the distant future. And believers, each in their own occupation or field of influence, can and should make a significant contribution.

Part three redirects the focus back to the church in Africa and the role it could play in the transformation of African societies. It contains an overview of the current state of the church in Africa – the church itself is in critical need of transformation before it can play a role in transforming communities, being light and salt in the world.

The book boasts a formidable list of contributors, scholars working in the African context and making a significant contribution to a distinctly African Public Theology. They certainly write with “pathos”, “ethos” and “logos” and challenge us to be deeply concerned about the things in our public life that God is concerned about. The book is compassionate about Africa’s suffering people, but also passionate about the Africa we all want, the type of Africa God would approve of.

The book profoundly challenges churches and individual Christians, and especially also centres of learning in Africa to engage with these issues Africa is struggling with – and then from a different, biblical perspective. Although much research has clearly been done, the content of each chapter is stripped of unnecessary academic baggage and language; it is easily readable and accessible to a wide readership. The book is also especially suitable as handbook for theological training, not only in Africa, but across the world. Each chapter ends with some questions that can be fruitfully discussed and it makes suggestions for further reading. Theological institutions just cannot afford to omit these important subjects, and this particular resource, from their theological curricula.