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Issues in Feminist Public Theology[1]

Abstract

This article aims to open out the debate over what constitutes feminist public theology. While the very nature of public theology is still under discussion, there is a need to ensure that the voice of feminist public theology is included. In a recent issue of the *International Journal of Public Theology* I edited a collection of articles under the heading 'Hearing the Other: Feminist Theology and Ethics'. The issue covered the history of feminist theology, reflections on public theology from a feminist perspective, justice for Latinas, a feminist theological perspective on abortion, new reproductive technologies and Simone Weil's views on the role of religious conviction in social and political life. Each of the authors of these articles viewed their piece as having relevance for public theology, and yet other scholars in the field may need convincing that each is equally relevant. My own work has tended to operate at the conceptual rather than the vocational level – I discuss the traditional concepts of God and sacrifice from a feminist perspective. It is because these concepts act as norms in the practical lives of Christian women that I consider their reassessment to be an essential part of public theology.

Introduction

At the second triennial meeting of the Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT) in Princeton, USA I was asked whether my research fitted under the umbrella of public theology. In the time since that GNPT meeting, the nature of public theology has been a recurring discussion, and, since I work in feminist theology and ethics, I am particularly interested in what constitutes feminist public theology. Before we can agree on this, however, we need to agree on what constitutes public theology.

Defining Public Theology

Public theology is not new; for example, the Centre for Public and Theological Issues at the University of Edinburgh, UK, originally under the direction of Duncan Forrester, has a

[1] A shorter version of this article was delivered at the Global Network for Public Theology, 3rd Triennial Consultation, Charles Sturt University, Canberra/Sydney, Australia (1-5 September 2010).

longstanding history of public theologians engaging with politicians and the wider public on issues such as poverty and justice.[2] However, public theology is receiving recently invigorated attention. In 2002 the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa was established to honour the example of its namesake, who fought against apartheid on Christian principles. Consequently, the Centre seeks to 'assist Christians . . . in the various public spheres of the democratic South African society'.[3] Then, in 2008 the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Research Center for Public Theology, University of Bamberg, Germany was inaugurated.[4] Drawing its focus from Bonhoeffer's social ethics, the Center at Bamberg aims to highlight the public relevance of religion, especially Christian theology, to contemporary debates. While these centres for public theology are springing up in varied locations around the world, this rekindled impetus seems to have come from America and to have its roots in historical theological giants, such as, amongst others, Reinhold Niebuhr.[5]

Increased religious diversity has meant that the place of religion in American public life has been under revitalized scrutiny. Hence, recent American public theology draws heavily on Martin Marty's notion of the '*res publica*' to refer to 'the public order that surrounds and includes people of faith'.[6] In addition, the definition of the term 'public' in public theology has been heavily influenced by David Tracy's suggestion that there are three publics: church, academy and society.[7] The aim of public theology is to unite these three publics, creating a community in which consensus on contemporary issues of public policy

[2] http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/divinity/research/centres/theology-public-issues/about [accessed 6 October 2010].
[3] http://academic.sun.ac.za/tsv/centres/beyers_naude_sentrum/materiaal/bnc_backgroundfinal.htm [accessed 6 October 2010].
[4] http://www.uni-bamberg.de/ev-syst/leistungen/forschung/dietrich_bonhoeffer_research_center_for_public_theology_english_website/ [accessed 22 September 2010].
[5] See, for example, Martin E. Marty, 'Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience', *The Journal of Religion*, 54:4 (1974), 332-359.
[6] Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline-Evangelical-Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 3.
[7] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 3-31.

can be reached without excluding religious voices. However, the manner in which religious opinions are to be communicated across the three publics identified by Tracy, and thereby included in discussion of public policy, is a cause for concern. On the one hand, to enable communication across the three publics, theologians may find it necessary to translate their theological concepts into a language that is largely absent of theological content; on the other hand, non-negotiable religious language (using confessional absolutes) alienates those who do not hold religious beliefs and thus functions as a 'conversation-stopper'.[8] Elsewhere, I argue that non-religious reasons, accessible to citizens of any faith or none, must be given in support of public policy.[9] However, I acknowledge that religious persons have religious reasons and that excluding them from all public debate is unwise, since it is equivalent to pretending that they do not exist. Consequently, I employ the notion of supervenience and argue that, where religious reasons are included in public debate on matters of public policy, religious reasons may supervene on secular reasons, but they should not be used as substitutes for an argument giving non-religious reasons in support of public policy.

If, then, public theology is concerned with uniting a variety of publics for the benefit of the common good, it ought to be concerned with inclusion. That is, the common good cannot be achieved while certain groups within society are excluded or prevented from having a public voice and participating fully in public debate, whether the exclusion is on grounds of sexuality, disability, race or class. Yet, as Rosemary Carbine notes: 'public theologians tend to assume full political participation in public life and its practices of rational civic discourse, and thus do not deal adequately with the possibilities and actualities of exclusion from public life'.[10] We need, therefore, to examine current use of the term

[8] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 168-174.
[9] Esther McIntosh, 'Philosophers, Politicians and Archbishops: Religious Reasons in the Public Sphere', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 2:4 (2008), 465-483.
[10] Rosemary P. Carbine, 'Ekklesial Work: Toward a Feminist Public Theology', Harvard Theological Review, 99:4 (2006), 433-455 at 442.

'public theology' and discover whether issues raised by feminist theology can be included within it.

On the grounds that language is fluid and that, as Wittgenstein in his later work famously argues 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language',[11] I will use six contemporary definitions of public theology. While other definitions could have been used, I have chosen these particular definitions on the grounds that we live in a technological age in which internet search engines are increasingly the first source of information for much of the general public. At the present time, the definitions that follow are the initial results that would be found by someone 'googling' public theology. First, the website for the Evangelical Alliance (a well-known ecumenical movement in the UK) states: 'Public Theology seeks to engage with the social, political and spiritual issues of the day, bringing a coherent Christian perspective to bear upon public policy and cultural discourse'.[12] Secondly, the Centre for Public Theology at the University of Manchester, UK describes its mission as 'Exploring the role of religious faith and faith-based organisations in public life'.[13] Thirdly, Theos, a public theology think tank, launched in November 2006 with the support of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, claims that it 'exists to undertake research and provide commentary on social and political arrangements . . . to impact opinion around issues of faith and belief in society'.[14] Fourthly, the Centre for Public Theology at the University of Western Ontario in Canada states that: 'Public theology in the most general sense is systematic reflection on issues relating to public life, carried out in the light of theological conviction and with the aid of the theological disciplines'.[15] Fifthly, the Centre for Public and Contextual Theology (PACT) at Charles Sturt University, Australia maintains that: 'Public theology is

[11] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), 43.
[12] http://www.eauk.org/publictheology/index.cfm [accessed 19 August 2010].
[13] http://www.arts.manchester.ac.uk/mcpt/ [accessed 19 August 2010]. This centre is in the process of moving to the University of Chester, UK.
[14] http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/mainnav/about-theos.aspx [accessed 19 August 2010].
[15] http://www.publictheology.org/ [accessed 19 August 2010].

concerned with analysis of the public expression of the Christian faith, and the public implications of the Christian faith for the whole of society and the environment'.[16] Finally, the International Journal of Public Theology states: 'Public theology is the result of the growing need for theology to interact with public issues of contemporary society'.[17] From these definitions it seems that there is a general consensus across relatively new centres and organizations working on public theology in Britain, Australia and Canada, while retaining some differences in emphasis. The majority of the definitions cited focus on the relationship between Christianity and public issues, while a couple of the definitions employ a broader understanding of religious faith and its expression in public life.

With these definitions in mind, feminist theology and feminist theological ethics raise particular issues for public theology. For example, the equality of women and the accessibility of reproductive technologies are, on the one hand, contemporary issues in society on which Christianity and other religions have opinions, and, on the other hand, are areas of social interest and development on which religions need to stake their claim if their opinions are to be considered part of the public debate.

Some Issues in Feminist Public Theology

Ecofeminism

[16] http://www.csu.edu.au/faculty/arts/theology/pact/ For a more detailed account of PACT's understanding of public theology see the document produced by its Associate Director, Clive Pearson at http://www.csu.edu.au/faculty/arts/theology/pact/documents/What_is_Public_Theology.pdf [accessed 19 August 2010].
[17] http://www.brill.nl/ijpt [accessed 19 August 2010].

In a recent issue of the *International Journal of Public Theology* I edited a collection of articles under the heading 'Hearing the Other: Feminist Theology and Ethics'.[18] In the issue Rosemary Radford Ruether maps the progress of feminism in theology from the beginnings of women church in the 1960s, through the critique of 'white' feminist theology in the 1980s that led to the development of mujerista, womanist and minjung theologies, eventually opening out to include lesbian perspectives and a greater emphasis on interfaith dialogue.[19] While significant advances have been made, the progress of feminist theology has not been straightforward; it has been met with attempts to dismiss or eradicate it at every stage, and it is still required to defend its status and necessity. During these advancements in feminist theology, Ruether has developed her conviction that the exploitation of women and the destruction of the environment are intertwined.

Women have, historically, been seen as closer to nature (through childbirth especially) and as chattel to be used by men. Links between sexism and the domination of nature still exist, except that we can now see the wider connections between the exploitation of all marginalized groups and the serious environmental crises that have resulted from the exploitation of non-human animals and the natural environment. Ruether insists, therefore, that a public theology concerned with ecological sustainability, peace and justice must reassess its teaching on women. Religion has been instrumental in advocating the domination of women and nature, and this needs critique; however, where religion contains resources within it that support more harmonious relations amongst persons and greater environmental sustainability, these need drawing out.

It is noteworthy that in the definitions of public theology considered above, only the one from PACT mentions the environment. While there are specific environmental concerns

[18] Esther McIntosh, ed., *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4:1 (2010). It should be noted that the journal has published other articles from feminist theologians, but this is the first full issue devoted to feminist theology.
[19] Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Feminist Theology: Where Is It Going?', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4:1 (2010), 5-20.

for Australia and its neighbours, we need to remember that environmental destruction (from growing cash crops and industrial mining) in the developing world disproportionately affects the women hunting for firewood and gathering food.[20]

Women's Voices

Moreover, Heather Walton's contribution to the special issue critically highlights the absence of women's voices and concerns in the field of public theology.[21] In fact, while acknowledging public theology's debt to Duncan Forrester, she draws attention to the gendered model he employs - whereby the public and private spheres are divided along masculine and feminine lines - and the difficulties that both public theology and feminist theology face when speaking of God in public. For Walton, then, public theology can be defined as 'speaking about God in public' and yet, she maintains that much contemporary theology is deluded as to its ability to speak to the social and political culture about God, attempting either to disguise God-talk with secular language or to maintain a radical orthodoxy that believes it can resolve social ills without engaging with the multifaith reality of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, she claims that feminist theology enables a different framework from which to bring religious and political convictions together. Since feminist theology grows out of dissatisfaction with women's position in Christian churches, it has a political rather than a doctrinal agenda at its centre. Furthermore, since the position of women in church and society has not been fully addressed, the doctrinal diversity of feminist theology is a strength when it comes to engaging with the struggle for equality. While the voice of liberation and hope is bound up with the Christian tradition, feminist theology forces

[20] As evidenced by publications from the World Health Organization (WHO), Amnesty International and the Department For International Development (DFID).
[21] Heather Walton, 'You Have To Say You Cannot Speak: Feminist Reflections Upon Public Theology', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4:1 (2010), 21-36.

traditional theology to own and address the elements of its teaching and practice that have proved negative and damaging; such as sexism, homophobia and violence. Feminist theology offers a shift in the mediums through which theological discourse is engaged, which understands the challenge of speaking of God in a meaningful way to a diverse political and social culture.

God-Talk

My own work on the concept of God affirms the stumbling block for female-male equality represented by the male God-language employed in Christianity.[22] We have to acknowledge that God-language is metaphorical; after all, the very notion of God is of a being we cannot fully grasp and cannot, therefore, adequately portray. In theory, therefore, we might be able to refer to God as male and to accept this as an inadequate metaphor. However, as PACT's definition states: 'Public theology is concerned with analysis of the public expression of the Christian faith', and we have to admit that the use of exclusively male language in reference to God allows believers to think of God as male. Furthermore, the perception of God as male (through images such as king, lord and priest), has supported the superiority of males and the subordination of the female. In response to this, some feminist scholars (such as Starhawk and Carol Christ) have favoured the metaphor of 'goddess'.[23] Yet, I find the use of 'goddess' to be similarly inadequate as a tool for serving the female and male persons, since it employs exclusively female language and leaves little with which men can identify, just as male metaphors have been criticized for leaving little with which women can identify.

[22] Esther McIntosh, 'The Possibility of a Gender-Transcendent God: Taking Macmurray Forward', *Feminist Theology*, 15:2 (2007), 236-255.
[23] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess* (New York: HarperCollins, 1979); Carol P. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Alternatively, some institutions, such as the Church of Scotland and the Church of England, have introduced inclusive language liturgies. However, this attempt to redress the male-female imbalance has succeeded only in allowing female language to exist as an alternative or an addition; it has not redressed the male-female imbalance and has, in fact, reinforced gender stereotypes by employing notions of nurturing as female (employing, for example, the biblical image of the hen gathering her chicks).[24] I argue, therefore, for gender-transcendent metaphor to be used when referring to God.

When we accept that all God-language is metaphorical and that metaphors can lose their meaning over time, we should be able to adopt new metaphors that are meaningful for our own time. In seeking such a metaphor, I recognize that the Christian tradition is founded upon the notion of a personal God and that giving up personal metaphors would have a negative impact on the notion of divine-human relations. I consider, therefore, the possibility of referring to the Trinity as parent, child and spirit rather than father, son and spirit, but I am concerned that the parent-child image can encourage infantilism rather than responsibility and cooperation. Alternatively, therefore, in an attempt to retain personal imagery without infantilism, I suggest referring to God as supreme agent, and in Trinitarian terms referring to a community of agents. The metaphor of agency is consistent with the biblical and Christian tradition, expressing the notions of personhood, activity and cooperation without any inherent gender. If, as Walton argues, public theology is about speaking of God in public, then we need a relevant and intelligible metaphor for doing so. My work in this area might not have impacted on public policy, which is emphasized by some definitions of public theology, such as the one above from the Evangelical Alliance. However, the Evangelical Alliance also states that: 'Public Theology seeks to engage with the social, political and spiritual issues of the day'; I would argue that it can only do this if it has an intelligible metaphor for God.

[24] Mt. 23:37; Lk. 13:34.

Sacrifice

At a similarly conceptual level, in an earlier issue of the journal I examine the ways in which the concept of sacrifice is understood and employed in Christianity.[25] My reasons for considering the analysis of this concept to be relevant to public theology are: first, that the concept of sacrifice legitimates the subordination of women and secondly, that the concept of sacrifice undermines the Church's ability to deal adequately with the very real issue of domestic violence. In 2006 the Church of England released its document 'Responding to Domestic Abuse' in which it acknowledges that 'the Church [has] failed . . . to address the processes that lead to domestic abuse . . . [it has] reinforced abuse, failed to challenge abusers and intensified the suffering of survivors'.[26] In addition, the document admits that 'the example of Christ's self-sacrificial giving has . . . encouraged compliant and passive responses by women'.[27] That is, the equation of Christ's love with self-sacrifice has led women to accept suffering out of duty to their religion.

Scholars such as John Macmurray and Peter Harvey, argue that the emphasis on self-sacrifice is a distortion of the Christian message.[28] On the contrary, drawing on the reported sayings of Jesus in the New Testament, they suggest that the primary motifs of Jesus' teaching are friendship and living a full life. Nevertheless, we cannot evade the concept of sacrifice altogether, since Christianity is based on the image of the cross, and yet, women in patriarchal cultures have been inculturated to bear the burden of that symbolism. In my article, therefore, I conclude that, while we do not have to abandon the notion of sacrifice

[25] Esther McIntosh, 'The Concept of Sacrifice: A Reconsideration of the Feminist Critique', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:2 (2007), 210-229.
[26] The Archbishops Council, *Responding to Domestic Abuse: Guidelines for those with Pastoral Responsibilities* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), p. 2.
[27] Ibid., p. 20.
[28] Peter Harvey, *The Morals of Jesus* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991); John Macmurray, *Ye Are My Friends* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1979).

altogether, it does need to be tied to an adequate account of self-love in order to prevent dehumanization and self-denial. We are accustomed to thinking of self-love in negative terms as something akin to the selfish promotion of self-interest. However, since we do not equate love of another person with obsession, it seems that we can separate self-obsession from appropriate self-love. Just as love of another implies respecting and encouraging that person to achieve her or his potential as a person, appropriate self-love implies aiming to achieve one's potential rather than pursuing or accepting self-denial within the parameters of healthy, mutually respectful relationships. Such an account would serve to promote a better understanding of humans as interdependent embodied beings. Again, while my work is theoretical, it is significant for public theology, since it has practical implications for the way in which the Church portrays women's role and responds to domestic abuse.

Marginalization

Furthermore, it is of primary importance that public theology includes the diverse voices of marginalized peoples. In the special issue of the journal on feminist theology and ethics, therefore, the article by Ada María Isasi-Díaz draws on her experience of marginalization as a member of the Latina community in America and proposes a model for a reconciliatory praxis of care.[29] She notes that, while the option for the poor identified in Christianity by liberation theology provides hope, it does not sufficiently hold wealthy nations to account for their exploitation of poorer nations. Isasi-Díaz maintains that future justice requires reconciliation of divided nations, a reconciliation that learns from the past and moves towards future liberation. There is no future apart from one in which indigenous and non-indigenous peoples engage in meaningful dialogue that acknowledges the atrocities of the past and builds

[29] Ada María Isasi-Díaz, 'Justice as Reconciliatory Praxis: A Decolonial *Mujerista* Move', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4:1 (2010), 37-50.

future communities. Her model of reconciliation and dialogue is especially relevant to public theology given the increasing religious and international divisions and marginalization that are bound up with the war in Afghanistan and the impact of war on women's lives.

Abortion

In addition, in the special issue two contributors considered the practical issues of abortion and new reproductive technologies to be of particular relevance to public theology. Tina Beattie critiques both feminist and Catholic perspectives on abortion.[30] Beattie's measured and objective argument is critical of excessively permissive abortion, and acutely aware of the difficulties women face in making decisions about unwanted or problematic pregnancies. In her investigation of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and the Christian Scriptures, Beattie highlights the inconsistent nature with which teaching on issues of life and death is applied, for example, to war and to abortion. In the end, she acknowledges that it is nonsensical to refer to a fertilized egg as a person, and, therefore, that prohibition of abortion based on such a notion does not stand up to scrutiny. Yet, at the same time, Beattie finds that she is unable to grant moral acceptability to third trimester abortions, since, by this stage, the foetus does seem to be a person.

It is clear to me that the issue of abortion is relevant to feminist public theology. It remains a contemporary issue for society and it is an issue on which religious organizations tend to have strong opinions. Public theology needs to be mindful, however, of the women it affects when it expresses a view on such an issue. It needs to be mindful of the feminist critique of sexuality, of the women who are coerced or forced into sexual relations, of women for whom contraception is not available (whether because of religious teaching, culture or

[30] Tina Beattie, 'Catholicism, Choice and Consciousness: A Feminist Theological Perspective on Abortion', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4:1 (2010), 51-75.

economic factors), of poorly educated girls, of women who cannot afford (whether physically, emotionally or economically) to have any more children and of the vast numbers of children born into abuse and/or poverty. Public theology needs to take male responsibility seriously, and, in its stress on respect for life, needs to emphasize the notion of wanted children.

New Reproductive Technologies

Almost at the opposite end of the spectrum from the abortion debate, however, is the equally ambiguous field of reproductive bioethics. In the special issue, Heather Widdows develops the theme of bioethics with her examination of new reproductive technologies (NRTs).[31] Historically the feminist debate on natural reproduction is concerned with whether pregnancy and childbirth empowers or enslaves women, but NRTs serve to confuse this issue. On the one hand, NRTs can be said to empower women enabling them to have children without male partners, to have children later in life and to overcome some aspects of infertility. On the other hand, NRTs may be enslaving women by encouraging women to seek assistance with reproduction, undergoing lengthy and expensive emotional and physical trauma that focuses solely on women's value as bearers of children. While the possibility of seeking assisted reproduction may appear to increase women's choices, it might actually prevent women from ruling out pregnancy; moreover, it may increase the exploitation of poor women who sell their eggs to the infertile rich in order to buy food.

Feminist scholars have been engaging in these debates for a number of years, but theologians have not come to the fore in the discussion of NRTs. Historically, reproduction is upheld in theological tradition, leading to contentious debates over the status of the embryo

[31] Heather Widdows, 'The Janus-Face of New Reproductive Technologies: Escaping the Polarized Debate', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4:1 (2010), 76-99.

(seen in the abortion debate and in discussions over stem-cell research), but neither the status of the pregnant woman nor that of the infertile woman have received proper theological attention. Yet, as Widdows points out, the secular debate over NRTs has focused on individual autonomy rather than the common good. Given that public theology, according to PACT's definition, is concerned with 'the public implications of the Christian faith for the whole of society', there is room here for public theology to offer a useful resource.

Technology and medicine will continue to advance, and this includes the field of reproduction. It would not be wise, therefore, to be silent or retrogressive about its use or its impact. If, as the definition from the Evangelical Alliance states: 'Public Theology seeks to engage with the social, political and spiritual issues of the day', public theology needs to be involved in the debate on the ethical use of NRTs; in particular, feminist public theologians need to safeguard the needs of women alongside that of the common good.

Religion in Society - Simone Weil

In fact, the role of religion in relation to the position of women in social and political life is aptly illustrated by Ann Loades' discussion of Simone Weil's life and work in the special issue of the journal.[32] As Loades suggests, Weil's views on the plight of female prostitutes and their children suggests that, if she were still alive, she would be speaking out against the very real issue of sex-trafficking to which shocking numbers of young women are falling prey today. Similarly, Weil's own experience of the dehumanization meted out through immigration policy would have found her highly critical of Britain's current practice of treating asylum seekers like convicted criminals.

[32] Ann Loades, 'Simone Weil: Resistance and Writing', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4:1 (2010), 100-117.

Nevertheless, Weil made some errors regarding war and the diversity of other nations, but from those errors she learnt the importance of hearing other voices and critiquing government policy. Moreover, she was especially concerned that government should not claim divine sanction to exercise violence; in this respect, she would be dismayed at the sort of political rhetoric espoused by George W. Bush that invokes the name of God as an authority on which to engage in war. Given her experience of world war, Weil was well aware of the suffering sustained as a consequence of religious and political persecution. In addition, as Loades explains, Weil went out of her way to gain insight into the social conditions of low paid workers and the unemployed, while also enduring the degrading conditions of employment as an unskilled female worker. In the end, therefore, Weil is convinced of the importance of a divine supernatural good that cannot be pinned down by any religious or political institution, but that must be the goal of our interactions with other human beings, if we are to strive to avoid dehumanization and instead to work to improve the lot of all persons.

Weil's reluctance to join the status quo and her active involvement in public issues on the grounds of a religious faith that sort to humanize rather than judge, preach or convert is an approach from which public theologians in today's multicultural societies can learn much. Church leaders and politicians need to understand the impact of their pronouncements and policies on the most disadvantaged of their people. In particular, given the patriarchal nature of our societies we need to be aware of the extent to which women are disproportionately affected by supposedly gender neutral policies. For example, during the Pope Benedict XVI's recent tour of Britain he showed little regard for the women that are disadvantaged by his views on ordination and contraception in the UK, let alone those living with extreme poverty and the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa. Likewise, while the current coalition government in Britain cuts public services and benefits it demonstrates scant concern for the much greater

numbers of women than men that will be affected by these cuts. In keeping with the definitions of public theology given above, public theologians need to ensure that they are addressing these contemporary issues in ways that seek the common good and not that of the status quo.

Implications

It seems to me, therefore, that a feminist public theology can legitimately address the issues I have discussed here – ecofeminism, the inclusion of women's voices, gender-transcendent God-language, the concepts of sacrifice and self-love, the experience of marginalization and the path to reconciliation, abortion, NRTs, religious conviction in social and political life. In the definitions we cited, there appeared to be a general consensus that public theology is about the relevance of Christianity to contemporary political and social issues. While Weil does not neatly fit the category of public theologian or feminist, she works with those who are excluded from full participation in public debate, and this is a concern for feminist theology. In particular, while the equality of women and men is an on-going global issue, the Church's own grappling with female ordination and its teaching on marriage and divorce are further areas of significance for a feminist public theology. In this respect, public theology needs to consider the way it treats women and the norms it perpetuates alongside secular political and social opinion; it needs to consider not only what it seeks to contribute to the public debate, but it needs also to consider what the wider debate has to say to the Church. As Carbine states, the task of public theology is 'to create a more just, egalitarian, and participatory public life'.[33]

[33] Carbine, 'Ekklesial Work', 452.

Furthermore, a couple of the definitions with which we began suggested a broader notion of public theology – one that goes beyond the Christian faith to consider other faiths. If we accept this broader notion of public theology, then interfaith dialogue comes to the fore. Such dialogue is only genuine dialogue if all parties are prepared not just to listen but to learn from the other. A particular challenge for a broader feminist public theology, therefore, might mean engaging in, rather than shying away from, the contentious and very political debates over the wearing of the niqab (face veil) or the burqa (head-to-toe garment). Feminists have argued for the right to privacy over their bodies, free from coercion, but the very real issue of domestic violence requires intervention and a reassessment of religious teaching on female submission. We have to remember that personal choices are political; consequently, we have to question the choice of the niqab given the manner in which it conceals women's identity from society, while the burqa both conceals identity and further restricts female interaction in public, making it difficult to eat or breast-feed outside of the home, for example.

Conclusion

Public theology should not mean men doing theology in public; this kind of separation of the public and private is dangerous for women, since it allows submission and the frightening statistics on domestic violence to continue behind closed doors. It is because norms are created in the home that 'the personal is political'. Public theology must engage with that which affects women in private because it is bound up with their voice (or lack of voice) in public. Power in the home and power in the world are interwoven, and we must not pretend that this does not apply to religion including Christianity. It seems, therefore, that public theology ought to be the area where this is taken on board most of all, addressing inequalities in religion and society and acknowledging the interrelation of those inequalities.

Consequently, as Carbine argues, in bridging the diverse publics of church, academy and society, public theology may better serve the common good by seeking solidarity rather than consensus.[34] Hence, feminist public theology employs 'a kind of this-worldly eschatology',[35] aiming for a more equal society through inclusive representation of diverse religious and cultural communities in the public space.

[34] Ibid., 450.
[35] Ibid., 452-453.