

Dimensions of diaconia: the public, political and prophetic

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In this article, I inquire into the concept of diaconia by examining the relationship between its public, prophetic and political dimensions. Firstly, I introduce the main constitutive features of public, political, and prophetic theology and the related controversies within and between them. Secondly, I present the document *A Moment of Truth. A word of faith, hope, and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering* (Kairos Palestine 2009). This document articulates a Christian ecumenical theology that combines critical social analysis with theological reflection on current socio-political issues. I show how it exemplifies how the public, political, and prophetic can be combined and integrated in a textual expression of diaconia. I conclude by arguing that all three approaches need to be critically combined in Christian social work. The tensions between them must be viewed as tensions within diaconia itself. Accordingly, it is a key task for the academic field of diaconia to study and interpret these dimensions.

Keywords: Public theology, political theology, prophetic theology, Kairos Palestine, diaconia,

Introduction

In December 2009, a group of Palestinian Christians issued the document *A Moment of Truth. A word of faith, hope, and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering* (Kairos Palestine).¹ In a manner inspired by documents such as the *The Kairos document: a theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa*² and *The Road to Damascus*,³ *Kairos Palestine* combines social analysis with theological reflection by scrutinising the current socio-political situation in Israel and Palestine. This makes the document highly contextual, as well as politically and theologically controversial.

As *Kairos Palestine* identifies and protests against exploitation and political oppression,⁴ rejects what it sees as false or bad theologies⁵ and points out

1 Kairos Palestine (2009), *A Moment of Truth. A word of faith, hope, and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering*, Kairos Palestine (www.kairospalestine.ps).

2 Kairos South Africa (1986), *The Kairos Document. A theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa*, Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR) and British Council of Churches (BCC).

3 Kairos Latin America (1990), *The Road to Damascus. Kairos and Conversion*, Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR) and Christian Aid.

4 Kairos Palestine: 2009,1

5 Ibid, 2.2.2

practical ways of bringing about social change,⁶ the document can be viewed as a textual expression of diaconia. By *diaconia* I mean a 'Christian witness in response to the needs and challenges of our communities'.⁷ The term thus refers to a number of different forms of social practices, depending on the available resources, contextual challenges and the interpretation of the Christian faith, including narrative or textual expressions of the kind found in *Kairos Palestine*. The corresponding academic field of diaconia deals with systematic, empirical and theoretical analysis, interpretation and reflection on such practices.

The meaning and implications of the concept of *diaconia* are disputed,⁸ and distinctions are sometimes drawn between individual and organised diaconia, as well as congregational, institutional and international diaconia.⁹ In the following I will inquire into the understanding and implications of the concept of diaconia by focusing on the distinctions between public, political and prophetic diaconia. I will also turn to diaconia's neighbouring discipline of Christian theology and the ongoing debate concerning the public, political and prophetic functions of theology in order to address these kinds of Christian witness.¹⁰ I begin by presenting the different theological approaches, then I let *Kairos Palestine* exemplify how the public, political and prophetic can be combined and integrated in a textual expression of diaconia.

Against this background, I argue that *Kairos Palestine* informs the very understanding of Christian social practice and that the distinction between the public, political and public is as relevant to the study of diaconia as it is to theological inquiry. I conclude that the public, political and prophetic elements can and should be combined in Christian social practice as dimensions of the concept of diaconia. The tensions between them must be seen as tensions within diaconia itself, and I consider it an important academic task to examine how they are combined in the practice of diaconia.

6 Ibid, 4.2

7 Medema, R. (2005), *Diakonia: creating harmony, seeking justice and practicing compassion*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1

8 See Collins, J. N. (1990), *Diakonia*, New York, Oxford University Press and Nordstokke, K. (2011), *Liberating Diakonia*, Trondheim, Tapir akademisk forlag.

9 Mette, N. and N. Greinacher (1988), *Diakonia: Church for Others*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark and Nordstokke, K. (2009), *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment*, Geneva, The Lutheran World Federation.

10 See for example O'Donovan, O. (1999), *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Scott, P. and W. T. Cavanaugh 2004. *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, Malden, Mass., Blackwell Publications; Milbank, J. (2009), *The Future of Love: Essays in political theology*, London, SCM Press; Bretherton, L. (2010), *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The conditions and possibilities of faithful witness*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell; Benne, R. (2010), *Good and Bad Ways to Think about Religion and Politics*, Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans and Hovey, C., W. T. Cavanaugh and J. W. Bailey (2012), *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology*, Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans.

Public theology

If theology is viewed as an activity undertaken by members of the Christian congregation that is only relevant within that circle, the concept of public theology might seem like a contradiction in terms. If, on the other hand, theology is viewed as a systematic reflection on the meaning and implications of the Christian faith in contemporary society, the public dimension is an integral part of it. Across a wide range of theological positions, schools and denominations, it is the latter understanding that guides the theological enterprise. This often applies even to those who see theology as closely rooted in, and committed to, the faith and tradition of the Christian church and/or those who draw a clear distinction between the world view and outlook of the Christian faith and the secular foundation and vision of modern societies.¹¹ In other words, the analysis offered by David Tracy in *Analogical Imagination*, in which he distinguishes between three different, though partly overlapping, contexts for theology, seems appropriate. Theology finds its place in relation to the church, society and academia,¹² and the academic and the societal 'publics', in particular, make theology a public undertaking.

Seen in this light, theology is public theology. When understood as a separate discipline, however, public theology has a particular focus on offering public interpretations of the human condition, the natural world or any aspect of social life that is informed by the Christian faith, scripture and tradition. Understood in this way, public theology has a long history in the Christian tradition and can be traced back to the very formative years of the Christian church. Augustine's *The City of God* is an obvious early example.¹³ A much more recent expression of public theology, and at the same time a more comprehensive definition of the field, is given by the Scottish theologian Duncan Forrester. He argues that public theology:

... is theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church, or its proper liberty to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments. Accordingly, public theology often takes "the world's agenda", or parts of it, as its own agenda, and seeks to offer distinctive and constructive insights from the treasury of faith to help in the building of a decent society, the restraint of evil, the curbing of violence, nation-building, and the reconciliation in the public arena, and so forth.¹⁴

11 See for example Milbank, J. (2006), *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Malden, Mass., Blackwell Publ.

12 Tracy, D. (1981), *The Analogical Imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism*, New York, Crossroad.

13 Augustinus, A. (1990), *The Confessions; The City of God; On Christian Doctrine*, Chicago, Encyclopædia Britannica.

14 Forrester, D. B. (2004), 'The Scope of Public Theology', in E. L. Graham (ed.) 2004: *The Future of Christian Social Ethics. Essays on the Work of Ronald H. Preston 1913–2001*, London, Continuum (p. 5–19), 6

Here, Forrester draws on a distinction that is also reflected in Augustine's understanding of the eternal city of God in contrast to the temporal city of man. In Forrester's terms, the basic distinction is between the Church and the city (of man), or more precisely: 'the interests of the Church' and 'the welfare of the city'. Public theology is in a particular way specifically committed to the latter, and will accordingly make 'the world's agenda' its own agenda. The aim is not to support or protect the Church or its doctrines, but rather to assess what is considered external to the Church in light of, and with the help of, theological concepts and insights. Forrester makes this concern quite explicit when he defines public theology as a

theology which is not primarily concerned with individual subjectivity, or with the internal discourse of the Church about doctrine and its clarification ... [and] ... not primarily and directly evangelical theology which addresses the Gospel to the world in the hope of repentance and conversion.¹⁵

This is not to say, however, that the theological nature of public theology is dismissed. On the contrary, Forrester also defines public theology as God-talk. The concern, however, is with making this talk accessible and relevant to a wider audience. In *Truthful Action*, he argues that public theology is:

... talk about God, which claims to point to publicly accessible truth, to contribute to public discussion by witnessing to a truth that is relevant to what is going on in the world and to the pressing issues which are facing people and societies today ... It takes the public square and what goes on there seriously, but it tries to articulate in the public square its convictions about truth and goodness. It offers convictions, challenges and insights derived from the tradition of which it is a steward, rather than seeking to articulate a consensus or reiterate what everyone is saying anyway.

Public theology is thus confessional and evangelical. It has a gospel to share, good news to proclaim. Public theology attends to the Bible and the tradition of faith at the same time as it attempts to discern the sign of the times and understand what is going on in the light of the gospel.¹⁶

In other words, according to Forrester, making the world's agenda its own does not contradict the religious, Christian or indeed theological identity of public theology. On the contrary, the scope of public theology is defined by its ability to combine and integrate its religious, confessional resources with a concern for the current social, economic and political issues, in an attempt to 'discern the sign of the times and understand what is going on in the light of the gospel'.

William Storrar draws on Forrester's conception of public theology, but elaborates in a recent article on the public nature of public theology. He

15 Ibid, 6

16 Forrester, D. B. (2000), *Truthful Action: Explorations in practical theology*, T&T Clark, 127–128

maintains that a ‘truly public theology is to be found operating in the public sphere’,¹⁷ but argues that this sphere cannot be taken for granted. For this reason, ‘[p]ublic theology should help to create a more inclusive public sphere in which the public anger of the silenced and excluded voices of the oppressed and marginalised can be heard and addressed by policymakers and practitioners’.¹⁸ Storrar’s emphasis on ‘the oppressed and marginalised’ indicates a diaconal, social concern in public theology that is closely linked to the inclusive nature of the public sphere in which theology takes place.

This understanding of public theology relies on the concept of the public sphere and of public discourse as described and envisioned by Jürgen Habermas.¹⁹ Habermas sees the public sphere as a realm of communication governed by norms that enable and encourage open, egalitarian and rational discussions. Storrar draws not only on Habermas, however, but also on authors such as Iris Marion Young and Denise Ackermann, who in different ways point to the effects of power on the public sphere. Young sees the public sphere as an arena that connects people and power and ‘a site of inclusive diversity where people can express their views in a variety of modes of expression and from a diversity of backgrounds and interests’.²⁰ Ackermann supplements this analysis by arguing for the need to create such an inclusive public sphere, and Storrar therefore argues that:

... it is the continuing pastoral task of public theology in the public sphere: through story and lament, through critical social analysis and theological reflection, giving constructive and healing expression to the public anger of the many different silenced and excluded voices of the oppressed or the marginalised.²¹

Accordingly, it is part of ‘the responsibility of public theology ... to help to create and sustain such public forums, as well as to participate in them’.²² Because public theology relies on a public sphere where one can freely communicate, discuss and argue, and given that this kind of freedom is not always the reality, it is a challenge for public theology to protect and promote the public sphere. Maintaining and upholding this space as an inclusive arena is of paramount importance to this way of thinking about, and practising, public theology.

Against this background, public theology can be seen as a systematic reflection on the meaning and interpretation of the Christian faith that ad-

17 Storrar, W. F. (2011), ‘The Naming of Parts: Doing Public Theology in a Global Era’, in *International Journal of Public Theology*, Vol. 5. No. 1, 27

18 *Ibid*, 23

19 Habermas, J. (1989), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, Cambridge, Polity.

20 Storrar: 2011, 30

21 *Ibid*, 31

22 *Ibid*, 34–35

dresses and communicates the meaning and public relevance of this faith in a given social context. This also makes public theology a contextual enterprise, and, by implication, there is in fact not one kind of public theology, but several public theologies. Furthermore, public theology has ‘a bias for inclusivity’²³ and seeks to accommodate broad and empowered participation in the process of communication that constitutes the public sphere. This makes the public theology a ‘theology of witness’²⁴, bringing the perspective of the oppressed and marginalised, as well as the perspectives of Christian believers, into the public discourse. In this sense, public theology has an emancipatory commitment to empowerment and participation, and a distinct diaconal character.

Political theology

Public and political theologies are closely connected and the terms are often used interchangeably.²⁵ However, I find reason to distinguish between them because I regard political theology as a more specified concept and field of study that explores and examines the meaning, use and function of theological concepts, ideas and metaphors in political discourse, in particular. This means that I distinguish between the public sphere and the domain of political decision-making. As Robert Kelly points out:

In the modern public sphere the discussion and the decisions are separate from one another. The discussion is in this sense “outside” politics in that it is the informed public, not the politicians, who carries on the discussion. The politicians’ task is to listen to the discussion and come to a decision based on what emerges in their refracting of the public discussion. Debate about and critique of the politicians’ decision then take place in the public sphere. Thus the public sphere, while in this sense is “extra-political,” is also the supervisor of and check on political power.²⁶

Against this background, and in line with the journal *Political Theology*, I regard political theology as a field of study that ‘investigates and examines religious and political issues’ in order ‘to deconstruct specific instances of political activity, reflect upon the mechanisms of power in civil life, analyse

23 Atherton, J. (2004), ‘Marginalisation, Manchester and the Scope of Public Theology’, in E. L. Graham (ed.) 2004: *The Future of Christian Social Ethics. Essays on the Work of Ronald H. Preston 1913–2001*, London, Continuum, 29

24 De Gruchy, J. W. (2004), ‘From Political to Public Theologies: The Role of Theology in Public Life in South Africa’, in W. F. Storrar and A. R. Morton (ed.) 2004: *Public Theology for the 21st Century. Essays in honour of Duncan B. Forrester*, London, T&T Clark, 46

25 See Kirwan, M. (2009), *Political Theology. An introduction*, Minneapolis, Mn., Fortress Press and Phillips, E. 2012. *Political Theology. A Guide for the Perplexed*, London, T&T Clark.

26 Kelly, R. A. (2011), ‘Public Theology and the Modern Social Imaginary’, in *Dialog*, Vol. 50. No 2, 166, drawing on Taylor, C. (2004), *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, Duke University Press, p. 89–90

theological paradigms employed by those engaged with political disclosures, [and] explore power dynamics within and between nations'.²⁷

Admittedly, the term political theology could give rise to associations with moralising, preaching or clinging to privileged positions vis-à-vis the government and attempts to influence government policies. In fact, this is how some authors and groups have understood and practised political theology historically. As John W. De Gruchy points out: 'Political theology originally referred to those theologies in Europe that gave legitimacy to the state and its claims within the context of Christendom'.²⁸ But examples of political theology can be found in several places and in a number of different versions:²⁹ in theological liberalism (Wilhelm Herrmann) and the social gospel movement (Walter Rauschenbusch), as well as in confessional ethics (Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer) and realist ecumenical social ethics, by authors such as Reinhold Niebuhr³⁰ and Ronald Preston.³¹ Illustrative of the latter, the realist position, Preston's concern is that 'the Church must denounce Christian utopianism and confine its attention to "realistic possibilities"'.³² He is also known for his so-called middle axiom method, which reflects his

... insistence upon the essentially dialogical nature of Christian social ethics: that is, that it entails mutually critical and reconstructive engagement between sources and norms of Christian tradition on the one hand, such as Bible and moral theology, and relevant authorities in the social and human sciences.³³

Through this method, and typical of realist Christian ethics, Preston's public and political theology aims to assist and enlighten politicians, policymakers and practitioners in their real-life assessments, choices and decision-making.

In the 1960s, however, a change took place in political theology. From being concerned with the theological dimensions of politics, its focus shifted to political aspects of theology. Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann were instrumental in bringing about this change.³⁴ While Metz explored the concept of political theology in light of Marxism, Moltmann argued that political theology asked 'about the political consciousness of theology itself'.³⁵ In developing his answer, Moltmann in fact seems to conflate public theol-

27 www.politicaltheology.com; accessed July 1 2012

28 De Gruchy; 2004, 47

29 Forrester; 2004

30 Niebuhr, R. (1960), *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A study in ethics and politics*, New York, Scribner.

31 Preston, R. H. (1991), *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism*, London, SCM Press.

32 Forrester; 2004, 14

33 Graham, E. L. (2004), 'Guest Editorial', in E. L. Graham (ed.) 2004: *The Future of Christian Social Ethics: Essays on the work of Ronald H. Preston, 1913–2001*, New York, Continuum, 2

34 De Gruchy; 2004, 47

35 Moltmann, J. (1971), 'Political Theology', in *Theology Today*, Vol. 28. No 1, 6

ogy and political theology. Reflecting on the identity and nature of Christian theology, he writes in the preface to *God for a Secular Society*:

Its subject alone makes Christian theology a *theologia publica*, a public theology. It gets involved in the public affairs of society. It thinks about what is of general concern in the light of hope in Christ for the kingdom of God. It becomes political in the name of the poor and the marginalised in a given society. Remembrance of the crucified Christ makes it critical towards political religions and idolatries. It thinks critically about the religious and moral values of the societies in which it exists, and presents its reflections as a reasoned position.³⁶

What unites this wide range of scholars working within the tradition of political theology is their shared attention to the political relevance of theology as well as to real-political processes, decision-making and policy implementation. Accordingly, several of them make use of what James M. Gustafson has termed *policy discourse*. They 'seek to recommend or prescribe quite particular courses of action about quite specific issues',³⁷ and are concerned not only with what *needs* to be done, but also with what *can* be done. This does not necessarily make political theologians politicians, but they engage in the same kind of policy discourse that is primarily conducted 'by the persons who have responsibility to make choices and to carry out the actions that are required by the choices'.³⁸

Prophetic theology

Prophetic theology is characterised by the same features that are commonly associated with the Old Testament prophets and what Gustafson describes as prophetic, and in part narrative, discourses.³⁹ Firstly, prophets are visionaries. They announce a future different from the present, and a vision of what this new society might look like. They do this by adopting utopian language, symbols and metaphors, and they appeal to their audience to move 'from indignation with the present to aspiration for the future'.⁴⁰ Secondly, prophets are critics. They denounce 'the reality that is in conflict with the vision of a new society'⁴¹ by addressing and exposing the root causes of contemporary

36 Moltmann, J. (1999), *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology*, London, SCM Press, 1

37 Gustafson, J.M. (2001), 'Varieties of Moral Discourse: Prophetic, Narrative, Ethical and Policy', in (ed.) 2001: *Seeking Understanding: the Stob lectures, 1986–1998*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 71

38 Ibid, 71–72

39 Ibid; see also Brady, B. V. (1998), *The Moral Bond of Community*, Washington D.C., Georgetown University Press.

40 Koopman, N. (2009), 'Public Theology as Prophetic Theology. More than Utopianism and Criticism?', in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, Vol. 133. No March 2009, 121

41 Ibid, 122

problems. Thirdly, prophets are storytellers, and through their narratives they 'form the ethos and identity of a community and its members'.⁴²

The more modern roots of prophetic theology can be traced back to the above-mentioned changes in political theology in the 1960s, which also gave rise to a new radical and utopian movement: liberation theology. This strand of modern theology is markedly and explicitly concerned with the prophetic distinctiveness of the Christian contribution to public debate. Recognising the utopian aspects of, for example, Bonhoeffer's writings, as well as Moltmann's critical analysis, it can also be seen as a continuation of the confessional tradition and political theology. Prophetic theology put strong emphasis, however, on the concept and vision of the Kingdom of God, and made liberation and justice its key theological concepts. Accordingly, the 'task of public theology was now understood as announcing the Gospel and denouncing the forces of injustice and oppression'.⁴³

The history of the churches' response to South African apartheid policies is of particular interest in this context. In the apartheid era of South African history, at least three different kinds of theologies can be identified. In the renowned *Kairos document*⁴⁴ the authors discuss 1) state theology, 2) church theology, and the alternative offered in the document itself: 3) kairos theology. State theology gave legitimacy to the apartheid policies of the ruling classes, while church theology failed to confront it. Kairos theology, on the other hand, was characterised by its clear stand against apartheid and its preferential attitude to the poor and the marginalised. These characteristics are key features of what is often referred to as prophetic theology and point towards its diaconal nature.

The South African case also highlights some of the challenges inherent in public theology. Using the South African experience as his point of reference, and arguing against Storrar, who places theologies that directly represent public anger (liberation theologies) outside his definition of public theology, James R. Cochrane 'question[s] whether one may therefore say they [liberation and prophetic theologies] are not public theologies but only representations of anger, simply because they faced a constrained public sphere'.⁴⁵ Clearly, kairos theology did not primarily address the conditions for, and the actual characteristics of, the South African public sphere. It can, however, be seen as a demand for a more open, free and inclusive public space. In fact, concern for the excluded and marginalised represents a key contact point between public and prophetic theologies.

42 Ibid, 123

43 Forrester: 2004, 15

44 Kairos South Africa: 1986

45 Cochrane, J. R. (2011), 'Against the Grain: Responsible Public Theology in a Global Era', in *International Journal of Public Theology*, Vol. 5. No. 1, 49

Similarly, this example also points to close links between prophetic and political theologies. South African kairos theology not only articulated a prophetic, radical criticism of the status quo, but also 'laid the foundations for the theology of a transition that led to the debates about justice, reparation and reconciliation'.⁴⁶ This development is in line with Robert J. Schreiter's proposal to rethink the tasks of liberation theology to include not only resistance, denunciation and critique, but also advocacy and reconstruction.⁴⁷ Similarly, Nico Koopman has suggested that prophets should participate in all the different discourses described by Gustafson, not just the prophetic discourse, but also narrative, ethical and policy discourses.⁴⁸

Kairos Palestine

Turning back to *Kairos Palestine*, its authors write as Palestinian Christians, and there are explicit references to the Bible, the Christian tradition and moral theology⁴⁹ in the document. Accordingly, the theological nature of the document seems quite evident. In addition, the authors refer explicitly to the South African experience,⁵⁰ and the document is clearly inspired and informed by the South African kairos document. *Kairos Palestine* is, in other words, a contemporary example of kairos theology. This kind of theology was discussed above under the heading prophetic theology. However, the discussion also pointed to the close links between public, political and prophetic theology. These links are also apparent when these distinctions are used as analytical tools when reading *Kairos Palestine*.

The public nature of *Kairos Palestine* is first and foremost evident in the way the document addresses a long list of different audiences. The authors address not only Christians, Muslims and Jews, but also the international community, politicians and religious leaders, as well as the Palestinian and Israeli peoples. Furthermore, although the authors do not shy away from using theological language, Christian concepts are used to analyse and interpret the shared socio-political situation of not only Christians, but everyone living in Israel and Palestine. In other words, the document contains a combination of theology and social analysis, with the clear aim of making this analysis accessible and relevant to a wider audience and to public debate. The authors also emphasise their belief in 'one God, Creator of the

46 De Gruchy: 2004, 52

47 Schreiter, R. J. (1997), *The New Catholicity: Theology between the global and the local*, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis, 109–110

48 Koopman: 2009

49 *Kairos Palestine*: 2009, 2

50 *Ibid.*, 4.2.6

universe and of humanity⁵¹ and the love of God as the Creator of all. In fact, the strong emphasis on universal hope, love and reconciliation (KP 3 and 4) indicates a dominant invitational discourse in the document.⁵²

The political nature of the document is indicated by its explicit appeal to political authorities and leaders to find solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, the authors explore, identify and suggest various political steps that they recommend should be taken. Most controversial among them is their discussion, and in part recommendation, of boycott, divestment and sanctions.⁵³ Thus, a political and policy-oriented discourse is adopted, not in defence of the status quo, but rather in a critical analysis of what *needs* to be done, as well as what *can* be done.

Finally, the prophetic nature of *Kairos Palestine* becomes evident through the document's engagement with the powers that be and the radical critique of the present in light of an alternative vision defined by faith, hope and love. The document is firmly rooted in a stubborn hope for a better world, and this utopia, together with a strong concern with bringing human suffering in the region to an end, guides its moral appeal. Moreover, the document seeks to rewrite the story of the Holy Land, making it a story not about conflict between Christians, Muslims and Jews, but rather a story of shared identity and belonging. In *Kairos Palestine* the 'land has a universal mission. In this universality, the meaning of the promises, of the land, of the election, of the people of God open up to include all of humanity, starting from all the peoples of this land'.⁵⁴

Against this background, it does not seem reasonable to read *Kairos Palestine* exclusively as an expression of prophetic theology. Rather, the prophetic elements in the document are there in combination with features of both public and political theology. The vision of a new society informs a radical criticism, but not without real-political policy considerations regarding which steps can and should be taken to bring about desired change. The concern with ending suffering is articulated as prophetic criticism, but it is also the basis for a broad invitation to very different groups to join forces in a shared struggle for justice and peace. *Kairos Palestine* is public, political and prophetic theology in combination.

51 Ibid, 2.1

52 Fretheim, K. (2012), 'The Power of Invitation. The Moral Discourse of Kairos Palestine', in *Dialog*, Vol. 51. No 2

53 Kairos Palestine: 2009, 4.2.6; 6.3 and 7; see also Barghouti, O. (2011), *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions. The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights*, Chicago, IL, Haymarket Books.

54 Kairos Palestine: 2009, 2.3

Dimensions of diaconia

This reading of *Kairos Palestine* also informs the understanding of the practice and study of diaconia. Firstly, the distinctions drawn between public, political and prophetic theology appear to be readily transferable to the field of diaconia. As argued, theology has an important public dimension, and the same can be said about both the practice and the study of diaconia. Diaconia is a public Christian witness beyond the family and the private sphere. Similarly, the more specific field of public diaconia deals in particular with this public dimension, seeking to maintain an inclusive public sphere, encouraging and enabling participation in this sphere. This inclusivity and bias towards empowering participation is a diaconal dimension of public theology, and it makes public diaconia a central part of Christian social practice. Political diaconia, on the other hand, deals specifically with practical and realistic steps towards dealing with such issues, with special concern and attention being devoted to the oppressed, poor and marginalised. In the same way as political theology focuses on real-political processes, decision-making and policy implementation, political diaconia engages in policy discourse and is concerned not only with what *needs* to be done, but also with what *can* in fact be done. And, finally, prophetic diaconia draws on the vision of the Kingdom of God and a new heaven and earth to articulate a utopia that informs social criticism and guides moral action. While public diaconia is concerned with inclusive and empowering participation, and political diaconia deals with policy implementation, prophetic diaconia shares the important characteristics of prophetic theology, being radically visionary, critical and morally committed to liberation and justice.

These distinctions can be used to maintain clear dividing lines between the public, political and prophetic dimensions of diaconia, and they can be an argument for further developing these dimensions as distinct sub-disciplines. However, the combination of these dimensions identified in *Kairos Palestine* seems to warn against taking a too rigid approach. The way in which it combines discourses appears to add to the argumentative strength and political relevance of the document. *Kairos Palestine* addresses a wide range of audiences and explores policy measures, while also communicating a vision of a shared future defined by justice and peace for everyone. It is this mix of concerns and perspectives that makes the document such a powerful statement. Therein lies the power of diaconia as well: its ability to be a Christian witness in the public sphere that carries a vision of a future, better society for everyone, but is realistic and policy-oriented in terms of what can be done in the present. It is this realism and policy-orientation, in particular, that makes diaconia politically relevant. It is in this way that diaconia can serve as a faith-based constructive engagement in contemporary politics.

However, this combined inclusive, critical, visionary and constructive task of diaconia also represents a practical and intellectual challenge for the field. Diaconia needs to strike the difficult balance between utopian visions and real-political considerations, between inclusive invitation and denunciation. This is challenging, both in theory and practice. But important aspects will be lost if diaconia is reduced to public, political or prophetic diaconia. The contradictions and challenges that follow from combining these aspects as dimensions of diaconia should, instead, be appreciated as integral to, and characteristic of, this kind of Christian witness.

This is not an argument for all-inclusive diaconia at all times. Christian witness needs to be primarily prophetic at times. At other times, it needs to be a conversation partner in the public arena – neither more nor less. And, of course, in everyday political life, diaconia is and should primarily be a political witness in the sense described above. The same applies to research in the field of diaconia and Christian social practice. Research can primarily focus on one or the other of these dimensions. When conducting empirical research, studying practical, historical and contextual examples of Christian social practice, these distinctions can also have an analytical function, however. As analytical tools, they can enable the researcher to study how actual examples of this kind of social practice are articulated and put into action. The distinction between the public, political and prophetic invites analysis of where the emphasis is placed, and, in a more critical fashion, it enables the researcher to look for dimensions that might be weak or missing. This kind of critical analysis can in turn inform a constructive and normative discussion of how Christian social practices can be improved.

Conclusion

The inquiry into the understanding and interpretation of Christian social practice is one of the foundational questions in the study of diaconia. In this paper, I have focused on the public, prophetic and political dimensions of the concept of diaconia, using *Kairos Palestine* as an example of textual diaconia. As noted, kairos theology is often linked to liberation theology or prophetic theology. The South African kairos document was presented in contrast to other kinds of public and political theologies, and as an alternative stemming from the prophetic tradition. I have argued, however, that it is the links between these discourses, and the combination of them, that gives strength to *Kairos Palestine* and the Christian witness it represents. I therefore conclude that all three approaches are relevant to the field of diaconia and can be combined in Christian social practice as dimensions of diaconia. The tensions between them must be viewed as tensions within the concept of diaconia itself. Accordingly, it will be a key task for the academic field of

diaconia to study examples of Christian social practices and to explore how contemporary diaconia can find ways of balancing and integrating all these dimensions.

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