

The background is a deep red color with a subtle, grainy texture. A large, semi-transparent circle is centered on the page, overlapping the main title. The circle's border is a thin, slightly darker red line. In the background, behind the circle, there is a faint, high-contrast image of a rose with its stem and leaves. The rose is positioned vertically, with its head near the top of the frame. The overall aesthetic is minimalist and elegant, with a focus on the interplay of light and shadow within the red palette.

Reformed Public Theology

*A Global Vision
for Life in the World*

Edited by
Matthew Kaemingk



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Contents

Dedication vii

Introduction: Toward a Reformed Public Theology 1
Matthew Kaemingk

Part One: Public Culture

Immigration

1. Immigrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers: The Migratory Beginnings of Reformed Public Theology 23
Rubén Rosario Rodríguez

Language

2. Let Every Tongue Confess: Language Diversity and Reformed Public Theology 35
James Eglinton

Decolonialism

3. African Decolonization and Reformed Theology 47
Nico Vorster

Euthanasia

4. The Dutch and Death: Pastoral Observations and Theological Reflections 60
Margriet van der Kooi and Cornelis van der Kooi

Pluralism

5. Religious Pluralism in Indonesia: Reformed Reflections 71
N. Gray Sutanto

Part Two: Public Markets

Work

6. A Reformed Theology of Work in New York 85
Katherine Leary Alsdorf

Economics

7. Political Economy in Brazil: A Reformed Response 97
Lucas G. Freire

Labor Rights

8. Workers' Rights in China: A Reformed Case for Labor Unions 110
Agnes Chiu

Part Three: Public Justice

Ideologies

9. Modern Political Ideologies: A Reformed Alternative 123
Bruce Riley Ashford and Dennis Greeson

Populism

10. Power Politics in the Philippines: A Reformed Response to the
Populism and Violence of Duterte 135
Romel Regalado Bagares

Activism

11. Reflections from a Reformed Activist 149
Stephanie Summers

Part Four: Public Aesthetics

Art

12. Japanese Aesthetics and Reformed Theology: Reflections on Rikyū,
Kintsugi, and Endō 163
Makoto Fujimura

Poetry

13. Poetry and the Reformed Tradition 175

James K. A. Smith

Fashion

14. Reformed Resources for Thinking about Fashion 186

Robert S. Covolo

Cities

15. Streets of Shalom: Reformed Reflections on Urban Design 197

Eric O. Jacobsen

Part Five: Public Academy

Campus

16. Engaging the Pluralist Campus: Reformed Resources 213

Bethany L. Jenkins

Research

17. A Reformed Understanding of Scholarship 226

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Race

18. Critical Race Theory, Campus Culture, and the Reformed Tradition 237

Jeff Liou

Part Six: Public Worship

Communion

19. A Migrant at the Lord's Table: A Reformed Theology of Home 253

Alberto La Rosa Rojas

Prayer

20. Public Trauma and Public Prayer: Reformed Reflections on Intercession 265

John D. Witvliet

Baptism

21. Sexism, Racism, and the Practice of Baptism in South Africa:
A Reformed and Transformative Perspective 276
Nico Koopman

Confession

22. Confession: Practice for Civil Public Discourse 288
Kyle David Bennett

Piety

23. Piety and Public Life: The Public Imitation of Christ 299
Jessica Joustra

Contributors 313
Index 319

Introduction

Toward a Reformed Public Theology

MATTHEW KAEMINGK

Christians face a complex array of public issues in the world today. As they navigate the dynamic arenas of politics and health care, media and the marketplace, race and culture, these Christians often reach for biblical texts and theological themes to make sense of their lives in the public square. Swimming amid the undulating waters of globalization, Christians look to the church and the Scriptures for some form of public direction, answer, or hope.

What, if anything, does Reformed theology have to say to the complex public issues that Christians around the world face every day? When coal miners are killed while laboring in unsafe Chinese mines. When a church in Jakarta wrestles with how to remain faithful in a Muslim-majority nation. When college students debate critical race theory on a university campus in Los Angeles. When a chaplain sits with a dying woman in a Dutch hospital and wrestles with the question of euthanasia. When a community of Gaelic speakers in Scotland begins to die out under the public pressure of an English-speaking majority. When a Black child is baptized into a racially diverse church in apartheid South Africa. When a drug war rages in the Philippines.

These issues are not theoretical. They represent just a few of the concrete public moments discussed in the essays that follow. What does Reformed theology *have to say* in these moments? What does Reformed theology *have to learn* by engaging them?

This book explores the intersection between Reformed theology and public life. Here some leading Reformed voices from around the world discuss complex public issues and arenas through the interpretive lens of the Reformed faith. They are philosophers and theologians, artists and lawyers, business leaders and activists, chaplains and ethicists. They engage these issues from a variety of contexts and disciplines in Asia and Europe, Africa and the Americas.

Despite their differences, these authors share a common Reformed desire to glorify God, not simply in the privacy of their own home or church but also in the public square. Within the Reformed tradition they have each found an interpretive theological resource that equips them to navigate complex worlds like medicine and the marketplace, art and fashion, politics and poetry. These authors occasionally point out the Reformed tradition's flaws, blind spots, and areas in which it stands in need of judgment and confession, amendment and growth. Yet within the tradition they have found a deep theological well from which they continue to draw.

In this introduction I focus on three things. First, I briefly introduce “public theology” as an emerging global and ecumenical discipline. Second, I propose some marks of a distinctly *Reformed* approach to engaging in public theology. And third, I close with a few editorial notes on how to read this book.

Public Theology: A Global and Ecumenical Discipline

We need, in short, not merely to defend the public character of theology but to develop it.

—Linell Cady, “A Model for Public Theology”

While the international and ecumenical discipline formally known as “public theology” did not emerge until the late twentieth century, debates about faith and public life are as old as Christianity itself. We can witness seeds of public theology in early Christian debates over the violence, sexuality, and politics of the Roman Empire. We can see it in the ancient Christian responses to orphans, the sick and the poor, taxes and persecution, pagan philosophy and magic. We can see public theology dripping from Christ's beatitudes and his interactions with tax collectors, soldiers, merchants, governors, and women. We can see it in the prophets' jeremiads against the injustices of Israel's markets, fields, and courts. We can trace its development in the lives of Esther, Daniel, and Joseph as they navigate the foreign palaces of Persia, Babylon, and Egypt.

Yahweh is first introduced to the people of Israel as the one who saves, not in spiritual abstraction but in the concrete public reality of the Egyptian slave economy. Thus Yahweh is revealed to Israel as a peculiar deity who is dedicated to their complete liberation—political and economic, cultural and spiritual. Under Yahweh’s public reign, Israel is commanded to “walk in the ways of the LORD” in every area of their lives (cf. Deut. 30:16 NRSV). In farming and trade, sexuality and health, politics and prayer, every aspect of Israel’s public life is to exhibit holy integrity.

Today the contemporary academic discipline known as “public theology” is still young, developing, and contested. Its precise definition and methodology are a matter of considerable debate. Founded in 2007, the Global Network for Public Theology is composed of scholars from a wide variety of cultural, political, and theological backgrounds.¹ The *International Journal for Public Theology* regularly publishes a broad array of European Lutherans, African Anglicans, North American Baptists, Latin American Liberationists, Congregationalists from Oceania, and many more. Emerging from such diverse contexts, these scholars harbor a wide variety of public concerns and points of theological emphasis, as expected. Given the profound contestation within the field, it might even be best to speak of public theologies, in the plural.

While the global diversity of the field is profound, some common patterns are beginning to emerge within the literature. Below I’ve summarized nine “marks” of public theology. Each of these is a matter of considerable debate and contestation. That said, their prevalence within the field is undeniable. I am drawing heavily on the foundational work of several leading public theologians, including Elaine Graham, Nico Koopman, Heinrich Bedford-Strom, Dirk Smit, Katie Day, and Sebastian Kim.² Readers looking

1. Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age* (London: SCM, 2013), 75.

2. For a background on the historical and methodological development of public theology, see Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Sebastian Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate* (London: SCM, 2011); Dirk J. Smit, “The Paradigm of Public Theology: Origins and Development,” in *Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology*, ed. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Florian Höhne, and Tobias Reitmeier (Berlin: Lit, 2013), 11–23; William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton, eds., *Public Theology for the 21st Century* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); Deirdre King Hainsworth and Scott R. Paeth, eds., *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, *Position beziehen: Perspektiven einer öffentliche Theologie* (Munich: Claudius, 2012); Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*.

Some of the earliest developments of the term “public theology” can be found in Martin Marty, “Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience,” *Journal of Religion* 54, no. 4 (October 1974): 332–59; Marty, *Public Church: Mainline–Evangelical–Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); David Tracy, “Defending the Public Character of Theology,” *Christian*

for a more comprehensive analysis of the field's development should consult their work.³

1. *Scripture and Theology as Public*. Public theologians hold that both Scripture and theology carry with them public value, authority, and consequence. Hence the field explores the implications and purchase of biblical commands and narratives, theological themes, and metaphors for public life. While the precise methods used for textual interpretation and application are matters of significant debate, the public nature of Scripture and theology are not. Here public theology directly challenges the modern Western push to relegate faith to a privatized sphere of personal values and spirituality.⁴ In this, true public theology must emerge from a deep and transformative encounter with scriptural and theological sources. If public theologians at any time untether themselves from these sources, their work ceases to be public theology proper and becomes something else.

Finally, the interpretive flow in public theology does not run in one direction, from scriptural reflection to public application. The field is also deeply interested in the ways in which our public lives inform our readings of Scripture and theology. Readers do not engage these texts in a private or spiritual vacuum. Their readings of God (and of God's mission in the world) are impacted by the ways in which they inhabit public life. Here public theologians are careful to remind Christians that the perceived boundaries between the text and the context, the church and the world, are all profoundly porous.

Century (April 1, 1981), 352; Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroads, 1981); Max Stackhouse, "An Ecumenist's Plea for a Public Theology," *This World* 8 (1984): 47–79; Robert N. Bellah, "Public Philosophy and Public Theology in America Today," in *Civil Religion and Political Theology*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1986), 79–97; Linell E. Cady, "A Model for a Public Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 80, no. 2 (1987): 193–212.

Some of the earliest book-length works on public theology are Max L. Stackhouse, *Public Theology and Political Economy: Christian Stewardship in Modern Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); and Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

3. "As the project of public theology has developed there is no single, identifiable corpus of orthodoxy that has been produced, but rather some 'marks' have been generally recognized as essential to the process of constructive public theology. While scholars might vary in the weight given to these, there is emerging consensus on the indicators which distinguish . . . public theology as such." Katie Day and Sebastian Kim, "Introduction," in Kim and Day, *Companion to Public Theology*, 10.

4. Kathryn Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 16 (1996): 79.

2. *Public Listening.* Public theology assumes that it can and *must* listen to the world around it. As a result, it assumes a posture of curiosity and openness toward the world and its many voices. This posture can be witnessed in the field's profoundly interdisciplinary character. Here public theologians immerse themselves in other fields of study, including political and social theory, economics, literature, cultural studies, and so on. Public theologians also seek to learn from different cultures, religions, industries, and political dispositions. A Muslim scientist in Cairo, an atheist artist in Berlin, an agnostic entrepreneur in New York, and a socialist activist in Mumbai—each of them has important insights to share. A good public theologian will be ready and willing to listen.

Finally, many public theologians place specific theological value on listening to the voices of those on the underside of global power. Much can be learned about the true nature of social systems and structures by listening to those who view those structures from the underside. Listening to their voices and walking at their side, public theologians hope to gain deeper insights into the true nature of the world's principalities and powers.

3. *Public Speech.* Having listened carefully, public theologians begin to develop their own unique forms of public speech. Over time they become increasingly bilingual or even multilingual. Here they slowly develop the competence to speak *both* theologically and publicly with diverse interlocutors in the church and the world, in the academy and on the street.

Public theologians attempt to speak—however haltingly—across the boundaries of diverse cultures and disciplines, religions and ideologies. While their multilingual abilities are always partial, imperfect, and incomplete, public theologians endeavor to serve as translators and bridge builders across worlds long divided. When they do speak, public theologians tend to engage in two primary forms of discourse: public persuasion and public critique.

4. *Public Persuasion.* Public theologians believe that it is possible for Christians to engage in persuasive dialogues across deep cultural and religious differences. Although they differ as to exactly *how* these discursive connections are possible, they believe that, by the power of God, they can make their theologically informed arguments understood and persuasive *even* within a religiously diverse public square.

Some public theologians appeal to a universal natural law, reason, or moral consciousness; others appeal to a divine work of universal

providence, general revelation, common grace, or simply the power of the Holy Spirit. Whatever their foundation, public theologians harbor some level of confidence that theologically informed public speech can actually connect with and persuade their neighbors.

In summation, though their precise methods and levels of optimism differ, public theologians believe that Christians have a responsibility for trying to be persuasive within public life.

5. *Public Critique.* Some public theologians go beyond the bounds of persuasion and engage in forceful acts of public critique. They see themselves as having a prophetic calling from God to tell the truth about public injustice, ugliness, and evil. For them, it is not sufficient merely to theologically reflect on the principalities and powers, they must publicly expose and confront them as well.⁵

Some public theologians even criticize the very construction of the “public square” and the rules of “public discourse” themselves. They point out that marginalized populations are being actively excluded from public life: what is called a “public consensus” is really just the consensus of the dominant. Herein the social construction of who counts as a “public voice” and what counts as a “public issue” is placed under their prophetic scrutiny.⁶

While their prophetic critique is often aimed at “the world,” public theologians can also be found criticizing the destructive ways in which the church shows up in public life. Here public theologians point out the manifold ways in which Christian communities and theologies have visited manifold forms of destruction onto public life.

6. *Praxis and Reflection.* The best public theology is developed in the streets. It is performed, embodied, and lived. Public theologians emphasize the

5. “Forrester contrasts two approaches to public theology, the ‘magisterial’ and the ‘liberationist,’ the first being more ‘top-down’ and the second being more ‘bottom-up.’ The first tends to reflect the perspective of theologians who are used to talking to the powers that be, whereas the second tends to reflect that of theologians close to the least powerful.” Andrew R. Morton, “Duncan Forrester: A Public Theologian,” in Storrar and Morton, *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, 34.

6. See Stephen Burns and Anita Monroe, eds., *Public Theology and the Challenge of Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Also see Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56–80. Here Fraser critiques modern European constructions of public space, civil society, and public discourse that fail to include marginalized voices: “This network of clubs and associations—philanthropic, civic, professional, and cultural—was anything but accessible to everyone. On the contrary, it was the arena, the training ground, and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men, who were coming to see themselves as a ‘universal class’ and preparing to assert their fitness to govern” (60).

importance of concrete and practice-based theological reflection. As an academic discipline, public theology endeavors to avoid losing itself in theoretical abstraction.⁷ As such, public theology is at its best when it is developed *in and through* Christian community and public action in specific times, spaces, and issues.

This is critically important. Being a disciple of Jesus is a *way of walking* in and through the world. The faith is active, embodied, and lived. The way of Jesus cannot be reduced to a set of disembodied ideas or dogmas. Christian theology—like Christian people—cannot remain above the fray. Christians must actually walk with Christ amid the highways and byways of Tokyo and Kinshasa, Seattle and São Paulo. *Public theology is an active reflection on the walking.*

7. *The Diversity of Publics and Theologies.* There is not one “public square” that all global Christians are called to engage. There are, instead, a multiplicity of public squares, each with their own unique challenges and opportunities. There is a public square of New York art, of Parisian fashion, of Pakistani farming, of Mexican telecommunications, of Vietnamese housing, and of Egyptian health care. These are obviously diverse publics, which invite diverse forms of Christian engagement.

Just as there are many public spaces, there are also many different public times. Consider the city of Berlin in the years 1940, 1980, and 2020. Consider the diverse ways in which Christians might be called to inhabit Berlin within those distinct eras. This is why it is not at all helpful to speak of “the public square” as if it were a single or stable thing that all Christians are called to engage.⁸ Instead, public theologians try to grapple with the ways in which distinct times and places have called for distinct Christian responses.

To further complicate matters, there are also a variety of theological traditions by which Christians can interpret and engage public life. Globally speaking, there are a multiplicity of Lutheran and Catholic,

7. Within public theology “there is not a one-way movement from theological reflection that is then ‘applied’ to a social context; rather the two are interactive. Theology is being produced even as it is being performed or expressed in the public sphere. Action challenges and informs theological understandings, even as theology interrogates the methods of activism.” Day and Kim, “Introduction,” 18.

8. “The dichotomy of ‘public’ and ‘private’ is not helpful in defining public theology. Public theology should not be understood as interested only in public issues in contrast to domestic or private matters. ‘Public’ does not refer to the place of doing theology but to the openness of theology for any party to engage in debate; it [has] to do with universal access and open debate for all members of the society.” Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, 10.

Pentecostal and postcolonial, fundamentalist and feminist forms of public theological engagement.

Acknowledging this somewhat overwhelming diversity, public theologians often seek to do two things at once. First, they seek to focus on and develop their own specific theological tradition in conversation with their own public context. Second, they seek to “look over the fence” and learn from other theological traditions engaging other contexts.⁹

One final note: when public theologians pay close attention to their own contexts and theological traditions, their specificity and particularity does not necessarily disconnect them from the larger global public. In fact, their specificity can actually *enable* their connections with other traditions and other public discourses. Benjamin Valentin’s work within Latino public theology is representative of this phenomenon. In his work he demonstrates how his very particular identity, context, and theological tradition help him to better connect with broader global issues and communities.¹⁰ In this way, diverse forms of public theology might be understood as having undergone a form of “glocalization.”¹¹ Accordingly, public theologians aim to be *both* deeply embedded in their local communities while also being conversant with other settings. This phenomenon is born out as the local and global repeatedly intersect in fascinating, unexpected, and “glocal” ways.

8. *Reformation over Revolution*. Through public persuasion, confrontation, and active participation, public theologians aim to bend and reform the powers, principalities, and institutions of the world in more just and life-giving directions. This method distinguishes public theology from other forms of theological discourse that call for a more “revolutionary” posture and practice. Revolutionary discourses in theology tend to see the dominant structures and institutions of public life as, on the whole, irreparable and unredeemable. Attempts at public compromise, deliberation, and negotiation are foolhardy. A belief in reformation is folly. There is nothing to do but deconstruct what is and build what could be. While public theologians differ in their

9. “To face several publics is not to be at home in any of them, but to be always away from the place where one really belongs. This experience of displacement is theology-generating discomfort, part of the grinding in this crucible of the simultaneity of publics.” Morton, “Duncan Forrester,” 33.

10. See Benjamin Valentin, *Mapping Public Theology: Beyond Culture, Identity, and Difference* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002).

11. For insight into glocalization’s early development, see Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity,” in *Global Modernities*, ed. Michael Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (London: Sage, 1995), 25–44.

methods and levels of optimism, they tend more toward public reform than public revolution.

9. *Complex Flourishing*. The final mark of public theology is its concern for the multifaceted flourishing of creation and culture, individuals and institutions, and a wide variety of global publics. Here “flourishing” cannot be narrowly measured by any single metric. Flourishing cannot be reduced to a marked increase in economic wealth, political justice, aesthetic beauty, intellectual discovery, leisurely play, or religious worship.¹² Human beings are complex and multifaceted creatures; their flourishing involves a complex array of public goods. The flourishing of one individual requires the flourishing of schools and families, courts and businesses, artist guilds and sports teams, newspapers and unions, churches and sewer systems. Public theologians therefore refuse to narrow their theological conception of flourishing to just the political, the economic, the spiritual, or the aesthetic. Instead, they aim to further the manifold flourishing of public life.

Elaine Graham, a leading public theologian in the United Kingdom, offers a definition of public theology that, while not comprehensive, connects well with the essays found in this book. She defines public theology as an “academic discipline and ecclesial discourse” that “seeks to comment and critically reflect from a theological perspective on aspects of public life such as economics, politics, culture and media. Traditionally, public theology sees itself as rooted in religious traditions, but strongly in conversation with secular discourse and public institutions.”¹³ Nico Koopman, a South African public theologian, offers a welcome Christocentric framing for the field, arguing that public theology “reflects upon the implication of the confession of the Lordship of Christ for life and for life together in all public spheres, from the most intimate to the most social, global and cosmic.”¹⁴

Although the essays in this book do not cohere around any single definition of public theology, these nine marks surface again and again. Now, having surveyed the international and ecumenical field of public theology, the next

12. “Yet in contrast to political theology, public theology is not exclusively or primarily concerned with politics and political institutions; . . . [public theologians often] propose a more expanded notion of the areas of life to which public theology should attend.” E. Harold Breitenberg, “To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 2 (2003): 59.

13. Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, xix.

14. Nico Koopman, “Public Theology in the Context of Nationalist Ideologies: A South African Example,” in Kim and Day, *Companion to Public Theology*, 161.

section will briefly drill down and consider the unique marks of a *Reformed* approach to public theology.

Toward a *Reformed* Public Theology

Even the most cursory reading of Reformation history reveals that the Reformed tradition has been a profoundly public enterprise from its very beginning. John Calvin and the early Reformers were constantly grappling with issues of language and culture, art and clothing, immigration and poverty, debt and interest, sex and politics.¹⁵ These early Reformed leaders were navigating profound public challenges and developing a theological tradition at one and the same time.

What we today call “Reformed theology” was not formulated on a remote university campus; it was worked out in the marketplaces and street.¹⁶ We can see the development of a Reformed public theology in the early Reformers’ letters to princes and kings. We can see it in their public appeals to local city councils. We can read it in their proposed civic laws on trade and clothing, sanitation and cursing, farming and foreigners. We can see Reformed public theology take on institutional flesh in their newly founded hospitals, universities, and businesses. It is embodied in their earliest charity organizations dedicated to serving refugees, widows, and the poor.

These early leaders sought a reformation, not simply of the church but also of the public structures, institutions, patterns, and morals that shaped their

15. For historical examinations of the intersection between faith and public life in the early Reformation, see John Witte Jr. and Amy Wheeler, eds., *The Protestant Reformation of the Church and the World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018); William A. Dyrness, *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe: Calvin’s Reformation Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); John Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); David P. Henreckson, *The Immortal Commonwealth: Covenant, Community, and Political Resistance in Early Reformed Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Timothy J. Demy, Mark J. Larson, and J. Daryl Charles, *The Reformers on War, Peace, and Justice* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019); W. Fred Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and His Socio-Economic Impact* (Richmond: John Knox, 1971); Harro M. Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); R. Po-Chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop, *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); John Bowlin, ed., *The Kuyper Center Review*, vol. 4, *Calvinism and Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

16. For an examination of Reformed theology’s impact on the intellectual and public life of Europe, see Gijsbert van den Brink and Harro M. Höpfl, *Calvinism and the Making of the European Mind* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). For an examination of the formative influence of Calvin’s early public-theological conflicts, see Gary Jenkins, *Calvin’s Tormentors: Understanding the Conflicts That Shaped the Reformer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

common life.¹⁷ Although medieval Roman Catholics tended to see themselves as part of a natural social order that was established, given, and settled, the early Reformers tended to see themselves as moral agents who were fundamentally responsible for the political, economic, and ecclesial patterns of public life. Nicholas Wolterstorff explains that, as the Reformation continued to develop, its leaders began to see themselves as morally and publicly “responsible for the structure of the social world in which they find themselves. That structure is not simply part of the order of nature; to the contrary, it is the result of human decision, and by concerted effort it can be altered. Indeed it *should* be altered, for its fallen structure is in need of reform.”¹⁸ In 1641, a Puritan pastor offered a revealing sermon to the English House of Commons charging the nation’s leaders with this holy and public task: “Reformation must be universal. . . . Reform all places, all persons and callings; reform the benches of judgment, the inferior magistrates. . . . Reform the universities, reform the cities, reform the countries, reform interior schools of learning, reform the Sabbath, reform the ordinances, the worship of God. . . . You have more work to do than I can speak. . . . Every plant which my heavenly father hath not planted shall be rooted up.”¹⁹ The zeal for the reformation of both church and public life was obviously intense, sometimes rather self-righteous and even unbearable. And yet, their constant call for public reform came from a core Reformed conviction: God alone, not the king, was sovereign over the public order, and the Holy Scriptures were a trustworthy guide for its renewal and reformation.

For the Reformers, the world was not a damned pit from which souls of humanity would be rescued. Instead, the world was a performative space in which God’s glory would be made manifest in and through creation. Within the global vision of John Calvin, Susan Schreiner argues, the whole of creation becomes the grand “theatre of God’s glory.”²⁰ Here is the key point: God’s glory would shine, not simply through God’s work of creation, but

17. “For Calvin the real world was to be taken seriously, and for him the real world involved shoemakers, printers, and clockmakers, as well as farmers, scholars, knights, and clergymen. . . . Calvin grimly assumes that all human enterprise is tainted with evil—a safe assumption—and sets about to make the gospel relevant to the city of commerce in which he lived and labored. . . . In other words, true religion not only visits the sick and takes care of the widows and orphans, but also tries to see the relevance of the gospel in the rest of the world that is.” Graham, *Constructive Revolutionary*, 79.

18. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 3.

19. Quoted in Michael Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 10–11.

20. Susan Elizabeth Schreiner, *Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

also through humanity’s holy work, worship, and service in the world. Here the world becomes a performative stage upon which people can serve and glorify their God through tilling fields and raising families, saying prayers and cleaning streets, cooking meals and housing refugees. Every vocation is a public calling to holy work and worship. For, as Calvin writes, “the faithful, to whom [God] has given eyes, see sparks of his glory, as it were, glittering in every created thing. The world was no doubt made that it might be the theatre of divine glory.”²¹

In view of this theological understanding of public life, it is no accident that the paintings of Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Van Gogh positively glory in the vocations of farmers and housewives, sailors and cooks. It is no accident that their paint brushes illuminate the creational glory of the fields, skies, and seas. Raised in the soil of the Dutch reformation, their theological and aesthetic imagination saw the inbreaking of divine glory in both creation and culture. As the South African public theologian John de Gruchy writes, “For artists imbued with the spirit of the Reformation, true piety was not to be found in the monastery but in the marketplace and the home, amidst the ordinary things and events of life.”²² A theological aesthetic that is informed by the tradition of Calvin “does not encourage flight from the world but assumes Christian participation in God’s mission to transform the world.”²³ De Gruchy argues that “no one expressed this better than Vincent van Gogh, the son of a Dutch Reformed pastor who turned to art only when he failed to become a theologian himself. In rejecting [Catholic] paintings of the *Annunciation*, *Christ in the Garden of Olives*, and the *Adoration of the Magi* by his friend Emil Bernard, Van Gogh declared: ‘I bow down before that study, powerful enough to make a Millet tremble—of peasants carrying home to the farm a calf which has been born in the fields.’”²⁴ Rather than painting the Virgin Mary, artists like Van Gogh painted the holy work and worship of common workers laboring in God’s fields and kitchens. Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Van Gogh portray in paint what Calvin depicts in his commentary on the Psalms: “The whole world is a theatre for the display of divine goodness, wisdom, justice, and power.”²⁵

21. Calvin’s *Commentary on Hebrews*, on Heb. 11:4; quoted in W. David O. Taylor, *The Theater of God’s Glory: Calvin, Creation, and the Liturgical Arts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 36, punctuation adjusted.

22. John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 46.

23. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation*, 129.

24. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation*, 46.

25. John Calvin is commenting on Ps. 135:13 in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 5, trans. James Anderson (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 126.

The Marks of Reformed Public Theology

In many ways, the search for a definitively *Reformed* approach to public theology is a doomed project from the start. Neither John Calvin nor his progeny ever created a single Reformed denomination or confession into which all others would fall into line. The Reformed tradition, in its theological method and its public expression, has always been deeply contested.²⁶

Unlike the Lutheran tradition, whose early public theological identity was built around the cultural identity of the German people, the Reformed identity was stretched across the kingdoms of Switzerland and Scotland, Hungary and the Netherlands, France and later New England. Rather early, the tradition was forced to make space for a diversity of nations, cultures, languages, ethnicities, and political arrangements. As a multinational phenomenon, Reformed leaders had to wrestle with the public consequences of their theology in diverse contexts.

Today the contested global conversation between Reformed theology and public life goes on. Reformed communities around the world continue to grapple with the texts they treasure and contexts to which they have been called. We can watch in real time as Reformed communities in Jakarta and Cape Town, São Paulo and New York, Amsterdam and Hong Kong—each wrestle with the age-old questions of Reformed theology and public life.²⁷ Every year new voices join what surely must become a more diverse multidisciplinary and multinational Reformed conversation.

In many ways Reformed public theology shares much in common with the larger ecumenical project of global public theology. As we will see in the essays that follow, Reformed public theologians also seek to examine the public nature of Scripture and theology. They listen and learn from diverse disciplines, cultures, contexts, and from those on the underside of power. They dive into the unique disciplinary languages like economics, urban design, and critical race theory. They find ways to speak within diverse publics and contexts in ways that are appropriate and understandable. At times they attempt public dialogue and persuasion; on other occasions they assume the posture of prophetic critique and forceful rebuttal. Many of the authors in this volume are practitioners first and theorists second. Public theology's prescription for a combination of praxis and reflection is a way of life for them. Finally,

26. Wallace M. Alston Jr. and Michael Welker, *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

27. For a Kenyan sociopolitical conversation with the theology of John Calvin, see David Kirwa Tarus, *A Different Way of Being: Towards a Reformed Theology of Ethnopolitical Cohesion for the Kenyan Context* (Cumbria, UK: Langham, 2019).

these authors engage a diversity of publics, including law in China, sexism in Africa, urban design in Brazil, racism in America, language in Scotland, business in New York, and Islam in Indonesia.

Although Reformed public theology shares much in common with the ecumenical project we have described as “public theology,” a few points of emphasis appear to set the tradition apart. While not exclusively owned by the Reformed tradition, these marks appear repeatedly within tradition’s public imagination. To be clear, these marks are not universally held by all Reformed Christians around the world. However, in the diverse essays contained within this book these points of emphasis will surface again and again. In a way, we might consider them “the public habits of the Reformed heart.”

1. *Listening to the Laity.* Reformed public theology does not belong to any specific guild of academic theologians or ordained clergy. The tradition’s emphasis on the priesthood of all believers demands that the laity be active participants in any public theological project that the tradition produces.

Though these essays are works of public theology, many of the authors do not consider themselves to be “public theologians.” They are Reformed activists and artists, painters and philosophers, lawyers and business leaders, chaplains and community organizers—all of whom are seeking to engage public life in a theologically conversant way. While many hold degrees in theology, philosophy, and ethics, I have been careful to include several voices whose theology has grown primarily through embodied public action in the boardroom, the courtroom, the studio, the campus, and the street protest. As Richard Mouw writes, “We would all think it odd if a lifelong resident of Paris wrote a book about how to live a life of discipleship in Latin America. . . . Similarly there something odd about an attempt by clergy and professional theologians to speak with authority about the situations faced by mechanics, insurance agents, and farmers.”²⁸

2. *Dispersing Power.* Reformed public theologians appear to be particularly concerned with pushing power *both down and out* throughout society. In pushing power *down*, they show a particular theological allergy to hierarchical consolidations of social power. In politics, the marketplace, the church, and beyond, dominating leaders and cabals are out of bounds. In pushing power *out*, Reformed public theologians also demonstrate a public allergy to the singular dominance of either the

28. Richard J. Mouw, *Called to Holy Worldliness* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 25.

state, the marketplace, or the church. No single institution or sphere of public life should dominate the others. Instead, public power should be pushed *out*; it should be extended generously to the arts and sciences, markets and courts, universities and nonprofits.

In this volume and beyond, Reformed public theologians heartily disagree on the specifics of power dispersal; yet in general, this theological desire to push public power both down and out throughout society comes up again and again in their work.

Much can be said about the origins of this Reformed allergy toward the collection and consolidation of public power. For now, I will briefly mention the public consequences of a Reformed theology of creation and fall. First, in creation, Reformed theologians see the Creator gifting the whole of humanity with a diverse array of gifts, callings, and responsibilities. These gifts are not exclusively given to a specific class of elites or a particular institution or sphere of life (like the state, the market, or the church). Instead, these divine gifts and responsibilities are distributed widely throughout human society. Therefore, any consolidation of power in the hands of a single leader, community, or institution is interpreted by Reformed theologians as a form of creational theft. It robs diverse individuals and institutions of their own *God-given* gifts, callings, and responsibilities.

Second, in the rebellious fall of human society into sin, every single public leader, institution, and discourse struggles to access, interpret, and do the will of God. No public force has a perfect knowledge of God's public will. In the light of society's collective blindness and depravity, Reformed public theologians argue that it is wise and prudent to disperse public power widely, pushing it further down and further out.

Finally, when discussing complex public evils like racism, colonialism, and economic oppression, the Reformed voices in this volume do not simply reach for a spiritual analysis of the issue; they reach for a structural analysis as well. Within the Reformed tradition, they find theological resources for thinking about the systemic, institutional, and structural nature of power. Within these complex social systems of power, they see the potential for both divine flourishing and human destruction.

3. *Temporal Awareness.* Again and again these essays seem profoundly concerned that Christians in public life recognize "what time it is." They insist that Christians become more aware of the divine epoch in which they live. According to their theological "watches," Christians

live, work, and play within the time of God’s “already” and “not yet.” The kingdom of God has already broken into the world in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is already alive and active within its social structures and systems. That said, the fulfillment of the Lord’s mission and work is not yet fully manifest. The creation is still groaning. The principalities and powers still wield their swords. Every tear has not yet been wiped away.

As Christians move in and through public life, these Reformed voices emphasize the need for them to grapple with their temporal place *between* the divine epochs. These theologians are particularly concerned with the public consequences of Christians who harbor either an over-realized or under-realized understanding of the kingdom’s arrival in the public square today.

4. *Historical Humility.* The authors in this volume will quote, in one and the same breath, a sixteenth-century voice on theology and a twenty-first-century voice on critical race theory, fashion theory, or urban design. While the authors fully recognize the vast historical chasms that exist between these worlds, they are convinced that historical voices within the Reformed tradition have something important to offer Christians in public life today. The authors’ peculiar willingness to learn from the historical wisdom of the tradition might be a contribution to a broader public theology movement, which could stand to grow in its willingness to engage historical sources.
5. *Aesthetic Neighborliness.* While the ecumenical movement for public theology tends to focus the bulk of its energy on the issues of politics, economics, and culture, the questions of art and public aesthetics are somewhat less prominent. This volume—with essays exploring the public importance of poetry and painting, pottery and fashion, urban design and architecture—highlights a Reformed interest in the importance of aesthetics for public life.

Here Reformed public theology is pointing to aesthetics as a medium through which Christians are called to love and serve their neighbors. Here Christians can inhabit and engage public life through artistic and architectural creativity, decoration and dress, poetic rhyme and musical rhythm.

6. *Culture Making.* Although much of contemporary public theology tends to focus on verbal and intellectual forms of public discourse and exchange, in these essays we can see a broader Reformed concern for the nonverbal and more common ways in which the laity engage

the public square every day. We notice the creation of a business plan or a new institution, the teaching of a class or the raising of a child, the writing of a novel or a new investment strategy: all of these are profound and embodied ways in which Christians impact public life every day. Through the *making* of culture, as opposed to simply criticizing it, Christian architects, entrepreneurs, farmers, and city planners offer their neighbors new ways of living and being in the public square.

Although the guild of public theology has historically been concerned with the public exchange of words, ideas, and beliefs, Reformed public theology thus emphasizes that the cultural creations we *make* constitute a critical aspect of Christian public exchange and global discourse.²⁹

7. *Public Delight*. As noted earlier, a universal mark of public theology is a desire to listen to and learn from the wisdom of diverse cultures, disciplines, and religions. In this sense, the Reformed tradition offers nothing unique in its belief that God has something to teach the church in and through the world.

That said, something somewhat distinct appears to happen in these essays when the authors examine the theological value of the world's words and work. Here we detect a rather unique display of joy, gratitude, and delight as these authors theologically reflect upon the beauty and insight they find in the world outside.

By way of their essays, we begin to suspect that *God* actually takes joy in the cultural wisdom, insight, virtue, and creativity of those outside the church. The essays repeatedly argue that Christians should not simply learn from their non-Christian neighbors; they should also be *grateful* for and take *delight* in their contributions to the global public square. Whether these essays are surveying well-designed neighborhoods, new fashion trends, Japanese tea ceremonies, Brazilian coffee shops, or African American poetry, one detects within them a call to Christian gratitude and delight in the world. Here the authors reflect John Calvin's words: "It is no small honor that God for our sake has so magnificently adorned the world, in order that we may not only be spectators of this beautiful theater, but also enjoy the multiplied abundance and variety of good things which are presented to us in it."³⁰

29. For a discussion of this form of public engagement, see Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013).

30. Calvin's *Commentary on the Psalms*, on Ps. 104:31, quoted in Taylor, *Theater of God's Glory*, 37.

8. *A Liturgical Life*. In a sexist and misogynistic society, a woman is baptized and declared a full member of the priesthood of all believers. Caught in a state of legal limbo between Peru and the USA, an undocumented immigrant finds a home at the Lord's Table. Flooded by distressing economic news about the COVID-19 pandemic, a congregation learns to offer their petitions and intercessions before God in public prayer. A nation demands that a lying politician publicly confess his sins and seek absolution. These are just a few of the many intersections between Christian worship and public life that are discussed in this book.

The best public theology emerges from a robust public liturgy. Within this volume an entire section of essays is dedicated to the Reformed desire to form a deeper connection between its worship and its public life. This section argues repeatedly that the walls between the sanctuary and the street should be made increasingly porous. The patterns of grace sung in the sanctuary should be reflected in the patterns of life lived in the world. Likewise, the public burdens carried by the people in the world should be carried directly into the sanctuary and laid upon the altar. The integrity of both worship and public life depend on it.

9. *A Liberated Solidarity*. Finally, these essays wrestle continuously with a twofold desire to liberate individuals from oppressive institutions and communities while, at the same time, conceiving of institutions and communities in which individuals might flourish. Here the Reformed public imagination is particularly concerned with avoiding the Scylla and Charybdis of *both* rootless individualism *and* oppressive collectivism.

These essays exhibit a profound yearning within the Reformed tradition to articulate a nuanced vision of individual freedom that can be found *within* communities, institutions, and civic structures. The Reformed imagination retains a strong refusal to accept the modern notion that individual liberty and communal solidarity are mutually exclusive. Articulating a relationship of mutuality between individuals and institutions is an ongoing Reformed concern.

How (Not) to Read this Book

How might Reformed theology engage Chinese labor laws, New York fashion trends, African colonialism, or the Philippine drug war? This book is specifically designed to serve as a “taste and see” introduction to a variety of select ways in which Reformed theology and public life intersect.

In no way is this book comprehensive. Because of strict space restrictions, authors were not permitted to offer an exhaustive account of their contexts or theological categories. Rather than clearing their throats with pages of theological methodology or cultural analysis, the authors were instructed to dive in, get to work, and actually do public theology. They were asked to show rather than tell. Readers looking for more intricate and nuanced discussions of the authors' contexts and theological categories are urged to consult the footnotes. Many of the authors have written on these subjects at great length, in their own books, dissertations, and articles.

By and large, the authors were instructed to explore the ways in which Reformed theology *positively* informs their engagement with public life. Although they occasionally challenge and criticize the failures, missteps, and outright injustices of the Reformed tradition, their primary interest is in constructively building on the generative resources that they have found within the tradition.

Designing the book in this way presents several dangers to the reader. First, it might give the impression that the authors view the Reformed tradition through a set of rose-colored glasses—as if the tradition has no public sins or theological blind spots for which it must account. Furthermore, it might even give the impression that we believe there is no public question to which Reformed theology does not already have the answer. This is clearly false. Given sufficient space, these authors could have expanded on a variety of ways in which they differ from the Reformed tradition. They recognize the clay-footed fallenness of Reformed heroes like Calvin and Edwards, Barth and Kuyper. The authors know, as do we all, that the Reformed tradition is complicit in any number of public sins, whether political or cultural, racial or colonial.

Second, such a book might inspire in its readers an ugly sort of theological chauvinism, in which Reformed theology is depicted as superior to all other theological traditions. Once again, given the requisite space and time, many of these authors would have listed their deep ecumenical indebtedness to the wisdom of Catholic, Lutheran, postcolonial, evangelical, and Pentecostal voices. These essays do not exist on the isolated island of “pure” Reformed theology. They exist as part of a deeper catholic archipelago. As Reformed catholics, we are connected to an ecumenical lineage of diverse theological traditions deeply linked beneath the sea. Calvinistic jingoism has no place here.

In selecting the authors for this book, the hope was to demonstrate a four-fold diversity of disciplines, denominations, issues, and contexts. While we have managed to include an impressive diversity of denominations and issues, it is important to briefly name the volume's shortcomings. We do not cover

important issues like the environment, gender, and technology.³¹ We have no authors representing the critically important regions of the Middle East or the Indian subcontinent. We have no authors representing the disciplines of science, psychology, or literature. The author list remains heavily American, mostly male, and primarily centered within the guild of the theological academy. These shortcomings signal that, despite the tradition's laudable progress, much more needs to be done.

With these notes and cautions made, we proceed with our task. The reigning purpose of this book is to explore a variety of ways in which Reformed theology and public life are intersecting in the world today. In and through this project, our hope is to demonstrate the tradition's continued ability to learn and grow, explore and serve, all within the complex public spaces to which it has been called.

31. For contemporary Reformed engagements with these issues see, for example, Derek Schuurman, *Shaping a Digital World: Faith, Culture, and Computer Technology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013); Steven Bouma Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones, eds., *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011).