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**“Should we do it in public? :
Public Theology in the Asia-Pacific Region”**

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Abstract

This lecture looks at Public Christian Theology in our Asia-Pacific region. It seeks to investigate two areas. **First**, it looks at public faith as opposed to privatised faith. In much of the Asia-Pacific region Christian faith is a very public matter. However, in certain areas of the region, as for example, in Aotearoa-New Zealand and Australia, Christian faith has become increasingly privatised, even though many migrant-ethnic communities would see faith in a very public manner. So, in this region

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of ours, where and how is Public Theology expressed? Are the assumptions of Public Theology actually only the assumptions of Post-Enlightenment Western Christianity? Does the agenda of much Public Theology actually reflect the situation of Christianity in our region and address the region's public issues, or is it only an attempt to address the internal *Angst* of Western Christianity? If so, how does Public Theology reflect and address the varied situations in our region? What should Public Theology be addressing? Can Public Theology address the divide between East and West? Can Public Theology assist with multicultural differences? **Second**, where Christianity is in a minority situation, what is the contribution of Public Theology to the debates of civil society? How is this minority status borne out in the welfare and educational services which the churches provide? Can Public Theology help with interfaith dialogue? In addition to an overview, this lecture draws on the praxis of theology in various parts of the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in Indonesia and Australia. In Indonesia it looks at the reconciliation process (2001 – 2005) after the violence between Muslims and Christians in the Molucca Islands, where the lecturer was involved in the peace negotiations. In Australia, it looks at the interaction of church and state during 2000 – 2006, during which the lecturer was President of the Uniting Church in Australia (2000 – 2003) and then President of the National Council of Churches in Australia (2003 – 2006).

Introduction

I should, first of all, like to thank the University of Auckland School of Theology and St David's Presbyterian Church, at Khyber Pass here in Auckland for their most kind invitation to me to deliver the annual University School of Theology lecture in Public Theology, and now this

Ferguson Lecture for 2007. I understand that this is the third year in which this lecture has been given, and I could it an honour to give it, after your two distinguished lecturers in the past two years, Professor Peter Matheson and Dr Marion Maddox. In particular, I would like to thank Professor Elaine Wainwright, the Head of the University of Auckland School of Theology, and the Reverend Doug Lendrum, the Minister of St David's Church for their invitation, their kindness and their hospitality. Professor Wainwright was my most distinguished colleague in Brisbane for seventeen years. We were involved together in setting up and developing the School of Theology of Griffith University in Queensland, and in developing the Brisbane College of Theology. Our Research Higher Degree programme in Griffith University and in the Brisbane College of Theology owed a very great deal to Elaine's outstanding scholarship, creativity, hard work, skill and care of her students and colleagues. It has also been my great pleasure to get to know the Reverend Doug Lendrum, since we first met at the Global Network on Public Theology in the University of Edinburgh in 2007. We met again very recently at the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools (ANZATS) / Australian and New Zealand Society for Theological Studies (ANZSTS) / Public and Contextual Theology (PACT) Strategic Research Centre Conference on "Good Neighbours and Faithful Citizens: Theology in the Public Domain" in Canberra.

I am particularly honoured to have been invited to give this lecture in honour of one of Australasia's most distinguished theologians, the Reverend Dr Graeme Ferguson. I served from 1992 to 2000 as Principal of Trinity Theological College in Brisbane. A very great deal of what I put into practice there I learned from Graeme, who beginning before my time as Principal of Trinity had been Principal of the United Theological

College in Sydney. The scholarship, verve and dynamism which Graeme brought to UTC were things for which we in the Uniting Church in Australia have always been most grateful. He literally got the place built. It is a privilege, sir, to deliver this lecture in your honour.

This lecture looks at Public Theology. Public Theology has come to the forefront in the theological consciousness of churches and Christians, particularly in so-called Western societies, in recent years. We now have a Global Network in Public Theology (GNPT), involving over twenty theological institutions in all continents around the world, including the School of Theology here in Auckland, the School of Theology at the University of Otago, and, in Australia, the Public and Contextual Theology Strategic Research Centre (PACT) at Charles Sturt University. This was provisionally set up at a conference held at the University of Edinburgh in 2005, and formally constituted at a second conference held in Princeton in the United States in May of this year. From the middle of next year we in Australasia will have responsibility for hosting its secretariat for three years.

So, what is Public Theology? Why, indeed, has there been this interest in Public Theology? To the first question, “What is Public Theology?”, there have been a variety of answers. The most prominent has been that of David Tracy, of Chicago. His answer has been that Public Theology is a theology which has three audiences, that is, the academy, the church, and society.

However, why the interest in Public Theology? Clearly the church in Western societies has faced the marginalisation and privatisation of faith and theology. Has that brought a reaction of the public presence of

theology? There is, of course, no logical reason why Christianity should not play into the public domain, any more than, for example, the trade unions, employer groups, doctors, legal practitioner, the teaching profession, miners, or any other group of citizens. Moreover, in terms of citizenry, Christians are probably as large a group in Western societies as any.

This lecture looks at public theology in the Asia-Pacific context. Many scholars in Asia and the Pacific, both of Christian faith and of other religions, would argue that in this context all theology is public. So the paper looks at a number of questions.

The **first** issue that the lecture considers is the question of *the privatisation of the Christian faith in Western societies, in particular in Australasia*. This partially relates to marginalisation, and yet is more complex, because of the vast amount of community service provided by the Christian Church and by para-church organisations. Thus, in our societies in Australasia, *there is a de facto community public theology. Or is it a real public theology?* Also, to what extent are the assumptions of public Christian theology actually are the assumptions of post-Enlightenment Western Christian theology? Does the agenda of much public Christian theology, for example, actually address the situation of Christianity in the Asia-Pacific region, or does it in fact only seek to address the internal *Angst* of Western Christianity?

The **second** issue that this lecture considers is *the new situation in which we in Australasia find ourselves in the midst of the Asia – Pacific Region*. We live in a region of strong public religiosity, both Christian and non-Christian. Where Christianity is a minority (albeit, large

minority) faith, what is the contribution of a public Christian theology to the debates of civil society?

The **third** issue that this lecture considers is *a concrete reality of Asia-Pacific society, that is violence*, and how Christian public theology is developed in that context. In this third section, I look at theological methodologies, and then go on to reflect on the dynamics of a New Testament theology in relation to violence. In doing so, I seek to find a method for *engaging theologically with the fact of violence*.

Fourth, and finally, this lecture seeks to answer the question as to what *we can learn from this new agenda in public theology in Australasia*, to help us in the engagement of a public theology in general.

First: Public Theology and its situation in Western Christianity

The first issue that the lecture considers is *the question of the privatisation of the Christian faith in Western societies, in particular in Australasia*. Within the tradition of Western Christianity of course comes the European Enlightenment. Here we see radical changes, but they develop within Western Christianity. Human beings, on the one hand, become more important than God. On the other, however, they become not fundamentally different from animals and plants. Both capitalism and Marxism derive from this Enlightenment vision of human beings as autonomous individuals without any reference to the Divine. It is a radical anthropocentrism. What distinguishes the effects of the Enlightenment is that it is, in its public face or public philosophy, atheist. The Christian faith is questioned, repudiated, or studiously ignored. Revelation, especially communal revelation, now has to prove its claim.

However, the Enlightenment did not deny the Christian faith, or indeed any religion, its place. That place is fundamentally in the private sphere. The Enlightenment relativised the Christian faith's exclusive claims, and thus placed it firmly in the area of the individual's personal rights. It taught that every individual was free to pursue his or her own happiness, irrespective of what others thought or said. This has continued in Western cultures to our times. It means that in Western Christianity individual faith and ethics, and the communal faith and ethics of like-minded individuals, can be nurtured and developed. Individual discipleship, and small communal or monastic groups, can flourish. However, the public face of Christianity is denied or ignored.

In addition, there is the issue of Erastianism (in the senses of both the political and the intellectual ascendancy of the state over the church in theological and ecclesiastical matters) and anti-Erastianism. In Western Christianity there have been both very strong Erastian and very strong anti-Erastian tendencies. These play heavily into the debates of public Christian theology.

Here is the *Angst* of contemporary Western Christianity. It faces a world where it sees what the effects of the European Enlightenment in the public place. What this tends to produce, in its eyes, is that people cannot take others seriously, and indeed do not need others. The *Angst*, then, of Western Christianity is that it follows from this that individuals can no longer take themselves seriously, and that, despite the fact that they now have liberty to believe as they wish, they can easily, following Nietzsche, live their lives in frenzied work and frenzied play so as not to face the fact, that is not to look into the abyss. It thus might seem that public theology is Western Christianity's way of addressing this *Angst*.

However, this privatisation, and consequent perceived marginalisation, of Christian faith is complex, because of the vast amount of community service provided by the Christian Church and by para-church organisations. Thus, in our societies in Australasia, there is a de facto community public theology. The vast amount of community services by the Christian churches in Australia has a double effect for public theology. On the one hand, they provide a security blanket for churches with dwindling attendances, to the effect that the churches have continued relevance in the community. Numbers may be down, but the logos appear everywhere. On the other hand, the churches in fact provide an enormous contribution to the national infrastructure, in terms of primary and secondary education, hospital, domiciliary nursing and other health care, welfare services, and retirement services. In Australia, depending on what is included in the funding of these services, around fifty per cent of the federal and state funding of these services at some point passes through the hands of church or para-church agencies. Clearly this can be public theology. However, the prophetic voice can be muffled in terms of compliance regimes. For example, in nineteenth century Victoria, on a number of occasions the Superintendent Minister of the Melbourne Central Methodist Mission was called to the bar of the Victorian Lower House of Parliament to give an account of the Mission's work. Thus, like Paul on the Areaopagus, he could give an account of the gospel in public life. Today, the Superintendent Minister is not called before the bar of the House. Rather, the managers of the Mission meet with the bureaucrats of the State public service. Moreover, in career terms, both groups can interchange jobs over time. So the prophetic ministry is muffled. In addition to this de facto public theology, there is also the

demand for, and the churches' involvement in, the provision public and professional ethical standards.

Moreover, in Australia, historic iconic figures in public theology have often been perceived as sectarian, and perhaps our perception of them needs to be revisited. John Dunmore Lang was often written off as a Protestant bigot. However, we need to remember that he was an early developer of tertiary education in Sydney, through the establishment of the University of Sydney. Moreover, he was an early pioneer of the Republican movement, and a strong democrat. Again, Archbishop Daniel Mannix was written off as an anti-patriotic Catholic bigot. However, it needs to be remembered that he was loyal to the British crown while President of Maynooth Seminary in Ireland, and developed his anti-conscription sentiments in response to humanitarian concern for soldiers in the midst of the slaughter of World War I. Moreover, Mother Mary Mackillop was viewed as sectarian, and poorly regarded within her own Catholic Church. However, her revolution streak and her concern for the underdog, especially women and children, are central to her life. Finally, John Flynn's delivery of the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the "Mantle of Safety" for the Australian Outback belie his ambivalent relationship with the Aboriginal population. His Christian pragmatism and practicality need to be underlined. Historically, then, iconic figures in Australian Christian history have been written off in sectarian terms. Other, genuine public theology, aspects of their impact, need to be rehabilitated and stressed.

In these ways, then, we see the problematic of public theology in the privatisation of Western Christianity, and the response of de facto

community public theology. However, we see this against the history of iconic figures ambivalently interpreted.

Second: Intercultural nature of Christian theology, including public theology, in the Asia–Pacific Region

The **second** issue that this lecture considers is *the new situation in which we in Australasia find ourselves in the midst of the Asia–Pacific Region*. We live in a region of strong public religiosity, both Christian and non-Christian. Where Christianity is a minority (albeit, large minority) faith in this large region, what is the contribution of a public Christian theology to the debates of civil society?

It is not my intention in this paper to look at the vast literature produced on this issue since the first discussions of the so-called *theologiae in loco* in the late 1960s. Rather, I wish to look at how the insights of almost the past half-century of theological debate in this area can inform the development of public theology, especially in societies as in the Asia-Pacific region where emerging indigenous theologies are significant.²

The authentic gospel or Christ-Event-for-us is not pre-packaged by cultural particularity but is living. The church remains in a constant struggle between the acceptance of the Christ Event within its particular culture in each place, and yet in the wrestling with that which stands against its own particular acceptance in each place. In this sense the church is always both indigenous and *semper reformanda*. In recent

² See HAIRE, J. *The Character and Theological Struggle of the Church in Halmahera, Indonesia, 1941 – 1979 (Studien zur interkulturellen Geschichte des Christentums, Band 26)*. Frankfurt am Main und Bern: Lang, 1981.

times the term *glocal* has been used in this respect. It is perhaps because the Christ Event can never be exclusively identified with one culture or one type of culture that Paul employs the ambiguous term, “ἡ ἀκοή” (*hē akoē – the hearing*), to describe the action by which the Christ Event enters a person’s or a community’s life, that is, the crucial steps of grace and faith.³ Since Käsemann’s pioneering work this, of course, has been seen in the varied theologies in the New Testament.⁴

If the Christ-Event-for-us in each place lives in widely diverse cultures, then for the whole people of God there can only be a true fullness of that event or gospel if there is true inter-confessional, inter-traditional, international, interracial and inter-cultural fellowship; for the church of Christ is a fellowship which transcends space and time. The gospel, especially today, can only be lived in its fullness through sustained and widespread inter-cultural theological reflection and action. For the Christ Event, to which these factors point as in Grünewald’s painting⁵ constantly before Karl Barth, is only truly the same if differently expressed in different cultures.

This now needs to be applied to public theology. It is not enough that indigenous theological reflection, oral and written and otherwise expressed, and related action, should take place in Asia, Africa, the Carribean, the Americas and the Pacific. That this should happen is

³ See, for example, Romans 10: 16 – 17; Galatians 3: 2.

⁴ See KÄSEMANN, E. “Begründet det neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche?”, in *Evangelische Theologie*, München, Vol. XI, 1951/52, 13 – 21 (subsequently published in KÄSEMANN, E. *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, Erster Band, 2nd Edition. Göttingen: Vandenhoech und Ruprecht, 1960); KÄSEMANN, E. “Zum Thema der Nichtobjektivierbarkeit”, in *Evangelische Theologie*, München, Vol. XII, 1952/53, 455 – 366. (subsequently published in KÄSEMANN, E., 1960).

⁵ “The Crucifixion of Christ”, a panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512 – 1515) by Matthias Grünewald.

important, but it does not go far enough. Public theology should not be seen as the appendix to theology, or even more the appendix to dogmatics, church history or practical theology; rather it should be at the heart of theological and dogmatic reflection, as its concerns were in the multi-cultural context of the beginnings of Christianity.

Asia-Pacific Christian theologies, in the main, make little or no distinction between the public and the private. Thus, they are in a situation entirely different, on the whole, from that of post-European Enlightenment Western Christianity. For this lecture, the main difference is in the conception of the public sphere within which these Asia-Pacific theologies are articulated.

In much of Asia public discussion of religion forms the normal pattern of life, quite unlike the marginalised and privatised place of religion in the post-European Enlightenment Western world. Equally, being a Christian, whether a church leader or church member, frequently necessarily involves the person in communal, public and political activity. This involvement has to do with Christian presence, self-propagation and survival in a multi-religious context. Moreover, with migration into Australasia, migrant cultures bring much of Asian and Pacific theologies into Australia and New Zealand.

Indigenous Asia-Pacific Christian theology has, of course, a very long history, as outlined so clearly by Samuel Moffett⁶, and also by Gillman

⁶ MOFFETT, SAMUEL HUGH. *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol 1. San Francisco: Harper, 1992.

and Klimkeit.⁷ However, if we look specifically at the development of self-conscious *theologiae in loco* or contextual theologies in Asia in recent times, that is, since the late 1960s, a number of significant factors occur.

First, there is the communal nature of these theologies. These theologies are not conceived for private purposes, but have the whole community as their audience. This is seen in a number of significant indigenous Asia-Pacific theologies. Let us look, for example, at the Korean concept of *han* as used in *Minjung* theology⁸, at the writings of Kosuke Koyama⁹ and at the work of Choan-Seng (C S) Song.¹⁰ This communality relates both to the Christian community and to the interaction between the Christian, minority community and the wider community in each Asia-Pacific society.

For the *Minjung* theologians this relationship is with the wider Buddhist and Shamanist communities of Korea. The Korean concept of the *minjung* is that of the people who have been put aside and robbed of their subjectivity in history, either by outsiders or by internal oppressors. The word is created from two Chinese characters, “*min*” and “*jung*”, which can together be translated as “the mass of the people”.¹¹ Its emphasis is on the people’s loss of subjectivity. It thus has some similarity to the

⁷ GILLMAN, I. and KLIMKEIT, H. J. *Christians in Asia before 1500*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002.

⁸ See BEVANS, S.B. *Models of Contextual Theology (Faith and Cultures Series)* (revised and expanded edition). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004, 77 – 78.

⁹ BEVANS, 95 – 99.

¹⁰ See, for example, SONG, CHOAN-SENG (C S), *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*. Madras: CLS, 1975; SONG, C S. *Third Eye Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979. See too KOSHY, 219.

¹¹ MOON, C. H. “*Minjung* Theology”, in *Ching Feng* 26 (1983), 48

New Testament concept of “ὄχλος” (*ochlos*). The Korean concept of *han*, so close to the heart of *Minjung* theology, refers to the sense of unresolved resentment against injustice and suffering, a sense of helplessness in the face of overwhelming odds, especially overwhelming violence, and a feeling of being totally abandoned. Again, we think of our Lord’s cry, “Why have you forsaken me?”¹² *Han* also points to a feeling of acute bodily pain, a feeling of helpless suffering, and an urge to right a wrong.¹³ An example is given is the account of Miss Kim Kyong-sook. Miss Kim was an executive committee member of a Korean trade union. On 11 August 1979 she was shot dead during a demonstration organised by two hundred women workers demanding that the Government party (the New Democratic Party) work out a fair solution to their labour dispute. According to the letter which she left for her mother and younger brother (in case she should die during this labour dispute), she recounted that sometimes she was not paid for her work in the factory over the previous eight-year period. She had no opportunity to attend church because of her work on Sunday. Her testament was for a deepening of personal and community piety (church attendance and Bible study) and stronger support for the trade union movement.¹⁴ For the *Minjung* theologian David Kwang-sun Suh¹⁵ this concern is always with the wider Shamanist, Buddhist, Confucian and Neo-Religionist communities of Korea, who respectively represent approximately 25%,

¹² Mark 15: 34 (NRSV).

¹³ SUH, David Kwang-sun. “*Minjung* and Theology in Korea”, in Kim Yong Bok, ed., *Minjung Theology: People as Subjects of History*. Singapore, Christian Conference of Asia, 1981, 27; MOL, D. “*Minjung* Theologie, Zuid Koreaanse Bevrijdingstheologie in een geïndustrialiseerde Samenleving”, in *Wending* (1985), 20 – 21.

¹⁴ SUH, Nam Dong. “Towards a Theology of *Han*”, in Kim Youn Bok, ed., *Minjung Theology*, 54.

¹⁵ See KOSHY, 306.

15%, 13% and 14% of the South Korean population, with Christians representing over 30%.

Equally for Koyama it relates to the wider Japanese community, and to the wider Buddhist community of Thailand ¹⁶, and for Choan-Seng Song it relates to the wider Daoist and Confucian society of both Taiwan and China. ¹⁷ Song uses the concept of the Mask Dance as a means of expressing communal theology in the public space. The dance helps the community, including both Christian and non-Christian, overcome the toil of the day, including the effects of structural violence. However, for Song, its importance is much greater. Song sees the dance in its social, political and theological contexts. ¹⁸ Through the dance, the plight of the poor and the achieving of justice without violence are portrayed. It inspires human resourcefulness in a merciless society. It exhibits the nearness of God to humanity, in God's favour as well as God's disfavour. So the communal mask dance, in the public space, is a political manifesto as well as a prayer for a community in trouble. According to Song, the dance comes from what is called the "experience of critical transcendence". ¹⁹

Second, there is the close inter-relationship of the personal, the political and the public. This is seen clearly, for example, in the work of Johannes Leimena ²⁰ and of T. B. Simatupang ²¹ in Indonesia, particularly

¹⁶ See BEVANS, 96 – 99, 169 – 170.

¹⁷ See, especially, SONG, C S. *Third Eye Theology*.

¹⁸ SONG, Choan Seng. *Theology from the Womb of Asia*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986, 218 – 219.

¹⁹ SONG, Choan Seng. *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 219.

²⁰ LEIMENA, J. "De Ontmoeting der Rassen in de Kerk", in *De Opwekker*, 1941, 626 – 642; LEIMENA, J., "The Task of Restoring Fellowship Within the Church and the Indonesian Nation", *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 9: 3 (1968), 57 – 64. See too VAN KLINKEN, G. *Minorities*,

in relation to the debates of the late 1940s as to whether or not Indonesia should become an Islamic State. Leimena, a Presbyterian from the Moluccas, served as Prime Minister of Indonesia in the 1950s. In the period after the so-called attempted Communist Coup in 1965, Leimena was questioned by officials of the *New Order* (*Orde Baru*) Government of President Suharto concerning the activities of former President Soekarno. He refused to implicate Soekarno as a Communist, insisting that Soekarno had primarily been a nationalist. What is more significant for this lecture is that Leimena insisted that his co-operation with all the independence revolutionaries of whatever background, as a Protestant Christian, had been part of his Christian calling. For Leimena, Soekarno, a nationalist of joint Muslim and Hindu background, had been one of his colleagues, and he refused to join in activity to betray or discredit him. Again, Simatupang, a Lutheran from North Sumatra, served as a General and Chief of Staff in the Indonesian Army during that decade too. In his writings he insists on the living relationship between the faith of Christians, on the one hand, and their thinking and activities in relation to the ongoing revolution in a nation like Indonesia in its striving to bring about a more just society without violence, on the other.²² Again, this close inter-relationship of the personal, the political and the public is seen in the work of Mamen Madathilparampil Thomas, or M M Thomas, in India²³, against the background of debates on the state as secular or as

Modernity and the Emerging Nation: Christians in Indonesia, a biographical approach (*Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Volume 199*). Leiden: KITLV Press, 2003, 122, 137, 189 – 190, 218 – 220.

²¹ See VAN KLINKEN, 97, 123, 147, 169 – 170.

²² SIMATUPANG, T. B. *Tugas Kristen dalam Revolusi* (“The Christian Task in the Revolution”). Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1967; SIMATUPANG, T. B. *Keselamatan Masa Kini* (Salvation Today). Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1973.

²³ THOMAS, M. M. *The Christian Response in the Asia-Pacific Revolution*. London: SCM, 1966. THOMAS, M. M. *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*. London: SCM, 1969. See too KOSHY, N. *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, Volume 1. Hong Kong: World Student

influenced by Hinduism. Thomas, a member of the Mar Syrian Church of Malabar, spent much of his career involved in the issues of Christianity and society, both in India and through the World Council of Churches²⁴, and completed his career as Governor of the Indian State of Mizoram. Unlike the early indigenous Indian theologian Vengal Chakkarai, who was interested in the *bakti-marga*, “the way of devotion”, Thomas was interested in the *karma-marga*, “the way of action”. One of his aims was to contribute to a humanized world community, along with other religious traditions. Especially in his work, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, Thomas demonstrates how Christianity has constantly had responsibility for introducing new elements into Indian society, particularly in facing the three challenging Indian issues of group over individual, of certain individuals over others, and of male over female. The introducing of these new elements have brought about many changes to the core of Indian society, both politically and otherwise, and also to Hinduism itself.²⁵

Thus public theology in the Asia-Pacific region needs to bear in mind the fact that the heavily privatised theology of much of Australasia is set in the midst of the religiosity, and highly public theology of the larger Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, this public Christian theology tends to be non-sectarian and inclusive.

Christian Federation Asia-Pacific Region, Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs, and Christian Conference of Asia, 2004, 32 – 33, 111 – 112, 179 – 180.

²⁴ See, for example, THOMAS, M. M. and ABRECHT, P., eds., *World Conference on Church and Society: Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of our Time*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967, passim.

²⁵ BOYD, R. H. S. *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*. Madras: CLS, 1975, 312.

Third: Public Theology in relation to the issue of Violence, a concrete reality for Public Theology in the Asia-Pacific Region

The **third** issue that this lecture considers is *a concrete reality of Asia-Pacific society, including Australasia, that is violence*, and how Christian public theology is developed in that context. In this third section, I look at theological methodologies, and then go on to reflect on the dynamics of a New Testament theology in relation to violence. In doing so, I seek to find a method for *engaging theologically with the fact of violence*.

In looking at the issue of public theology on this occasion, this lecture takes one of the major realities of the Asia-Pacific context, including Australasia, that is, the reality of *violence*. It thus seeks to do public theology in the praxis of the church in Asia, against a specific, and at times overwhelming, background. This is because the issue of the prevalence of violence in Asia is dominant, and because of the relationship between violence and theological debate.

The contemporary reality of Asia ²⁶ and the Pacific, including Australasia, is one of deep violence. The irony of the ending of the Cold War is that it has coincided with the unleashing of uncontrollable violence, especially in Asia. The combination of high technology and seemingly medieval tribal conflict has become the pattern particularly in the West, which “legitimizes a culture of violence by invoking God arbitrarily to suit a particular agenda for aggression. As a result,

²⁶ I have lectured in Asia now for thirty-five years, including thirteen when I was resident in Indonesia.

insecurity, fear and anxiety characterize the lives of many people”²⁷ throughout Asia.

This culture of violence manifests itself in many different ways. There is the negative impact of economic globalisation, which continues to widen the gap between the haves and the have nots. There is also the structural violence of domineering or negligent governments in relation to their populations. Corruption and the abuse of power often manifest themselves in violence. In addition in the Asia-Pacific region, there are often structural forms of traditional violence, mainly based in patriarchal societies. These result in gender discrimination, forced labour migration, discrimination against young people and those with disabilities, and discrimination based on race, caste, and class. In Australasia there is the major issue of domestic violence. In outback Australia in particular, there is the unprecedented level of male suicide. Surrounding human life itself is the violence against the environment.

Against this rather gloomy picture of the Asia-Pacific region, positive signs must also be noted. There is a yearning among young people for true manifestations of peace and of peaceful communities. In the aftermath of the Tsunami there were remarkable efforts to create communities of peace in various places. Again, the speed of reconciliation after ethnic and communal violence often has been very rapid. Despite violence, there is evidence of a vast amount of resilience among populations who have been deeply wounded.

²⁷ KOBIA, S, quoted in World Council of Churches News Release entitled “Restating the Ecumenical Vision demands Conversion, says Kobia”, Geneva, 15/02/2005. Cf. BURTON, J. *Conflict: Resolution and Provention*. London: Macmillan Press, 1990, 1 – 2; 13 – 24.

Between 2001 and 2005 I took part in the reconciliation process organised by the Government of the Republic of Indonesia for the Molucca Islands, the capital of which was the city of Ambon.

In 2001 and 2002, I visited Halmahera in the North Moluccas, where I had served for thirteen years in the 1970s and 1980s, and saw the results of the Christian – Muslim violence, which had been stimulated by the political situation in Indonesia at that time, and aggravated by elements within the Indonesian military. Events too terrible for words had occurred. Both Muslims and Christians were involved in violence. Let me just give one example. Six of my former students in Indonesia, all ordained ministers, were killed. One of them was the Rev Albert Lahi. He was in the vestry of his parish church when elements of the *Jihad*, aided and abetted by elements of the military, arrived. He knew that his case was hopeless. He asked to be allowed to pray. His wish was granted. He put on his preaching gown and knelt by the communion table. He prayed for his church, for his nation, for his congregation and for those about to kill him. The Sunday school children who observed the whole incident told me what happened. Then he stretched his head forward and was beheaded. His head was carried on a pole around the village. His body was dragged by the feet for all to see. Yet in this same village, and in this whole area, reconciliation has come about. Christians too, were heavily engaged in violence. However, since 2002 both the Muslim and the Christian populations have been slowly but surely slowly working their futures out together, in a quite remarkable display of creating communities of peace. At the end of the peace process a remarkable communal act of reconciliation occurred. A rebuilt central mosque and a rebuilt Christian church were both dedicated. Both had been destroyed in the violence. On the Friday, at the beginning of the dedication of the mosque, Christians on their knees brought the *tifa*

(the equipment used to call Muslims to worship), which they had had made at their own expense, to the Muslim community, as their gift for the new mosque. On the Sunday, at the beginning of the dedication of the church, Muslims, again on their knees brought a large bell, which they had had made at their own expense in the Netherlands, as their gift for the new church. Both promised never to engage in violence again with their neighbours.

Against the situation in which we find ourselves, in which we find incredible violence in our communities, but also the resilience of the human spirit, we need to seek a public theology. That we should do so is important, for two reasons. First, as Christianity represents just over one third of the global population, it has a responsibility for the existence of violence in our contemporary world. Second, despite its strong peace traditions, Christianity has at times been involved in violence in its history. Within this, we need to hear the voice of God because that is central to our identity as Christians.

Doing Theology in the midst of Violence

How do we listen to the voice of God? It is not our task primarily to invoke God for our particular view of the world, but rather, in humility, to sit and listen as that divine voice comes to us.

Therefore, in looking at how we move towards a public theology, let us, in this paper, take up this task theologically, as we must as Christians. Let us first go to the very heart of our existence as Christians, and as the church. The inexplicable will of God to be for, and with, humanity implies that the church's life cannot begin to be understood in terms of

the structures and events of the world. Equally, God's inexplicable will to be God with, and for, humanity implies that we should always understand our life as Christians theologically. These simple, yet profound, facts derive from the mystery of the triune God not to be God apart from, or separate from, humanity, but rather to make God's very life intersect with the unity of the Son of God with us. Our theological basis as Christians and as the church is in the wonder of God's condescension, in the intentionality of God's solidarity with sinners, that is, with those who find their self-identity solely within themselves, and find their self-justification and sole solace in themselves alone, without any reference to God. The church is called to exist solely through the solidarity of Jesus Christ with those who are alienated from God, by Christ going to the extremes of alienation for humanity, so that humanity might through him come close to God. At the heart of our faith is expressed the fact that God does not wish to be alone in celebrating the wonder God's inexpressible love for humanity. God in Christ calls into existence an earthly body of his Son who is its heavenly head, in order that humanity may responsively rejoice with God in the harmony and peace which God has established for creation.

If the being of the church and its life is predicated upon the grace of Jesus Christ as itself defining God's action in the world for the reconciliation of creation, including humanity, then its life of peace is that which it receives from him, who is its life. The church's very existence will be shaped by the manner in which it confesses this truth to be its very life.

Violence and Transformed Communities of Peace in the New Testament

On the basis of our theological identity in Christ, we take the New Testament writings, on Christian community especially, most seriously. Like our struggle to be faithful disciples of Christ to-day in a world of violence, Christianity was born in a milieu of political and social violence. The evidence which we have both from the New Testament and from non-Christian sources of the First Century C E point to the constant struggle of Christianity to survive in such a climate. Clearly that climate of violence also influenced the language and concept-construction of many parts of the New Testament. Nevertheless, it is also very striking how early Christianity sought to transcend this violent world.

A microcosm of the New Testament understanding of building communities of peace for all can be seen in the ethical sections of Paul's writings, especially in those ethical sections in his *Letter to the Romans*, frequently used in Asia-Pacific contexts.

It is arguable that no document in Christian history has played a more influential part than Paul's *Letter to the Romans*. One simply has to reflect on the pivotal impact of *Romans* on Augustine and the development of Western Christianity, on Luther and then on Calvin and Cranmer and the political, social, and religious consequences of the Reformation, on Wesley and the emergence of the Evangelical Revival, on Karl Barth and his dominance of Twentieth Century Theology, and on the Second Vatican Council and the Renewal of the Roman Catholic Church. A primary impetus for Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Cranmer, Wesley, Barth, and the Members of Vatican II came from Paul's writings, particularly from *Romans*. This letter is thus central to Christian self-identity and self-understanding. It forms a useful basis for the

exploration of the understanding of Christian community based on identification with God in Christ as it challenges the prevailing Greco-Roman culture of status based on potentially violent concepts through the ethical sections of *Romans*, particularly Chapter 12.

The Milieu of Violence

In order to understand this ideal community, living out its theology in public, we need to understand that it both reacts against, and transforms, Graeco-Roman cultures of the first century C E. We need, first, of course to look at the results of socio-scientific research on first century C E social organisation, on social interaction, and on religious organisations.

First, in the world of Early Christianity, social groupings were based on kinship, ethnic issues, power, and politics. Kinship was the central factor of social organisation. The kinship group was the focus of individual loyalty, and had decisive influence over individual identity and self-awareness. The security of each individual was grounded in the community, sharing as they did common interests, values, and activities. Hence, the most basic unit of social awareness was not the individual. Individual consciousness was subordinate to social consciousness.²⁸

Second, religion, like other social factors, was enmeshed in kinship and politics. Membership of a religious community was not necessarily

²⁸ MALINA, B J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981, 55-66, 60-64; MEEKS, W A. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, 90-91. Cf. THEISSEN, G. *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics and the World of the New Testament*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1992, 272 – 278.

based on religious relationships, but on bonds of kinship that gave structure to religious associations. Membership in religious groups was either involuntary or voluntary. Involuntary members belonged to a religion because, for example, they were born into a particular family. Voluntary membership in early Christianity stood in contrast to family-based religion. In the first century C E the religion of voluntary members resulted in a newly-created kinship group.²⁹ Although it appeared to be similar to, or to look like, any other kinship group, it was in fact a created or fictive kinship grouping. In early Christianity, language of the natural kinship group, for example “household (of faith)”, was used for a created kinship group. Indeed, the struggle of the Christian community as a totality, for example in Rome, can be seen in relationship to these two types. It struggled as to which of these two types it in fact belonged.

Third, there is considerable evidence in the First Century C E within Greco-Roman culture of intense expressions of emotion, through outbursts of anger, aggression, pugnacity, and indeed violence. Moreover, these appear to have been socially acceptable.³⁰

Fourth, in such an atmosphere, concern for honour and shame was significant. This was because honour determined social standing and was essential for social cooperation. Honour was the outward approval

²⁹ THEISSEN, G. *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (edited and translated by John H Schutz). Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982, 27-40. Cf. ESLER, P. F. *The First Christians in their Social Worlds: Social-Scientific approaches to New Testament interpretation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 6 – 12.

³⁰ PEARSON, L. *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece*. Stanford: University Press, 1973, 193; WEDDERBURN, A J M. *The Reason for Romans (Studies of the New Testament and its World)*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988, 81-83. Cf. LOADER, W. R. G. *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids (Michigan) and Cambridge (UK): Eerdmans, 2002, 177.

given to a group or an individual by others whose honour was not in question. The honour of an individual normally was dependent upon the outward approval given to one's group. On the other hand, people became shamed when they transgressed group standards or when they sought a social status to which public approval was not given. Honour was ascribed, for example, by birth into an honourable family, or by it being given or bestowed from honourable persons of power. It was acquired by outdoing others in social interchange. A person's sense of self-worth was therefore established by public reputation related to that person's associations rather than by a judgment of conscience.³¹

Transformed Communities of Peace

Over against these four factors of community life in the Greco-Roman cultures of the first century C E, Paul summons Christians to a new form of religious organisation, a fictive kinship religious community based on identity in Christ in which membership is voluntary, and also to new social roles. These social roles are based on the twin concepts of peace or harmony, and mercy, in a complex of cultures where expressions of violence seem not only to have been common, but also accepted, as has been noted.

To understand the significance of peace or harmony, and the related concept of mercy, in Paul's writings, it is helpful first to look more widely in the New Testament at the Greek words commonly translated *peace* and *mercy*.

³¹ MALINA, op.cit., 27-48.

There are strong communal elements in the New Testament uses of *peace* and of *mercy*. There are also strong elements of God's desire for a world which ultimately is to be under God's rule. These factors we see as we look at the two concepts more closely.

The Greek word “εἰρήνη” (*eirēnē*) means *harmony* and *peace*. The verb “εἰρηνεύω” (*eirēneuō*) signifies *to be at peace* or *to live at peace* or *to keep the peace*. *Eirēnē* is also closely associated with the Hebrew term for *peace* and *harmony*, “שלום” (*shālôm*). In the New Testament, *eirēnē* refers to two distinct states of peace.

First, it means the final salvation and harmony of the whole community, and thus of the whole of each individual person. Zechariah proclaims this expected state of salvation and harmony of the whole community in Luke 1: 76 – 79. The Angels' Song in Luke 2: 14 refers to this salvation and harmony which has come to the earth. This concept is again referred to in Hebrews 13: 20 – 21. It is this idea of peace which Paul himself uses in II Corinthians 5: 16 – 19. There he speaks about Christian believers, being justified by grace in faith, having peace with God through Christ. These believers, Paul says, will be granted salvation. So the concept has a future orientation, referring to the final end of history.

Second, on the basis of its future orientation, *eirēnē* refers to a condition here and now of peace and harmony, guaranteed by what will occur at the end of time. This divinely-willed state in the here and now includes Christians' well-being, and their harmony with God, with one another and with all human beings. This idea appears in Hebrews 12: 14. Paul uses it in Ephesians 4: 1 – 3. So, again, the concept has also a present

orientation. This present orientation refers in the first instance to the state of the whole Christian community, and then to the individual as part of it.

The First Century C E Greek terms for *mercy* are “οἰκτιρμός” (*oiktirmos*) and “ἔλεος” (*eleos*). Both refer to *mercy* and *compassion*, while *oiktirmos* additionally means *pity*. The verbs “ἔλεέω” (*eleeō*) and “ἔλεάω” (*eleaō*) mean *to show kindness* or *to be merciful*. Human mercy, therefore, denotes the divinely intended attitude of Christians towards each other. It signifies sympathy and loving-kindness, which are to be exhibited in relationships, particularly through acts of help to the needy. This we see in Matthew 9: 13, in relation to Jesus’ attitude to eating with outsiders, and in Luke 10: 37, in relation to Jesus defining the neighbour who may be an outsider. The neighbour was the despised outsider who showed mercy to the person on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho who fell among thieves.

Thus, in the definitions of both of these terms as they were used in the New Testament we see sustained communal elements, and also sustained pointers to the ideal of a society which is ultimately to be under God’s rule. An example of this is in *Romans*. In Romans 12: 1 Paul describes Christian life against the background of these terms, using metaphors from the sacrificial cult. This cult spoke of the offering of the central parts of a community’s life to the power of God. For Christians, this is now to suggest that Christians are to give themselves permanently to the rule of God, as this way has been opened for them through God’s self-sacrifice in Christ. The sacrificial cult continues to point to the rule of God throughout the community. It also points to an individual’s relationship with God within the community’s relationship with God.

This is based on Paul's theological argument in Romans 5: 1 and 9 – 10, where he describes how *peace* (*eirēnē*) and *reconciliation* (“καταλλαγή” - *katallagē*) have been given by God to God's community in Christ.

The Dynamics of Transformed Communities

So, if we now return to Paul, and specifically to *Romans*, we can observe how he deals with the four factors of community life in Greco-Roman culture outlined above.

Over against these four factors, Paul summons Christians to new social roles. They are based on mercy, peaceable conduct and reconciliation in a culture where expressions of violence seem to have been normative. The call for transformation now means new expressions of group identity. No longer based on kinship or ethnicity, group identity nevertheless seeks to retain the intense cohesion of former groups. Paul's community members bind themselves together as one body in Christ. This metaphor is poignantly suitable in a society where self-awareness arises from group association rather than from individual worth. The ideals of honourable and shameless conduct are altered in that they are not primarily derived from society outside. Rather, enhanced honour for the community derives from its incorporation into its risen Lord. Patterns of social cooperation are modified as a result. A new communal identity as one body in Christ is thus reinforced.

The social groupings see their identity as coming from beyond themselves. Their self-understanding and their life together are defined by the kindness or mercy of God and by the truthful harmony (or peace) which God gives. The other factors in the transformation include

cohesiveness within the group based on an understanding of God's action from outside. For that reason, attitudes of peaceful harmony are central to the community's identity. Moreover, no other identity marker (ethnicity, gender, class, or status) may be accepted as absolute. Honour derives from the faith-life of the community, originating from beyond. The original groupings are transformed by the new ideal of a central awareness of their relationship with God.

In addition, throughout the ethical sections of *Romans* attitudes to those *outside* the newly created Christian social groupings are to be the same as to those *within* them. There is to be no distinction. All are to be treated in the same way.

We thus see the radical way in which Paul took hold of Greco-Roman categories of group identity, and then applied to them new metaphors, including that of the body of Christ, so as to create in them a totally new identity.

Fourth: Christianity, Religions and Doing Public Theology

Fourth, and finally, this lecture seeks to answer the question as to what *we can learn from this new agenda in public theology in Australasia*, to help us in the engagement of a public theology in general.

A number of things are incumbent upon us.

First, we need to be aware that creating communities of peace from the Pauline tradition means creating attitudes of peace and harmony towards those *outside* which are the same as to those *within* the

faith-community.³² This has major impact in relation to *inter-faith dialogue* throughout the Asia-Pacific region, including Australasia. In particular in this context, the following issues need attention:

1. the importance of *transparency* in relation to the facts of the size of particular communities within a particular community or nation. For example in Australia, there approximately 320,000 Muslims, or 1.7 % of the population, coming from perhaps the broadest range of nations of origin in the world. There is no overwhelming country of origin of Australian Muslims. It may be necessary for religious communities, and government, to educate the public on the statistical facts.
2. the need for each community to define the terms of its theology and ethics *as it sees them*.
3. the need for each community to explain *in the language of the other communities* the bases of its faith and life.
4. the need for *sensitivity* in the styles of inter-religious discourse.
5. the need for public *education* on inter-faith issues. It seems to me that this is primarily the responsibility of faith communities.
6. the need for *joint action in public ethical issues*, despite the fact that these may occur via a variety of theological avenues.

³² See, for example from a Muslim perspective, H. TARMIMI TAHER. *Aspiring for the Middle Path: Religious Harmony in Indonesia*. Jakarta: Center for the Study of Islam and Society (CENSIS), 1997; MUHAMAD ALI. *Teologi Pluralis-Multikultural: Menghargai Kemajemukan Menjalin Kebersamaan*. Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2003; H. M. OASIM MATHAR, ED. *Sejarah, Teologi dan Etika Agama*. Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Interfidei/Dian, 2003.

7. the need for *the guarantee of the integrity of each faith allied with inter-faith tolerance*.

Second, Asia-Pacific public theology, therefore, is not simply a matter of engaging in word and semantic exercises (in, for example, doctrine, ethics and polity). It is as much an expression of faith through liturgy, drama, dance, music, and communal living.

Third, the communal nature of expressing theology in the Asia-Pacific region calls Asia-Pacific Christians in particular to advance, at all opportunities, the eight goals of the Millennium Declaration (MDG) of the United Nations, that is, to

1. eradicate poverty and hunger;
2. achieve universal primary education;
3. promote gender equality and empower women;
4. reduce child mortality;
5. improve maternal health;
6. combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases;
7. ensure environmental sustainability; and
8. develop a global partnership for development ³³.

These are indeed expressions of Asia-Pacific *theologiae in locō*.

Fourth, truth can be communicated without aggression. Therefore, genuine public theological engagement by church leaders and others

³³ See <http://www.un.org/millennium goals/>

needs to be encouraged, and not questioned or subverted, by congregations and other church communities..

We in our time live in a deeply ambivalent age, an age of high technology and of medieval conflict, and an age as strangely confident of the saving powers of the market-place as a previous age was strangely confident of the saving powers of collectivism. Yet both these ages have reflected inbuilt cultures of violence. In this age, Christians are called to follow Paul in speaking of, and living out, the wonder of God's mercy, peaceful harmony and reconciliation with humanity. Christians are thus called to a life of praise, which embraces all of our personal and social life, in all its practical, ethical, religious, political and intellectual aspects. That praise will be both culture-transforming and culture-renewing, over against the self-worship of individuals and nations in our time. For Christians, it is not just *what* we do, but *how* we do *what* we do that is important. The way we express public theology, the way in which we preach, the ways in which we engage in the worship of God, the ways in which we engage in community services, the ways we live need to express this שלום (*shālôm*).

One Saturday afternoon in the city of Belfast, a bank was robbed by a terrorist group. During a car chase, the car in which the terrorists were involved and the police car following were both engaged in an accident. A mother was pushing a pram along the road, holding her toddler in her hand, with her baby in the pram. One of the cars slammed into them, and the two children were killed instantly. The mother's name was Betty Williams, and she had a friend, a social worker named Miréad Corrigan. The two of them, as a result of this appalling accident, formed a group called the Peace People. Subsequently both of them went on to receive

the Nobel Peace Prize. In the recent peace settlement, their work has been recognised.

I was involved on my leave from Indonesia with this group, trying to overcome the violence and build a community of peace in Ireland. Although it was within Christianity, it tragically represented all the elements of inter-faith and ethnic violence. To overcome this, we sought to live out a single community of peace. When a Protestant was killed, Catholic clergymen would carry the person's coffin into the Protestant church for the funeral service. When a Catholic was killed, Protestant clergy would carry that person's coffin into the Catholic Church for the funeral service. One Saturday afternoon we were engaged in the regular marches which became a pattern of those times, walking through Protestant and Catholic areas, so as to show our unity in Christ. I had a friend who had been teaching Scholastic Philosophy at the University in Belfast and had recently become a Bishop. His name was Cahal Daly. He subsequently became Cardinal Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of the Catholic Church in Ireland. He was not a natural hero. He was a small, scholarly, introverted man, a large leprechaun, as he once referred to himself. On that Saturday afternoon we locked arms and walked at the head of a procession through a joint Catholic / Protestant area. Protestant young people were jeering at me because I dared to walk with a friend, now a Catholic bishop. We were at that time both doing a bit of teaching at the university.

A person came charging out of a Catholic church, flailing a great crucifix above her head. The person hit Cahal on the back of the head with it, at the same time questioning whether his parents had been married at the time of his birth. She was able to express this idea with a single word.

Cahal fell to the ground, blood coming from the back of his head. I asked him if he would like to sit in a shop doorway until we sorted things out. He looked at me with steely eyes, which I shall never forget, and he said “James, put your hand into my pocket, get out a handkerchief, wipe the back of my head, clean me up, and up we get and on we go.” He was over seventy at the time.

He said to me, “If at this point we fail, if at this point we do not go on, than all those words that we spout from the pulpit will be shown up for the hypocrisy that they are”. Here was public theology.