2 Can contextual theology bridge the divide?

South Africa's politics of forgiveness as an example of a contextual public theology

Dion A. Forster

Introduction

How might contextual theology help to bridge the divide between Black African Liberationist theologies and public theologies in South Africa? Stephen Bevans, a Catholic contextual theologian, writes:

There is no such thing as “theology”; there is only contextual theology: feminist theology, black theology, liberation theology, Filipino theology, Asian-American theology, African theology, and so forth.¹

Of course, this is true in at least two senses. First, all theologies emanate from particular contexts. The history, traditions, participants, sources, and concerns of particular theological traditions (and the theologians who operate within those theological traditions) are the contexts within which theological contributions are formulated and from which they are presented as contributions to the theological discourse. This is what Stephen Garner calls “inherently contextual” theology.² Second, it must be acknowledged that there is also a second sense in which theologies can be considered contextual in nature. Garner characterises the second type of contextual theology as “explicitly contextual” in nature and intent.³ Contextual theologies of the second kind place a particular emphasis upon the concerns, situations, experiences, sources, and approaches to theological reflection (and also theological contribution) that emanate from prescribed contexts.⁴

It is important to ask the question of what value each of the two types of contextual theology offers to the academic discourse, and to Christianity, in its various forms, expressions, and locations.

An outline of the argument for a “contextual public theology”

This chapter aims to consider this complex question. In doing so, it will argue for the relevance of a contextual public theology in the South African theological context by reflecting on the “politics of forgiveness” among

black and white South Africans. This task is predicated on numerous relevant critiques of public theologies within the South African context. Some South African theologians have questioned whether public theology has any place, or validity, in this context. The critics suggest that public theologies are too generic or universal in nature to address adequately the concerns of black African Christians. As we shall see, their critique is that public theologies tend not to be contextual enough. The claims of such generic public theologies are not particular in content and contribution, but rather universal in nature. In consequence, they are considered domesticated (by the standards, traditions, sources, and approaches of historically Western theological traditions), and perhaps even domesticating. These critics argue that South African theologians should remain firmly committed to contextual, African, and liberation theologies instead of the generic, universalised, domesticated, public theologies they critique.

We shall engage critiques that are presented by four primary conversation partners, Esther McIntosh, Tinyiko Maluleke, Rothney Tshaka, and Jakub Urbaniak. In doing so, we shall identify a common discontent among these critics of South African public theologies – namely, that contemporary South African public theologians have a tendency to collapse their theological tasks into vague universal approaches, and also to produce non-specific, universalised, theological content and claims. In response, they advocate a return from the universal to the particular – namely, liberationist, feminist, and de-colonial – approaches to the theological task and the resultant theological content. The challenge with this, as we shall see, is that the proposed approaches to the theological task could limit the universal applicability and claims of the Christian faith. This could serve to limit, or “privatise”, the possible transformative and redeeming potential of the Christian Gospel.⁵ For example, true forgiveness has been difficult to achieve among South Africans since the end of political apartheid. Within this context, can the universal claim for forgiveness in Christianity be disregarded because of the contextual challenges to this notion? Surely not. What is required is not the denial of the universal, but the creation of a meaningful tension between the requirements of the universal claims of Christianity and the particular realities of the context within which they ought to function.

Thus, having presented these critiques, and considered the common concern about a lack of contextual theological engagement, this chapter will consider how one example of Southern African public theology, which focuses on the politics of forgiveness, can serve as a form of “contextual public theology”. The illustrative project invites an engagement with the particular (ethnicity, gender, age, social and economic class, language, religious experience, and social identity complexity). It also invites a rethinking of theological sources and methods (a move from only engaging peer reviewed academic theological texts, towards a people’s theology that listens to the experiences and perspectives of “ordinary readers” of the Bible). Finally, it invites theologians to employ new epistemological approaches to

the theological task that take the needs of the “problem owners” seriously, balancing them with academic requirements. In short, it can be characterised as a “contextual public theology in South Africa” that maintains the integrity of the universal claims of Christianity, in relation to the contextual uniqueness of history and identity.

A critique of public theologies in South Africa

South Africa remains a deeply religious society, with 84.2 per cent of South Africans indicating that they are Christian in the last General Household Survey.⁶ Moreover, a 2010 Pew report found that 74 per cent of South Africans “indicated that religion plays an important role in their lives”.⁷ South Africans also place higher trust in religious institutions and leaders than in the state or the public sector.⁸

It can be said, with a measure of confidence, that religion is important to all spheres of South African life. Religious beliefs shape social identity,⁹ and religious institutions play a very important role in shaping society. However, the converse is also true. South Africa’s social, cultural, and political life also shapes Christianity, the Church, and theology. The South African theologian Nico Koopman writes about this mutual impact, saying that the “church exists in public, is a part of it and impacts upon it both knowingly and unknowingly”.¹⁰ Koopman’s definition of public theology is instructive in this regard. He asks three questions about the relationship between belief and public life:

- What is the inherent public nature of God’s love for the world?
- How can we understand and articulate the rationality of God’s love for the world?
- What are the meaning and implications of God’s love for every facet of life?¹¹

As one can see, these questions aim at understanding the universal claims of the Christian faith in relation to specific issues of public concern. In this sense at least, one could conclude, as Jürgen Moltmann does, that:

[f]rom the perspective of its origins and its goal, Christian theology is public theology, for it is the theology of the kingdom of God. . . . As such it must engage with the political, cultural, educational, economic and ecological spheres of life, not just with the private and ecclesial spheres.¹²

That South African Christianity, and so South African theologies, are important for, and engaged in, public life is not significantly contested in the academy. There seems to be a general agreement that religion matters for South Africans. What is contested, however, is what approach to the task of

theology is best suited to a constructive engagement with the ongoing social, economic, political, and also theological challenges of the contemporary South African context.

Perhaps the most robust, and widely recognised, critique of public theology (in the South African context) has come from Black theologians and Liberation theologians, such as Tinyiko Maluleke and Rothney Tshaka. They question whether a public theological approach can ever be specific enough to engage the complexities and uniqueness of the black and African socio-religious context and experience.¹³ Maluleke and Tshaka both question whether an approach to theology that does not focus primarily on social analysis (as liberation theologies do)¹⁴ would have value in the broader (Southern) African social context. In particular, both Maluleke and Tshaka, as well as Jakub Urbaniak,¹⁵ have critiqued the approaches, and even methods, associated with the persons and places that are identified as offering a public theological contribution in South Africa. Maluleke's primary concern is that:

public theology is trapped in an attempt to universalize concepts, similar to earlier forms of [colonial] theology, and does not take developing world theologies seriously. It is post-coloniality, rather than postmodernity, that . . . is of importance to South African society.¹⁶

In particular, Maluleke is concerned that public theologians, and their theologies, are incapable of addressing the ongoing "anger in South African society".¹⁷ They tend to employ theological language and objectives, such as reconciliation and forgiveness, which are much more closely aligned to both universal theological ideals in general, and the intentions of Western theologies in particular. He contends that these choices directly, or inadvertently, contribute towards maintaining the status quo of black and African subjugation. For this reason, primarily, he contends that "a theory of resistance as found in liberation theologies" is crucial for addressing the concerns of South African life.¹⁸

Of course, there is merit in this critique. The particular must always be held in tension with the universal – in this case, the history, and current reality, of South Africans must surely be engaged in a careful and robust manner if a particular theology is to have value for the context. However, one could also ask whether this task is only to be achieved through a liberation theology – or perhaps, whether a liberative theological approach should not be prioritised in certain contexts and settings, while other theological approaches can be of value in different settings. Moreover, it is important to remember that Maluleke's critique had a specific context – the article in which he develops his critique emanates from a particular academic engagement between Maluleke and the Princeton theologian William Storrar, on 4 August 2008. A careful reading of Maluleke's argument shows that he is aware that his privileging of liberation theology in South Africa is meant to

be held in tension with other universal theological claims. This is evidenced in his discussion of some major definitions of public theology, and his own approaches to the theological task, in pages 80–82 of his critique.¹⁹ As such, it would be fair to conclude that he is not dismissing public theologies outright, but rather seeking to aggregate and critique particular approaches to faith and public life in South Africa that are inadequate to address specific concerns and needs. In this particular instance, he seems to be concerned that the universal claims of public theologies, and public theologians, may be inadequate to deal with the “anger” of black South African Christian experience.²⁰ This does not mean that a carefully constructed engagement between faith and contextual issues of public concern – perhaps a liberative, multi-disciplinary, South African engagement with faith, experience, economics, and politics – should deny the universal claims of Christianity. Rather, he makes a convincing point, asking “whether public theology” of the “universal”, historically Western, kind that he has described “is the most potent vehicle for dealing with the reality” of black South African pain.²¹ My reading of his critique is that certain approaches to faith and public life have tended to lack contextuality – “the reality” – and so they have decreased the contextual “potency” of the liberative and transformative claims of the Christian faith.

Tshaka’s critique follows a similar line of reasoning, but with an emphasis upon a different set of theological convictions that he feels should gain priority. Tshaka questions whether it is credible to engage in the task of theology in the African, and particularly the South African, context in a way that does not privilege the perspectives and contributions of black African theologians.²² In particular, Tshaka picks up on an aspect of Maluleke’s critique and deals with it more directly and extensively – namely that the specifically South African contributions to public theologies have tended to be primarily informed by, and in conversation with, European and North American theologians.²³ This results in both a methodological and a content shift in the task of South African public theologies. Methodologically, it means that public theologians tend to approach the task of theology in ways that are best suited to European and North American theological and public concerns.²⁴ Theology (as doctrine) and reason are privileged, as are published sources and the contributions of professional academic theologians. These tend to be dominated by the contributions of white men, and of course the concerns of such persons and their contexts.²⁵ Again, this is a valuable and important critique of South African public theologies, which have tended to approach both the task and the primary conversation partners in theology from a Western, academic theological, perspective. However, as with Maluleke’s critique, Tshaka’s does not dismiss public theology in its broader sense, but rather seeks to critique, and correct, a privileging of white, Western, sources and conversation partners.²⁶ Again, as with Maluleke’s concern, this critique advocates a privileging of the voices, experiences, and approaches to theology that are indicative of the black South

African Christian experience. What he proposes is sensitivity and choice in matters of faith and public life, and not a denial of the public role, and importance, of Christianity and Christian theologies in South Africa. Hence, here we see once more that a contextual approach to faith and matters of public concern could be the bridge across the divide.

Urbaniak's critiques, stemming from a sustained research project, are among the most specific, and most carefully developed, critiques of South African public theologies. Urbaniak built his critique of South African public theologies through an engagement with the work and person of Nico Koopman, the former chair of the Global Network for Public Theology, a former editor of the *International Journal for Public Theology*, and former director of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at the University of Stellenbosch. Urbaniak develops the two critiques discussed earlier (from Maluleke and Tshaka) extensively to illustrate some of the challenges at the intersection of the particulars of the South African context and the universal claims of some public theologies. He writes that by

using [a] postmodern, rather than postcolonial framework, South African public theologians [have tended to] open themselves *in a more obvious way* to dialogue with their Western/Northern counterparts. This, however, comes at a price.²⁷

The price, as mentioned by Maluleke and Tshaka, is that the concerns and approaches of historical, colonial theologies and theologians inadvertently shape both the issues that are addressed and the manner in which they are addressed.²⁸ A further "price" that is paid is that the voices of South African Christians are also inadvertently not heard or engaged. Simply stated, Urbaniak advocates an engagement with more than just published academic sources. He encourages South African theologians to employ approaches to the task of theology that engage "ordinary" black South African Christian voices and perspectives.²⁹ Urbaniak rightly argues that it is a mistake for South African public theologians to give themselves over entirely to historically Western and Northern theological paradigms and traditions.³⁰ Again, it is worth taking Urbaniak's critique to heart – South African public theologies should take the postcolonial theological framework very seriously in their task. What he suggests is that African public theologians should seek to cultivate an "explicit and constructive link between [African] social analysis and [African] theological ideas".³¹ This is an important reminder to African public theologians to offer the richness and diversity of our contexts to both African and global theological research. Yet, as was argued previously, it can also be said in this instance that the central claim of Urbaniak's critique is related to the lack of contextual methodologies and contextual inputs in considering the relationships that exist between issues of faith and public life.

Of course, these challenges are valid within the local context of South Africa, and the larger contexts of the African continent. It would be a mistake to think that theologies of liberation, or other contextual theologies (such as African or Black theologies), can be ignored within these contexts. Africa has a predominantly black African population in which there is a crucial need for rigorous prophetic engagement with the historical social structures and oppressive systems (such as racism, colonialism, and entrenched social injustice). Moreover, we need to recognise that (South) Africans are not only consumers of theological knowledge; we are also producers thereof. The relative disregard for non-published materials does not mean that (South) Africans are not thinking theologically, or developing theological resources for significant engagement with issues of public concern. However, as has been argued, it would also be a mistake to create a binary between theologies of liberation and all other approaches to the complex socio-theological issues that we face in our context. Rather, it would be of greater value to hold liberationist approaches to theology in tension with the contributions of experts from other relevant fields (such as economics, political science, sociology, history, etc.). The approach of public theology, as outlined in the previous sections, aims to bring these voices into conversation with one another so that new insights might emerge. Yet, we must acknowledge the validity of Maluleke's, Tshaka's, and Urbaniak's critiques. It would be irresponsible to attempt to engage in credible theology in the African context without responsibly accentuating the richness of contextual African and Black theologies for this context and other contexts.³² It is in this sense that theologians, including African public theologians, have a great deal to offer African theologies, and indeed global theologies. Certainly, it is not the intention of those who engage in public theological reflection and engagement to downplay the value and importance of our context and its contribution, as can be seen for example in Koopman's article "In Search of a Transforming Public Theology: Drinking from the Wells of Black Theology".³³

A final significant critique that could be raised against South African public theologies is one that is brought by feminist public theologians. To date, the most constructive South African contribution has come from Julie Claassens in an article entitled "Towards a Feminist Public Theology: On Wounds, Scars and Healing in the Book of Jeremiah and Beyond".³⁴ However, given the historically patriarchal nature of South African academic theologies, the absence of extensively developed feminist public theologies in the South African context is a critique within itself.

Esther McIntosh, from York St John University, has been outspoken about the nature and character of public theologies around the world. A core element of her claim is that the contextual experiences, concerns, and input of women are silenced or disregarded in the formal academic circles of global public theologies.³⁵ In particular, she rightly shows that public theological research is dominated by male theologians, and by approaches to theology

that can function in ways that exclude women and women's perspectives.³⁶ This is certainly a critique that we are subject to in African theologies in general, and South African public theologies in particular. While there are a number of significant women public theologians on the continent (such as Musa Dube, Isabel Phiri, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Julie Claassens, Sarojini Nadar, and Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel, to name just a few), the reality is that public theological research is largely occupied by men and men's worldviews and concerns. Moreover, if one were to look at the chosen conversation partners that are highlighted in published books and articles on public theologies around the world, they are largely dominated by men.³⁷ This critique is valid and is to be taken seriously – it is a call for contextuality that is intersectional in nature. It brings gender considerations to the fore alongside economic, geographic, cultural, and political concerns. It requires concerted attention and a choice for critical self-reflection. The only answer to this critique is to encourage (South) African public theologians to be intentional about how we do our theology, with whom we undertake the theological task, and what issues we choose to address in our public theological research. Again, this is a call for a contextual public theology for the South African context.

This section of the chapter has sought to highlight, and give attention to, the necessary critiques against South African public theologies. In particular, these major critiques all share one common concern – that South African public theologies must be deeply and consistently contextual in nature. Moreover, as we considered the corrections that these critics offered, it became clear that they were not negating the importance of a rigorous and credible engagement between faith and public issues. Rather, what they were calling for is the maintaining of a strong and significant tension between the universal claims of Christianity and the particular concerns, approaches, and demands of South Africans and the South African context.

A politics of forgiveness as a bridge to the context and concerns of South African public theologies: an example of a contextual public theology

In the previous section, we came to the conclusion that faith and public life are in a constant and necessary interchange in South African life. Theology matters in South African public life. Yet, there is a need for a contextual engagement (both in content and method) to adequately engage the complexities of the interchange between faith and public life in this context.

In this section, we shall consider one illustrative example of a contextual public theology in South Africa. It takes the critiques mentioned previously seriously, and seeks to find a credible way to bridge the divide between the universal claims of Christianity (in the call for deep, liberative, and transforming forgiveness) and the particular (namely, South Africa's social, political, and economic history).

A politics of forgiveness

In his book *The Politics of Peace*, the South African theologian Brian Frost suggests that to the popular imagination, linking politics and forgiveness may seem unusual. Forgiveness would seem to be a deeply theological “universal” concept, while politics comes from a much more particular and contextual framing of reality. However, as he notes,

“Politics” is surely the way human beings organize themselves in groups, either locally, nationally or internationally, to determine and distribute the use of resources, often in short supply, and how they handle the institutions they create for doing this. “Forgiveness” is a word used to indicate that a wrong has been committed which needs redressing. It is also a word which implies both accepting a wrong and dealing with it in a constructive way.³⁸

In this regard, it would seem that a coupling of politics and forgiveness finds their logical link in time – how we deal with our present reality, in the light of our experiences of the past and our hopes for the future. William Faulkner succinctly stated that the “past is not dead and gone; it isn’t even the past”.³⁹ Indeed, in South Africa, we are facing a present contextual reality that shows that we have not adequately dealt with our past in a manner that is politically sufficient (i.e., in structural, economic, and social terms). As such, we want forgiveness of our past sins (which is one of Christianity’s universal claims),⁴⁰ but nonetheless, forgiveness is deeply contested in the present, and a shared future lived in peace seems to elude us. This is precisely what Tinyiko Maluleke critiques: a universal call for forgiveness, which does not pay adequate attention to the “anger in South African society”.⁴¹

Thus, we can safely assert that the link between a politics of forgiveness and a peaceable future among South Africa’s predominantly Christian population is also not a given. However, as Donald Shriver points out,

A political form of forgiveness may not guarantee that we humans can survive our sins against each other. But without it, we might not have survived this long; and we need it, as our capacity to harm or hurt each other grows, more than ever.⁴²

Understood in this way, we can see the tension that is necessary, and should exist, between the universal call for forgiveness in the Christian faith and the particular contextual experience and reality of South Africans.

Forgiveness, as a theological and social discourse in South Africa, is deeply contested. Numerous South African scholars and activists have raised concerns about the transactional nature of the concept of forgiveness in this context.⁴³ Moreover, interpersonal socio-political factors – such as

the nature of the historical offences of apartheid, whether reparation has been made (or attempted) for these offences, the political identities of the parties involved, and expectations and conditions for the self and for the other – also play a role in understandings of forgiveness. One significant problem that has been identified, and is evidenced in the findings of this research, is that unreconciled persons in South Africa seldom have contact with each other because of the legacy of the apartheid system, which separated persons racially, according to economic class, and geographically.⁴⁴ In at least one sense, this makes forgiveness impossible – not only is it impossible for persons to forgive one another since they have no proximate or authentic social engagement, but forgiveness is also a theological impossibility because of deeply held and entrenched religious convictions about the nature and processes of forgiveness. The universal and the particular must be held in tension for either to find fuller and truer meaning.

A people's theology: empirical intercultural Bible study

In 2018, I published a discussion of the findings of a four-year project on the politics of forgiveness, entitled “Translation and a Politics of Forgiveness in South Africa? What Black Christians Believe, and White Christians do not Seem to Understand”.⁴⁵ The title for this paper originates from the findings of a project on forgiveness that was conducted among black and white Christians in Cape Town, South Africa.⁴⁶ The research aimed to ascertain, by means of a qualitative empirical study, how a sampling of black and white South African Christians understand forgiveness. What does forgiveness mean? What does each group understand as the expectations, processes, and requirements for forgiveness to be realised?

It could be said that forgiveness in its universal and vague sense is a deeply contested notion for South African Christians – it is not understood, and particular understandings of forgiveness are not broadly accepted or shared. Because of the debts of the past, and unhealed history, discourses of forgiveness frequently contribute towards the ongoing suffering of South Africans. We simply have not done enough “sensemaking” with one another, as black and white Christians, to plumb the depths of an authentic “difficult forgiveness”.⁴⁷ The South African poet Nathan Trantraal, in his poem “Fiction en Estrangement”, tells of how after the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa, the Christian religion called upon black South Africans to be “Christlike”, to give up the violent struggle for liberation, and to forgive the white perpetrators for the sins of apartheid. This can be likened to the critique that Maluleke gives of “universal” approaches to public theologies.⁴⁸ Trantraal says that it resulted in a “cheap” forgiveness – forgiveness without justice. He writes:

*Ammel het hystoe gegaan
Hulle na hulle hyse langsie sea*

*ós na ós shacks
langs poeletjies stagnant wate
waa die gif in vergifnis
ós ammel
siek gemaak et*

*Everyone went home
They to their homes along the sea
And we to our shacks
Next to pools of stagnant water
Where the poison [gif] in forgiveness [vergifnis]
Made us all
Sick⁴⁹*

Trantraal says this cheap forgiveness made everyone sick. He employs a subtle play on the Afrikaans words for forgiveness and poison to do so, pointing to the “gif [poison] in vergifnis [forgiveness]”.⁵⁰ This sentiment is evidenced in the 2015 Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) report on reconciliation, which notes that

While most South Africans agree that the creation of a united, reconciled nation remains a worthy objective to pursue, the country remains afflicted by its historical divisions. The majority feels that race relations have either stayed the same or deteriorated since the country’s political transition in 1994 and the bulk of respondents have noted income inequality as a major source of social division. Most believe that it is impossible to achieve a reconciled society for as long as those who were disadvantaged under apartheid remain poor within the “new South Africa”.⁵¹

What the research on forgiveness among black and white South Africans found was that social identity, of which political identity is a part,⁵² played a very important role in the construction of beliefs concerning the expectations, processes, and content of forgiveness.

We cannot go into great detail on the findings of the research at this stage. However, the general findings were as follows.

- Among the predominantly black and so-called coloured⁵³ participants, forgiveness was largely understood in a collective and social manner.⁵⁴ In other words, forgiveness was not only an individual concern, but had social consequences and social expectations within the community. Moreover, this group understood that forgiveness was not only a matter of spiritual restoration between the individual (or community) and God. Rather, it should be evidenced in the restoration of relationships and structures in the community. For this group, forgiveness can only

be authentic if the conditions for forgiveness are evidenced in the community. In other words, forgiveness in South Africa would be contingent upon economic transformation, transfer of land ownership, a transformation of social power dynamics, and visible and tangible expressions of remorse on the part of the beneficiaries and initiators of apartheid in South Africa. A social understanding of community harmony is largely in keeping with notions of intersubjective identity that are more common in black and coloured South African communities.⁵⁵

- The white participants largely understood forgiveness in an individual and spiritual manner.⁵⁶ For the majority of participants in this group, the data showed that they viewed forgiveness as being primarily a matter of restoring their spiritual relationship with God. They did not initially consider that forgiveness may need to engage the party against whom the sin was committed. Forgiveness is theological (spiritual); it has to do with spiritual sin. As such, God is the offended party, and forgiveness would have been enacted when God had set them free from the guilt and spiritual culpability of their actions. Such a view of forgiveness would not necessarily entail the restoration of relational harmony among members of the community or the restitution of social, political, or economic structures in the community. Common expressions of this view would be statements such as “apartheid was wrong, but it is over. I confessed my part [sin] in it and I believe God has forgiven me. Now we need to move on and stop living in the past. We must stop talking about apartheid”.

This research project offers an example of a “contextual public theology” that can bridge the divide between a universal claim of Christianity (forgiveness) and the particular contextual concerns and lived experiences of South Africans.

First, the project, and its methodological approach, illustrate that faith and public life operate in a mutual interchange with one another. This project is not only contextual in the general, or universal, sense in which “all theology is contextual”. Rather, it is “explicitly contextual”, both in its methodological approach and in its findings. Methodologically, the project sought to prioritise the lived experiences, theological perspectives, and insights of “ordinary readers” of the texts of forgiveness.⁵⁷ It was specifically designed so that not only published, formal, academic sources would inform the understandings of “political forgiveness” in South Africa. The voices of the “ordinary readers” predominate in the theological discussion and form the primary conversation partners, alongside which the perspectives of other theologians are brought into the conversation. In consequence, this contextual public theological engagement with the politics of forgiveness gave priority to black South African women’s and men’s perspectives. These voices shaped our understanding of the complex interplay between faith and public life, and also brought these perspectives into the wider academic public discourse.

Second, this “contextual public theological” project illustrates how contextual factors, such as social identity, can be brought into conversation with theological concerns, in an interdisciplinary manner that has scholarly rigour and academic credibility. What is critical in this regard is that the universal claim of forgiveness in the Christian faith is taken very seriously in this project. Rather than merely rejecting it because of contextual concerns and critiques over its misuse in the past, this “contextual public theological” engagement with the politics of forgiveness illustrates how one can hold a creative and necessary tension between the universal and the particular. This project shows that social identity and lived, contextual reality play significant roles in the shaping of religious and theological convictions. This relates to a number of important factors such as ethnicity, gender, and social and economic class. In answering a central question of the public theologian, “what are the meaning and implications of God’s love for every facet of life?”⁵⁸ this project shows that one can only provide an adequate answer when the universal is actualised within the context, experience, and history of particular persons. This requires not only theological insight, but also a credible engagement with insights from other disciplines (such as psychology, sociology, economics, politics, gender studies, etc.). This goes some way towards addressing Maluleke’s concern about the adequacy of a contextual public theology for South Africa that can truly engage black “public anger”.⁵⁹ Moreover, it takes McIntosh’s concern seriously not only by facilitating critical conversation with (black African) women, but also by considering the uniqueness of (black African) women’s lived experiences and expectations of a politics of forgiveness.

Third, this illustrative example of a “contextual public theology” shows that inadequate, jaundiced, and un-contextual applications of “universal” theological concepts (such as forgiveness), if not coupled with lived experience, political expectation, and social engagement, can be counterproductive to the theological beliefs themselves. The results of the research project show that because of a lack of contextual engagement with forgiveness as a contextual political issue, black South Africans have come to experience it as painful, and white South Africans have tended to disregard it.⁶⁰ It is important for academic theologians, well-intentioned faith leaders, and persons of faith to take the importance of careful and rigorous contextual engagement into consideration when seeking to adequately understand and address issues of faith and public concern. A contextual public theology has the potential to make a constructive contribution to the understanding of, and adequate engagement with, issues of faith and public concern. On the other hand, a non-contextual, universalised approach to contested issues of faith and public concern (such as the politics of forgiveness in South Africa) could lead to greater disconnection and disharmony among Christians and within society at large.⁶¹

Finally, what this illustrative example of a contextual public theology, related to the politics of forgiveness in South Africa, shows is that theological

convictions have a significant impact upon daily life and political life. This returns us to the claim with which we began – in some senses, all theologies, whether liberative, feminist, or public, are contextual theologies.⁶² In this instance, we focused deliberately on the deeply contextual nature of the “public” within which faith operates and is formed. The “universal” claims of Christianity (whether they are shaped by a liberationist, Black, African, or feminist approach) ultimately function within public life. As such, we cannot escape the need for rigorous, intentional, and sustained contextual public theologies that consider the interchange between faith and life. To opt for an approach to engaging the complexities of faith that seeks to “privatise” such engagement within a particular sphere will only serve to limit the intended liberating and transformative aims of Christian theology and the Christian faith.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that a contextual theology can help to address some of the most significant critiques of South African public theologies. We saw that we cannot dismiss the universal claims of Christianity (such as forgiveness) because of specific, important, contextual concerns. However, what is needed is to facilitate a creative and credible tension between the universal claims of Christianity and the particular contextual concerns of those who engage in issues of faith and public concern. A number of important critiques of South African public theologies were presented and considered. In doing so, it was argued that the central issue at stake is that greater attention has to be paid to contextual voices, contextual approaches, and contextual priorities in public theologies. The chapter concluded by presenting an illustrative example of a “contextual public theological” research project that focused on the “politics of forgiveness” among black and white South African Christians. This project showed that “contextual South African public theology” can hold great value for academic theologies, as well as for public life in South Africa.

Notes

- 1 Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 3.
- 2 Stephen Garner, “Contextual and Public Theology: Passing Fads or Theological Imperatives?” *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 22, no. 1 (2015): 20–28, 21.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 4 Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (London: Routledge, 2009), 7–9.
- 5 See the discussion of the loss of confidence in some liberation theological traditions, and the fracturing of others in the contemporary academy, in Ward’s consideration of the rise of Radical Orthodoxy in relation to the contemporary debates on ecumenical Christianity, in Graham Ward, “Radical Orthodoxy:

- Its Ecumenical Vision," *Acta Theologica* 25 (2017): 29–45, 36–37, <https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v37i1S.1>.
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- 43 Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and Chris Van Der Merwe, *Memory, Narrative and Forgiveness: Perspectives on the Unfinished Journeys of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009); Robert Vosloo, "Difficult Forgiveness? Engaging Paul Ricoeur on Public Forgiveness within the Context of Social Change in South Africa," *International Journal of Public Theology* 9, no. 3 (2015): 360–78, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341406>; Robert R. Vosloo, "Traumatic Memory, Representation and Forgiveness: Some Remarks in Conversation with Antjie Krog's Country of My Skull," *In Die Skriflig* 46, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v46i1.53>; Dion A. Forster, "Translation and a Politics of Forgiveness in South Africa? What Black Christians Believe, and White Christians Do Not Seem to Understand," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 14, no. 2 (2018): 77–94, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n2.a04>.
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- 46 See Forster, *The (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness?*
- 47 Vosloo, "Difficult Forgiveness?" 360.
- 48 Maluleke, "Reflections and Resources," 83–89.
- 49 My translation.
- 50 Cf. Louise Viljoen, "Alles Het Niet Kom Wôd Deur Nathan Trantraal: 'n Resensie," *LitNet*, April 3, 2017, www.litnet.co.za/alles-het-niet-kom-wod-deur-nathan-trantraal-n-resensie/; Nathan Trantraal, *Alles Het Niet Kom Wôd: 'n Digbundel*, 1st ed. (Kaapstad: Kwela, 2017).
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- 52 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (London: Macmillan, 2018), 3–5.
- 53 The notion of ethnic identity is not to be understood in an essentialist manner in this study. Hammett points out that ethnic identity, which in South Africa is related to race identity (as is the case in Hammett's discussion of the notion), remains fluid, with the "reification or erasure of racial identities" continuing to take place among population groups and within social and political structures in South Africa; see Daniel Hammett, "Ongoing Contestations: The Use of Racial Signifiers in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Social Identities* 16, no. 2 (2010): 247–60, 247–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504631003691090>. The notion of ethnic identity and race identification remains contested and complex

in South Africa. See Allan Boesak et al., *Contesting Post-Racialism: Conflicted Churches in the United States and South Africa*, eds. R. Drew Smith et al. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015); Cobus Van Wyngaard, "Whiteness and Public Theology: An Exploration of Listening," *Missionalia* 43, no. 3 (2015): 478–92, <https://doi.org/10.7832/43-3-132>; Cobus van Wyngaard, "The Language of 'Diversity' in Reconstructing Whiteness in the Dutch Reformed Church," in *Churches, Blackness, and Contested Multiculturalism: Europe, Africa and North America*, eds. R. D. Smith, William Ackah, and Anthony G. Reddie (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 157–70. In reality there is no ethnic or race category that could adequately contain the complexity of human identities. The terms that are used in this study are informed by the literature, and are terms used by the participants in identifying their own race identities. The three dominant self-descriptors are so-called coloured (brown, Khoi), black and white. Some of the participants described themselves as white. Some participants described themselves as either black or coloured (or "so-called coloured"). Others described themselves as black and coloured. The research shows that black and coloured identity is based on an understanding that is relational in some contexts and political in others. At times ethnicity, or race, is identified and described in relation to a community of reference. For example, in relation to family and friends, a person may self-identify as coloured, while in a political setting the same person may self-identify as black so as not to be excluded from the political solidarity of redressing the ethnic and racial legacies of apartheid. See Mohamed Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 98–130; Ian Goldin, "The Reconstitution of Coloured Identity in the Western Cape," in *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa*, eds. S. Marks and Stanley Trapido (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 156–81. The Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act 53 of 2003 as Amended by Act No. 46 of 2013 in South Africa uses the term "Black people" as a generic term to refer to "Africans, Coloureds and Indians". The Black Consciousness movement in South Africa employed the term Black inclusively in order to raise awareness around black experience and black identity, but also to subvert the essentialist and divisive intentions of Apartheid-era race classifications.

54 Forster, *The (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness?* 178–84.

55 Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough*; Augustine Shutte, "Ubuntu as the African Ethical Vision," in *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, ed. Munyaradzi Felix Murove (Scottsville, South Africa: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2009), 85–99; Dion A. Forster, "A Generous Ontology: Identity as a Process of Intersubjective Discovery – An African Theological Contribution," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66, no. 1 (2010): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.731>; Huseyin Cakal et al., "An Investigation of the Social Identity Model of Collective Action and the 'Sedative' Effect of Intergroup Contact among Black and White Students in South Africa," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 50, no. 4 (2011): 606–27.

56 Forster, *The (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness?* 184–89.

57 Dion A. Forster, "A Social Imagination of Forgiveness," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 1, no. 32 (2019): 70–88, 70–72, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1163/15709256-12341387>; Forster, *The (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness?* 211; Gerald West, "Liberation Hermeneutics after Liberation in South Africa," in *Trajectories of Religion in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Pobee*, Studies in World Christianity and Interreligious Relations 48 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 341–81, 341; Gerald O. West, "Locating 'Contextual Bible Study' within Biblical Liberation

Hermeneutics and Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics,” *HTS Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2641>.

58 Koopman, “Some Contours for Public Theology in South Africa,” 124.

59 Maluleke, “Reflections and Resources,” 89.

60 Forster, “A Social Imagination of Forgiveness,” 70–88; Forster, *The (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness?* 178–89.

61 Forster, “Translation and a Politics of Forgiveness in South Africa?” 77–94.

62 Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3.