

Un-Thinking the West?

On African Christianities and the Future of Global Public Theology

Dion A. Forster is Professor of Public Theology and Ethics, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Stellenbosch University.

d.a.forster@vu.nl

In his professorial inaugural lecture at Lund University, Prof Ulrich Schmiedel invited a some colleagues to reflect on the notion of a “global Public Theology”, without falling into the trap of what Marcella Althaus-Reid has called “theme park theology”.¹ Althaus-Reid suggests that some approaches to theology sanitize reality, commodifying and domesticating the radical elements of faith in relation to issues of public concern. By doing so, they opt for a form of escapism from difficult realities. This paper aims to address an important concern among some African Christian theologians – to decolonize and Africanize the (public) theological archive.

Critical Positionality: From Where Do You Speak?

Prof Schmiedel and I have recently undergone changes in our professional lives. He moved to Lund – something that we celebrate today! I have moved to the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In South Africa, however, my work centred on the intersections of faith and public life within the contested space of the ongoing traumas of colonialism and apartheid. There, I encountered critiques from colleagues who viewed Public Theology as a supercessionist project. By that I understand that some felt that Public Theo-

¹ Marcella Maria Althaus-Ried, “Gustavo Gutiérrez Goes to Disneyland: Theme Park Theologies and the Diaspora of the Discourse of the Popular Theologian in Liberation Theology”, *Interpreting Beyond Borders*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, 42.

logical research aimed to replace, or at least displace, important approaches to theology, such as contextual theology, and liberation theologies (such as black theologies, feminist theologies, queer theologies etc.).² They argued that Public Theology was, both methodologically and in content, largely a Western enterprise that had become captured by Western (or West sympathetic) academic interests, aims, and questions. While I don't entirely agree with this critique, it is one that demands serious engagement.

I am an African migrant in Europe where Public Theology is widely embraced. Yet, I find that the definitions and frameworks employed are sometimes thin, and can perpetuate Western privileges and biases, tending to assume universal applicability and value. As a white, professor who can speak Dutch I function within the social, economic, religious, and political elite of Dutch society. I am a privileged insider. Yet, I remain an outsider on the inside. I occasionally encounter the prejudices that other African migrants experience – afro-pessimism, xenophobia, miss-recognition, paternalism, and being regarded as the exotic other.

These important realities, shape my reflections on what has become characterised as an African decolonial Public Theological perspective.³ It invites a critical reflection upon the hegemony of Western epistemologies in theology and seeks to contribute to a more inclusive, critical, and globally conscious theological discourse.⁴

The purpose of this discussion is to present four points. These are, that a “global” Public Theology could expand beyond Western models to include more diverse perspectives, recognize religion's persistence across the world, support decolonial discourses, and amplify African voices in shaping global theological conversations.

The Persistence and Relevance of Religion and Faith in Public Life

Contrary to secularisation theories that predicted the decline of religion in public life, faith remains an enduring and even growing force in many parts of the world, especially in the Global South, but also in late secular and early post-secular Western Europe. Religion's relevance in the public sphere, particularly in Africa, has not diminished but transformed, shaping

2 Tinyiko Maluleke, “Why I Am Not a Public Theologian”, *The Ecumenical Review* 73, no. 2 (April 2021), 297–315, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12602>.

3 Dion A. Forster, “African Public Theology? A Conceptual Engagement to Keep the Conversation Alive”, *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 56, no. 1 (July 22, 2022), 9, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v56i1.2849>.

4 For some discussion on the notion of a ‘glo-cal’ (global and local) Public Theology, please see: Dion A. Forster, “Democracy and Social Justice in Glocal Contexts”, *International Journal of Public Theology* 12, no. 1 (April 23, 2018), 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341530>.

everything from politics to social movements.⁵ The persistence of religion is not only an African phenomenon. Pippa Norris, Ronald Inglehart, and more recently by Hennie Kotze have demonstrated that while secularisation trends are evident in Western Europe, religiosity persists strongly, particularly where existential insecurity continues to drive the need for spiritual meaning and community.⁶

One of the major limitations of some scholarship on religion and secularisation is its overreliance on Western European trends, particularly the decline in church attendance among Protestants and Catholics.⁷ However, this narrow focus fails to account for the reality that in many parts of the world, particularly in Africa, religiosity remains vibrant, and religious movements, such as Pentecostalism and African Independent Churches, are growing rapidly.⁸ As noted, the religious vitality in these contexts is underpinned by socio-economic conditions, where existential insecurities remain.⁹ These trends are also present among African migrants in Europe, who bring their religious practices and beliefs into the secular public spaces of countries like the Netherlands and Sweden.¹⁰

Peter Berger's revision of the secularisation thesis is particularly instructive here. In his later work, Berger argues that rather than fading away, religion has shifted in form, adapting to pluralistic and modern societies.¹¹ The rise of pluralism and globalisation has, in many ways, intensified religious expression, rather than diminishing it.

The comparison between South Africa and Sweden, as explored by Hennie Kotze (2019), provides a striking example of the diversity in global religiosity. In South Africa, 85% of the population identifies as Christian, with high levels of religious participation, while in Sweden, church attendance

5 Dion A Forster, "Public Theology and Africa", *T&T Clark Handbook of Public Theology*, eds. Christoph Hübenal & Christiane Alpers, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 475–80.

6 Pippa Norris & Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 7–9; Hennie Kotze, "Religiosity in South Africa and Sweden: A Comparison", *Freedom of Religion at Stake: Competing Claims among Faith Traditions, States and Persons*, ed. Dion A Forster, Elisabeth Gerle, & Göran Gunner, *Church of Sweden Research Series* 18, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019, 3.

7 Norris & Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*, 3.

8 Kotze, "Religiosity in South Africa and Sweden: A Comparison", 11–13.

9 Dion A. Forster, "Theology in the Public Realm? David Tracy and Contemporary African Religiosity", *Beyond the Analogical Imagination: The Theological and Cultural Vision of David Tracy*, ed. Barnabas Palfrey & Andreas Telser, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, 88–94.

10 Jürgen Habermas, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023, 54–55.

11 Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2014), 51, 68–78.

has plummeted, with only 6% of the population attending services regularly.¹² In Sweden, where existential security is relatively high, the secularisation thesis holds true – people feel less need for religion to provide existential answers. In contrast, South Africa’s high levels of inequality and economic insecurity create fertile ground for the flourishing of religious belief. Yet, even when persons migrate to contexts like Sweden, while they tend to be better off (economically and in terms of security, for example), they still remain at the margins of society – thus facing existential and social challenges of differing kinds. In both cases, as Kotze notes, the context in which religion operates is key to understanding its persistence or decline.¹³

Peter Berger and Wolfram Weisse (2016) offer additional insights into the dynamics of religious pluralism, noting that in pluralistic societies, religion does not disappear but rather adapts and takes on new forms, often becoming a tool for identity formation and social cohesion. This is particularly evident in contexts where religious communities play a central role in providing not only spiritual guidance but also identity retention, and basic social services, such as education, and political formation.¹⁴

Jurgen Habermas also argues that migration is reshaping the religious and political landscape in contemporary Western Europe. Migrant communities, particularly from Africa and the Middle East, are bringing new forms of religiosity into secular public spaces, challenging the assumption that modernity leads to the decline of religion. In countries like Sweden and the Netherlands, the influx of religious migrants is reintroducing faith into public life in ways that complicate the secularisation narrative. Habermas suggests that rather than religiosity diminishing, it is shifting, with migrants and other minority religious groups revitalising religious practices in Europe.¹⁵

In summary, the persistence of religion in public life cannot be understood through a single lens. Global religiosity is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including socio-economic conditions, cultural traditions, and migration patterns. While secularisation may be evident in some parts of the world it is far from a singular, or universal, phenomenon. So, the first point is that Public Theology must move beyond Western-centric models and engage with diverse, global perspectives, especially those from the Global South to understand the presence of religion in public life.

¹² Kotze, “Religiosity in South Africa and Sweden: A Comparison,” 7.

¹³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴ Peter Berger and Wolfram Weisse, “The Moral Limits of Religious Pluralism” (Unpublished project proposal, November 29, 2016), 5.

¹⁵ Habermas, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, 35, 54–55.

Untangling the Complexities: Religion in the Public Sphere

Religion and public life interact in complex ways, with religious beliefs and practices both shaping and being shaped by societal structures and political contexts, influencing moral values and political alignments.¹⁶ Public Theology should provide frameworks to engage with the complex intersections of religion and public life, moving beyond binaries like faith versus secularism to examine diverse cultural and socio-political contexts shaped by broader socio-economic factors. In South Africa, where inequality and economic insecurity remain high, religion plays a critical role in providing existential security, social cohesion, and even political mobilisation. This is evident in the rise of religious movements that engage directly with political issues, such as the prosperity gospel and religious nationalist movements, both of which have gained significant traction in post-apartheid South Africa.¹⁷ Conversely, in Sweden, high levels of existential security, combined with a welfare state that provides for many of the needs traditionally met by religious institutions, have contributed to the decline in formal religious participation. Yet, as noted earlier, the influx of highly religious migrants to Western Europe continues to complicate our understanding of religion in the public sphere.¹⁸

Such notions challenge simplistic secularisation narratives and highlight the importance of studying the specific contexts and the unique ways in which religion and public life intersect. The work of Schmiedel and Ralston (2021) on political theologies and populism offers further insights into the complexities of the relationship between religion and public life. In *The Spirit of Populism*, they examine how religious narratives are often co-opted by populist movements to create an “us versus them” dynamic, where religious identities are used to draw boundaries between the so-called true people and the perceived outsiders.¹⁹ In reality, however, the public sphere should be an open space occupied by diverse sets of ideas and beliefs.

However, to avoid becoming a form of ‘theme park theology’, Public Theology should aim to offer more than just an analysis of various religious beliefs and practices; it must critically engage with the political, social, and economic structures that shape how religion is practiced and understood in public life.²⁰ This requires an interdisciplinary approach, one that draws on

16 Forster, “Theology in the Public Realm? David Tracy and Contemporary African Religiosity”, 87.

17 Forster, “Public Theology and Africa”, 474–75.

18 Kotze, “Religiosity in South Africa and Sweden: A Comparison”, 10.

19 Ulrich Schmiedel & Joshua Ralston, *The Spirit of Populism: Political Theologies in Polarized Times*, Leiden: Brill, 2021, 3.

20 Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, *Liberation Theology for a Democratic Society: Essays in*

the social sciences, and even the natural sciences, and theology to untangle the complex relationships between faith, politics, and public life.

The complexities of religion in the public sphere cannot be reduced to simple binaries or universal models. Whether in South Africa, where religion plays a central role in public life, or in Sweden, where secularism dominates but religious migrants are reshaping the public sphere, the interplay between faith and public life is shaped by unique cultural, socio-political, and economic factors. Public Theologians must engage critically with these contexts, offering nuanced frameworks that can help us understand how religion continues to shape, and be shaped by, public life in an increasingly pluralistic world. So, the second point is that the persistence of religion in public life, particularly in Africa and among African migrants, calls for a more nuanced approach to Public Theology, one that accounts for socio-political and economic conditions that drive religious expression.

The African Public Theologian and the Decolonial Imperative

As an African Public Theologian working in the diaspora, I am increasingly convinced of the need for a decolonial approach to theology – one that challenges the intellectual hegemony of Western scholarship and holds space for other perspectives. The insights of African theologians like Vuyani Vellem and Tinyiko Maluleke, are important. Both have been deeply critical of the project of Public Theology. Maluleke argues that it is precisely people like me (white, male, academics, supposedly in service of Western scholarship) who are responsible for turning Public Theology into a kind of ‘theme park’ theology.²¹

Vellem (2017) emphasizes the need to acknowledge that we are facing an “epistemic break” in contemporary theological reasoning.²² As Ndlovu Gatsheni argues, “[w]hen important new evidence undermines old theories and predictions do not hold, we are pressed to rethink our premises”.²³ Western intellectual frameworks are proving to be incapable of dealing with issues of human and non-human flourishing and justice without remainder to other forms of wisdom and knowledge. Instead, as Vellem argues such frameworks contribute towards greed, polarizations of various forms, the miss-recognition of our shared human (and non-human) existence.²⁴

Public Theology, Münster: LIT Verlag, 2018, 45–61.

21 Maluleke, “Why I Am Not a Public Theologian”, 303.

22 Vuyani S. Vellem, “Un-Thinking the West: The Spirit of Doing Black Theology of Liberation in Decolonial Times”, *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017), 2, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4737>.

23 Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity*, New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2013, 31.

24 Vellem, “Un-Thinking the West”, 8.

He advocates for a theological framework that he terms “un-thinking the west”.²⁵ He argues that his call is constructive, rooted in broader philosophical, ethical, and religious traditions that better address the socio-political realities of the majority world.

Maluleke (2021) adds another dimension to this discourse by critiquing the “supersessionist” tendencies in some approaches to Public Theology, which seem to want to universalize Western frameworks of religion and public life, imposing them on non-Western contexts. He writes, that, global Public Theology should at least become conscious of its imperial ambitions that set it not merely in competition but in opposition with local theologies. It should become conscious of its unspoken or even unconscious desire to efface and trivialize local agency and of its desire to become the one and only representative of all voices, in all places and all times.²⁶

He argues that uncritical ‘global’ Public Theology risks becoming a tool of Western domination, erasing African theological contributions and responses to local challenges – a critique that resonates strongly with my work on decolonizing and Africanizing theology in both African and global contexts.²⁷

Decolonizing theology requires confronting the historical and ongoing theft – of land, of culture, of intellectual agency, and of course of bodies – that has shaped African experience. This is not only a matter of reclaiming African religious traditions but also of developing new theological frameworks that speak to the realities of African societies in the 21st century. Africans who do Public Theology must be actively involved in addressing the socio-political struggles of African people, particularly in the face of global challenges such as globalisation, migration, environmental degradation, and political conflict.

Drawing on these insights, I argue that there are three key tasks that are essential for decolonizing and Africanising Public Theological reflection. First, we must *name and de-center the power of Western hegemony* on academic reasoning and theological research. Vellem has aptly described the way Western epistemologies have functioned as tools of domination, sys-

25 Ibid.

26 Maluleke, “Why I Am Not a Public Theologian”, 303.

27 Forster, “African Public Theology?”; Dion A. Forster, “The ‘Stolen Bible’ and the ‘Stolen Land’? Some Tentative Reflections on the Decolonising of Biblical Studies”, *Facilitating God’s Preferred Future: Faith Formation, Missional Transformation and Theological Education*, eds. Marius J. Nel & Pieter van der Walt, Biblecor: Wellington, 2023, 241–62; Dion A. Forster, “African Realities and Resilient Religion? An Invitation to Africanize the Conversation”, *Resilient Religion, Resilience and Heartbreaking Adversity*, ed. C. A. M. Hermans & Kobus Schoeman, *International Practical Theology* 24, Münster: LIT Verlag, 2022, 83–100.

tematically marginalizing African knowledge systems and ways of being.²⁸ This “epistemicide,” has rendered African theological voices quite invisible in global theological discourses. Second, it is crucial to *create and hold space for inputs and perspectives that have been historically been silenced*. This involves not only amplifying African voices in theological conversations but also challenging the methodological blindness that continues to pervade some Western theological institutions. Public Theology should insist on the legitimacy of African religious experiences and theologies as sources of knowledge that can speak to global issues. As Maluleke (2021) argues, this requires a reimagining of the structures of theological education and research, where African scholars and practitioners have an equal footing and the necessary resources to develop their own frameworks. Third, Africans who do Public Theology must recognize that *African religiosity is having an increasing impact on global theology and public life*, a phenomenon that Catherine Keller refers to as “global entanglement.”²⁹ African Christianity is reshaping not only the continent’s theology but also global Christianity, as African migrants bring their traditions to the West. This global entanglement calls for rethinking boundaries between African and Western theologies. African theologians in the diaspora, including myself, have a responsibility to bridge these worlds, ensuring African theological contributions are recognized for their transformative potential rather than diluted by Western frameworks.

Ultimately, the task of the African who does Public Theology is to engage, and even challenge, the dominance of Western epistemologies and to build new theological frameworks that are rooted in African experiences and practices. So, the third point is that African Public Theology plays a critical role in decolonizing theological discourse by challenging the intellectual hegemony of some Western epistemologies.

The Task of the African Public Theologian in the Diaspora

The task of the African Public Theologian in the diaspora is multifaceted and urgent. As mentioned at the start, we should aim to avoid the dangers of ‘theme park theology’ with its three-fold consequences: sanitizing complexity, commodifying faith, and furthering escapism from reality. For those of us Africans who work in European academic contexts, the task is not only to critically represent broader glo-cal theological perspectives but also to contribute towards the transformation the Western frameworks.

First, as I have argued throughout this presentation, the African Public

²⁸ Vellem, “Un-Thinking the West”, 5.

²⁹ Catherine Keller & Mary-Jane Rubenstein, eds., *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, 1st edition, New York: Fordham University Press, 2017, 3.

Theologian must work to decolonize the field of theology by naming and decentring the power of Western hegemony in academic reasoning and research. In the Netherlands (and possibly also in Sweden), where secularism dominates public discourse and religious participation is notably low, there is a particular need for majority world Public Theologians to push back against the narrative that religion is in retreat. As Habermas has observed, while secularism may characterize much of Europe's public life, migration has brought new forms of religious expression into the public sphere.³⁰ This shift calls for a deeper engagement with the lived experiences of religious migrants and a rethinking of how Public Theology is practiced in late- or post-secular contexts.

Second, African (and other majority world) Public Theologians in the diaspora must actively create and hold space for perspectives that have historically been silenced. This also involves advocating for non-traditional epistemologies as legitimate sources of knowledge. This task is not just about inclusion for its own sake but about the necessity of diversifying theological discourse in order to address the complex, global challenges we face today. Whether it is the challenges of religious populism, migration, or environmental degradation, African theological perspectives, particularly those that emphasize community, resilience, and justice, offer vital resources for responding to these issues in meaningful ways. African Public Theologians have an important role to play in this discourse, bringing a perspective that is rooted in the experiences of communities that have been historically marginalized and oppressed.

Finally, the task of the African Public Theologian in the diaspora is to recognize the increasing global influence of migrant religiosity. As Catherine Keller notes, we are living in an era of "global entanglement,"³¹ where the boundaries between local and global religious practices are becoming increasingly porous. African (and other migrant) Christianities, in particular, are no longer confined to the continent; they are shaping theological discourses around the world, particularly in contexts where African migrants have established new religious communities. This is particularly true in countries like Sweden and the Netherlands, where African migrant communities are becoming African theological repositories with critical engagement in Western contexts.

In conclusion, the task of the African Public Theologian in the diaspora is not just to represent African perspectives in global theological discourse but to actively decolonize that discourse. Finally, this leads to my fourth point,

³⁰ Habermas, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, 54.

³¹ Keller & Rubenstein, *Entangled Worlds*, 3.

that African Public Theologians in the diaspora have the task of amplifying African theological contributions, translating the inputs of diverse voices to shape global theological discourses.

Conclusion

This article argues that far from diminishing, religion is evolving and adapting in ways that call for greater scholarly attention and public engagement. We must push beyond Western-centric models that have dominated Public Theology and hold space for the rich, diverse, and globally impactful voices of African (and other majority world) Christianities. This is not only a matter of justice but of relevance, as majority world religious thought and practices are increasingly shaping theological discourse and public life worldwide.

The decolonial imperative at the heart of African public theology calls us to un-think the West and its dominance in both the academy and the public square. It challenges us to hold polycentric experiences and perspectives, not as peripheral or reactive to the West but as vital contributors to global conversations on faith, justice, and social change. In doing so, we begin to untangle the complexities of religion in the public sphere, offering a more inclusive, grounded, and transformative approach to public theology. ▲