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# Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology



Programa de  
**PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO  
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a Global Network for Public Theology

<https://www.pucpr.br/escola-de-educacao-e-humanidades/theology/>

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# Theses to begin with

Public Theology is nothing new – it is biblical and part of the “DNA” of Theology to be public and assume public responsibility. This is intercontextual, “catholic” in a broad sense. The gospel transcends boundaries and the triune God is one.

The public space or public sphere is, in its specific configuration, something very contextual, and in transformation. This is precisely one of the appeals of a public theology today.

Also the specific role of the churches and theology in such specific public space is contextual.

There is an intercontextual articulation between public theologies which is very fruitful and necessary, contemplating post- and decolonial as well as World Christianity perspectives.

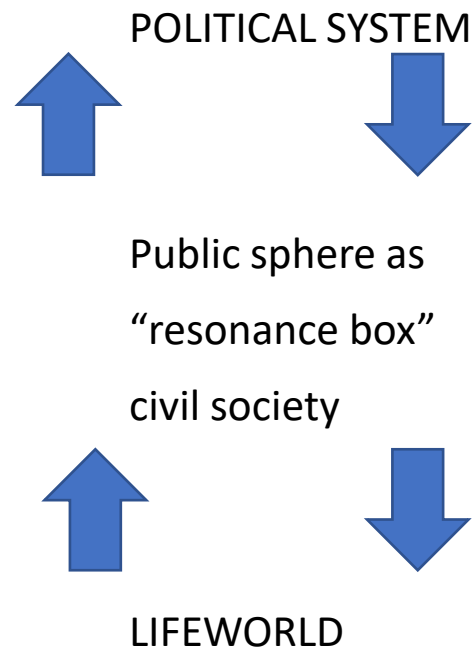
Public or private?  
[a distinction common since Aristotle]

|                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Public</i> (polis)<br>“the street” | <i>Private</i> (oikos)<br>“the house”          |
| belongs to all                        | what belongs to an individual, family, clan... |
| needs to be known to all              | needs to be protected                          |
| demands accountability                | grants freedom                                 |



# Jürgen Habermas

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Heinrich Bedford-Strohm –  
features of a public theology  
taken up by Dion Forster and Min-Seuk Kim

biblical-  
theological profile

bilinguality

interdisciplinarity

competence for  
political  
orientation

prophetic quality

intercontextuality



# Categories – Jacobsen

## UNIVERSALITY – FUNDAMENTATION

- Chicago School: analogy
- Yale School: dialectic

## CONTEXTUALITY – PRACTICE

- South Africa: post-apartheid (after 1994)
- Brazil: post-military regime (after 1985)

JACOBSEN: She claims “a public theology anchored in the lifeworld”, but also affirms, in dialogue with Habermas, that “rational discourse can be emancipating”



# A Public Theology in Brazil (von Sinner)

Seeks to *reflect on the factual presence* and the role of the churches and theology in the public sphere.

Seeks to *analyse the pertinence* of the different forms of religious presence – is there too little, too much? Does it contribute towards the common good?

Seeks to *serve as dialogue partner* with other areas of knowledge, the government and administration, civil society and the churches.

Seeks to practice, like Jesus, *parrhesia* and *kenosis* – boldness and humility.

# Critique

- there is a gender-bias
- there is a race-bias
- it is a universalistic imposition
- naive in seeking harmony rather than resistance – “there is anger”
- attempts to substitute liberation theology

Among the critics are:

Tinyiko Maluleke – weary of “public theology”

Esther McIntosh – doing public theology critically

Rothney Tshaka – in critical dialogue with public theology





# Some tentative answers

- As for all theology, sensitivity towards biases (gender, race, and others) and rigorous self-critique are necessary and call for intentional action (e.g. promote black theology, feminist theology, affirmative action).
- In my view, it is wrong to see public theology as an importation from the North, especially the United States. Even if one of the narratives leads back to Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Marty and David Tracy in the U.S., it is only one of the six named by South African Dirk Smit (see further reading). Public theology in Brazil was to a high degree inspired by South African public theology.
- Public theology, as I tried to show, is developed from within, from and for a specific context. At the same time, it can (and does) benefit from intercontextual exchange and joins under the horizon of one interrelated world and the One Triune God.
- Public theology is different from liberation theology as it seeks more strongly to negotiate constructively in an ever more pluralistic public sphere. However, it must not (and, in my view, does not) leave out resistance where necessary. It does not seek to create a simple harmony. Furthermore, it is heir (but not a substitution!) to liberation theology's central assets of the preferential option for the poor and praxis as a source for theology.

Authors of  
contextual public  
theologies  
interacting  
intercontextually  
(incomplete list)

ARGENTINA/CHILE: Nicolás Panotto

AUSTRALIA: Clive Pearson, Dianne Rayson, James Haire

AUSTRIA: Andreas Telser, Eva Harasta

BRAZIL: Alex Villas Boas, Claudete Beise Ulrich, Jefferson Zeferino, Rudolf von Sinner

CHINA: Kang Phee Seng, Xhibin Zie

GERMANY: Clemens Wustmans, Florian Höhne, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Helga Kuhlmann, Jürgen Moltmann, Thomas Wabel, Torsten Meireis, Wolfgang Huber

NEW ZEALAND: David Tombs, Murray Rae

UNITED KINGDOM: Elaine Graham, Esther McIntosh

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Charles Mathewes, David Tracy, Dirk Smit, Linell Cady, Katie Day, Paul S. Chung, Sebastian Kim, Storm Swain, William Storrar

SOUTH AFRICA: Dion Forster, John De Gruchy, Nico Koopman, Stephan de Beer

SOUTH KOREA: Minseuk Kim

SWITZERLAND: Katrin Kusmierz, Simone Sinn, Sivin Kit, Thomas Schlag

For further  
discussion

What are the main challenges in your specific context today?

What is the place and role of the churches and of theology in your context?

Are the churches in your context being faithful to the gospel and contributing to the common good?

## For further reading

Dirk J. Smit: “The Paradigm of Public Theology – Origins and Development”, in Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Florian Höhne and Tobias Reitmeier, eds., *Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology* (Münster: LIT, 2013), 11-23.

Eneida Jacobsen: “Public and Contextual? An Introductory Approach to the Contextuality of Public Theologies”, in Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Florian Höhne and Tobias Reitmeier, eds., *Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology* (Münster: LIT, 2013), 71-83.

Rudolf von Sinner: “Public Theology in Brazil: Searching for its Voice in Dialogue with the Context and *Glocal* Trends”, in Dion A. Forster, Rudolf von Sinner and Claudete Beise Ulrich, eds., *Public Theology in Brazil and South Africa: A Theological and Political Dialogue* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press 2021, forthcoming).

# For reference

Sunday Bobai Agang, Dion A. Forster and H. Jurgens Hendriks, eds., *African Public Theology* (Bukuru/Carlisle: Hippo Books/ACTS/Langham, 2020).

Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Florian Höhne and Tobias Reitmeier, eds., *Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology* (Münster: LIT, 2013).

James R. Cochrane and Christine Lienemann, eds., *The Church and the Public Sphere in Societies in Transition* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2013).

Dion A. Forster, Rudolf von Sinner, and Claudete Beise Ulrich, eds., *Public Theology in Brazil and South Africa: A Theological and Political Dialogue* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2021 – forthcoming).

Eneida Jacobsen, Rudolf von Sinner and Roberto Zwetsch, eds., *Public Theology in Brazil – Social and Cultural Challenges* (Münster: LIT, 2013).

Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

Rudolf von Sinner, *The Churches and Democracy in Brazil. Towards a Public Theology Focused on Citizenship* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

Rudolf von Sinner, *Public Theology in the Secular State: a Perspective from the Global South* (Münster: LIT, 2021 – forthcoming).

Special issues of the *International Journal of Public Theology*: 5/1 (2011) – South Africa; 6/1 (2012) – Brazil, and again 16/1 (2022) towards the Curitiba Consultation on “Public Theology in Vibrating Cities: Precious and Precarious” (3-6/10/2022)