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# **‘I Met God, She’s Black’: Racial, Gender and Sexual Equalities in Public Theology**

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## **Introducing the Issues**

At the outset, the very notion of ‘public theology’ is contentious when considering issues of race, gender and sexual equality and yet these issues are of primary significance for Christian churches today. Despite the election of its first black President, Barack Obama in 2008, racial justice is not a reality in the United States of America; on the contrary, the number of black Americans killed by police is a serious concern. While some white Christians have supported ‘Black Lives Matter Sunday’,<sup>1</sup> polls conducted by the Pew Research Center, following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, reveal that eighty per cent of blacks believe that the grand jury made the wrong decision in not charging the police officer, Darren Wilson, in the death of Brown, compared with only twenty-three per cent of whites; likewise, only sixteen per cent of whites believe race was a ‘major factor’ in the grand jury’s decision-making, compared with sixty-four per cent of blacks.<sup>2</sup> Even more troubling than the discrepancies in the perception of racial discrimination is the perpetuation of notions of white supremacy through the Ku Klux Klan, its claim to be a Christian group and its use of biblical texts to support its views.<sup>3</sup> In June 2015, over one hundred and twenty years since Ida B. Wells called for an end to the lynching of black people, and over fifty years since Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* highlighting the ‘whiteness’ of the gospel as it was preached in America, controversy over the Confederate flag and the burning of seven black churches has made international news headlines.<sup>4</sup>

On the matter of female bishops, the Anglican church in the UK lagged behind the US, Germany, Iceland, New Zealand, Sweden and South Africa until January 2015, when

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<sup>1</sup> <http://georgeowood.com/black-lives-matter-sunday/> [accessed 11 June 2015].

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.people-press.org/2014/12/08/sharp-racial-divisions-in-reactions-to-brown-garner-decisions/> [accessed 11 June 2015].

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kkkknights.com/> [accessed 11 June 2015].

<sup>4</sup> <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/245579-obama-thinks-confederate-flag-belongs-in-a-museum> [accessed 20 June 2015].; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-33368317> [accessed 4 July 2015].

Libby Lane was consecrated at York Minster as the Church of England's first female bishop. Despite approving the ordination of women as priests over twenty years ago, following decades of campaigning, the issue remains controversial with both those for and those against female ordination employing biblical texts in support of their position. When the General Synod voted to allow the ordination of women to the priesthood in 1992, over four hundred male clergy left the Church of England in protest. In an attempt to appease those who opposed the ordination of women, the Church of England introduced 'flying bishops' (properly known as Provincial Episcopal Visitors) who would be 'flown in' to minister to parishes who refused to accept the ministry of female priests or the ministry of bishops prepared to ordain women to the priesthood; yet, making such an allowance continued discrimination against women. Although the General Synod voted in 2005 to remove legal barriers to women becoming bishops, drawing up the necessary legislation involved a further seven years of wrangling and was not put to a vote until 2012. Despite an overwhelming majority of dioceses supporting the legislation, the outcome was that the two-thirds majority required was a mere six votes short; this was a severe blow to gender equality and to the credibility of the church. By the end of May 2014 revised legislation had been approved by all dioceses of the Church of England which went on to pass the vote at General Synod in July 2014; yet, still with an allowance for those in opposition to female ordination to request male priests and bishops.

Similarly divisive has been the debate over gay priests and same-sex marriage, which has attracted media coverage since Gene Robinson hit the headlines as the first priest in an openly gay relationship to be consecrated as a bishop in New Hampshire's Episcopal Church. In response, the Archbishop of Canterbury formed the Eames Commission (published as the Windsor Report), which put a halt to the consecration of bishops who were in same-sex relationships. Nevertheless, in 2003 Canon Jeffrey John was appointed Bishop of Reading whilst advocating faithful same-sex relationships (although insisting on his own celibacy). For years the Church of England has opposed active homosexuality, only allowing the ordination of gay priests on the grounds that they remain celibate. Yet, changes in the law have galvanized campaigners for lesbian and gay rights within the church; an issue which threatens to spilt the African Anglican churches from the worldwide Anglican Communion.<sup>5</sup> A bill to allow same-sex marriages was passed in England and Wales in July 2013, and came into force in March 2014, but churches were not compelled to perform them. While the

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<sup>5</sup> See Harriet Sherwood, 'Anglican Church Risks Global Schism Over Homosexuality', *The Guardian* (12 January 2016).

Pilling Report suggested that churches might provide blessings for gay couples, the House of Bishops stated that the Church of England would not provide them and it reiterated its belief that marriage is between one man and one woman; although, the bishops' statement also acknowledges the social virtues of same-sex relationships.<sup>6</sup> Hence, in 2013 the Church of England officially sanctioned the appointment of gay bishops who are in civil partnerships, but still on the grounds that they remain celibate.

Catholicism has been unwavering in its condemnation of female ordination and homosexuality and yet the Catholic Women's Ordination movement has been active since 1993, a year before Pope John Paul II's definitive statement: 'it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood' was made in the *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* of 1994. Pope Francis has upheld this view on women, and maintains that gay sex is a sin, despite speaking of 'welcoming homosexuals'; a phrase used in the Vatican's document, *Relatio Post Disceptationem*, of October 2014. Both of these views were widely reported following his earlier conversation with reporters on a 2013 flight from Brazil, in which he supports 'a greater role for women' but not the priesthood, and similarly, opposes the marginalization of homosexuals in society stating: 'if a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?' and yet continues to condemn homosexual acts.<sup>7</sup> As with the Anglican Church, the Catholic Church hierarchy lags behind the views of ordinary Catholics, most of whom do not think homosexuality is a sin and are not opposed to same-sex marriage. For example, polls from the Pew Research Center indicate that seventy per cent of US Catholics think society should accept homosexuality and fifty-seven per cent also support same-sex marriage.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, while maintaining a discriminatory position on women and homosexuality, the Catholic Church has been plagued by child sexual abuse scandals. From the 1980s cases of sustained sexual abuse by Catholic priests in the US, Canada, Ireland and Europe, covering several decades, began to make global headlines. As victims' accusations were investigated, it was not only further cases that came to light, but also the shocking cover-up by the Catholic Church: victims had been ignored and paedophile priests had been quietly relocated rather than reported to the police and removed from office. In particular, the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2014/02/house-of-bishops-pastoral-guidance-on-same-sex-marriage.aspx> [accessed 11 June 2015].

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-23489702> [accessed 12 January 2016]; <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/pope-francis-who-am-i-to-judge/> [accessed 12 January 2016]; [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/30/world/europe/pope-francis-gay-priests.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/30/world/europe/pope-francis-gay-priests.html?_r=0) [accessed 12 January 2016].

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/10/16/young-u-s-catholics-overwhelmingly-accepting-of-homosexuality/> [accessed 11 June 2015].

2009 Ryan Report (also known as the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse) found endemic child sexual abuse dating back to 1936 in Catholic children's institutions in the Republic of Ireland. Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) faced the gruelling task of meeting victims and cleaning up the 'filth', as he called it. Between 2001 and 2010 allegations came before the Holy See concerning three thousand priests over a fifty year period. These scandals undoubtedly caused enormous damage to the Catholic Church resulting in a loss of moral credibility and an exodus of persons (which, in turn, meant substantial financial loss).

According to Pew Research Center polls, over a quarter of US Catholics who have left the church did so because of sexual abuse scandals; in addition, of those now religiously unaffiliated sixty per cent were dissatisfied with the Vatican's position on homosexuality and abortion, fifty per cent cited disagreement with the ban on contraception and forty per cent left because of the Church's position on women.<sup>9</sup> Linda Woodhead's similar research in the UK also finds that those referring to the Catholic Church as 'a negative force in society' cite its discrimination 'against women and gay people' as the top two reasons for this view, while those referring to themselves as Roman Catholic disagree with Vatican teaching on abortion and homosexuality.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly matters of race, gender and sexual equality are highly significant areas of engagement for public theology. Both biblical material and the theological interpretation of it is used on both sides of the debate: by campaigners in favour of greater equality and those arguing against it. Therefore, as key areas of debate and tension in which church and society struggle to reach agreement, there is a need for public theologians to make their voices heard. However, there are few theologians seriously engaged with issues of race, gender and sexual equality who refer to themselves as 'public theologians' or to their work as 'public theology'.

### **Is it Public Theology?**

Since Martin Marty coined the term 'public theology' in 1974, certain key names have become associated with it.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Duncan Forrester in Scotland and John de Gruchy in South Africa have spearheaded work on social justice and aimed at changing public policy

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/daily-number/clergy-sexual-abuse-and-the-catholic-church/> [accessed 11 June 2015].

<sup>10</sup> The 2013 'Religion and Public Life' YouGov surveys designed by Linda Woodhead can be downloaded at: <http://faithdebates.org.uk/research/> [accessed 11 June 2015]; see also Linda Woodhead, 'Endangered Species', *The Tablet* (14 November 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Martin Marty, 'Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion,' *American Civil Religion* (1974), 139-157 and 'Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience', *Journal of Religion*, 54:4 (1974), 332-359.

and have, accordingly, become associated with contemporary public theology. More theoretically, David Tracy's argument that theology should engage with three publics: church, academy and society, is regularly cited and expanded upon as the basis for public theology, while Max Stackhouse advocates a persuasive public theology.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, public theology seems to refer to theology that is public; in other words, theology that reaches beyond academia to debate with the wider public on issues of public interest. Hence, in his oft-cited 2003 article 'Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?', Harold Breitenberg refers to public discourse that is informed by theology and yet addresses both the religious and the non-religious audience.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm argues that public theology must be 'bilingual'; that is, in order to be intelligible to both the religious and the non-religious audience, it must be able to express itself in both theological and secular terms.<sup>14</sup>

What is immediately noticeable, however, is that this emerging 'canon' of public theologians is composed of white men. In fact, nearly all of the centres for public theology that have sprung up around the world in recent years are either named after or headed by men (mostly white men). Notable exceptions to the whiteness of public theology are Nico Koopman at the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, Stellenbosch in South Africa and Sebastian Kim at York St John University in the UK; while the only female regularly cited as a public theologian (given her work on the role of religion in American public life) is Linell Cady, although Elaine Graham's work also asserts the public nature of theology and critiques its gendered and exclusionary perspectives.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, it seems that public theology, thus far, has failed to properly acknowledge its reliance on a Habermasian notion of the public sphere that is founded on a concept of reason that has excluded women and other marginalized groups. Habermas' influential work on the public sphere imagined a liberal democratic space in which social status could be eradicated and reasoned consensus could be reached on important matters.<sup>16</sup> Yet, as Graham reminds us:

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<sup>12</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Sebastian Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere* (London: SCM Press, 2011); Max Stackhouse, *God and Globalization, vol 4: Globalization and Grace* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> E. Harold Breitenberg, 'To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 23:2 (2003), 55-96.

<sup>14</sup> Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, 'Nurturing Reason: The Public Role of Religion in the Liberal State', *Nederduits Gereformeerde Theologiese Tydskrif*, 48 (2007), 25-41.

<sup>15</sup> Linell E. Cady, *Religion, Theology and American Public Life* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993); Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age* (London: SCM Press, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity, 1989 [original in German, 1962]).

many of the same processes that gave birth to modernity's elevation of public reason, impartial and non-contingent subjectivity, and models of the free, self-actualizing autonomous agent facilitated by the formation of liberal democracy, were not actually neutral or universal; but highly gendered. They rested on binary representations of women and men's differential nature; and they conceived of differential and gendered division of labour which often precluded women's claiming full humanity, let alone full and active citizenship.<sup>17</sup>

As soon as public theology employs the term 'public' it sets boundaries around who is included and who is excluded. Tracy's 'three publics' does not go deep enough into an examination of whose voices are heard and considered legitimate in church, academy and society. In all three publics, those who have access and those to whom we listen are demarcated by race, gender and sexuality. As Stephen Burns and Anita Monro assert: 'There are always limitations on the 'public': who may enter, speak, act, and the roles that they are allowed to play in these public spaces'.<sup>18</sup> Questions of power and authority that are central to feminist and other liberationist theologies have not been drawn out by public theology, with the effect that the position of privilege occupied by the white, educated, elite males has not been challenged amongst public theologians and, in effect, the diversity of marginalized voices speaking theologically about pressing public issues has not been heard. Admittedly, public theologians cite influences from amongst marginalized groups; especially Martin Luther King, Jr in the US and anti-apartheid activists, such as Desmond Tutu, in South Africa (alongside the social critiques of Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer), but in its effort to determine the public relevance of theology in what has been the increasingly secular public sphere of western liberal democracy, the developing public theology corpus risks reinscribing patriarchal and androcentric boundaries. On the contrary, if the aim of public theology is to engage with diverse voices from interdisciplinary fields, so as to constructively critique both church and society, it must 'align itself with principles of empowerment and participation of groups who for whatever reason often operate outside the mainstream'.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, in so doing, public theology may need to grapple with theology that takes place

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<sup>17</sup> Elaine Graham, 'What's Missing? Gender, Reason and the Post-Secular', *Political Theology*, 13:2 (2012), 233-245 at 234.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Burns and Anita Monro, 'Which Public? Inspecting the House of Public Theology', in Anita Monro and Stephen Burns, eds, *Public Theology and the Challenge of Feminism* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1-14 at p. 1

<sup>19</sup> Elaine Graham 'Power, Knowledge and Authority in Public Theology', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:1 (2007), 42-62 at 61.

outside of official church documents and academic publications; as Graham suggests, ‘theology may not necessarily find expression in academic treatises but in other, more performative styles, such as liturgy, creative writing, drama or music’.<sup>20</sup>

In spite of the decline in church attendance in the global west, religion is very much on the agenda and being played out in the public arena, with women seemingly at the centre of a political battle for their autonomy and a religious one for their conformity. It is striking, therefore, that the public theology being played out in this post-secular public sphere is doing little to engage with and promote women’s voices and concerns. Drawing on Habermas’ recent work, Graham suggests that it is not only religion that is missing from post-secular discourse, but also an analysis of the gendered construction of the public square.<sup>21</sup> In the light of the ‘resurgence of religion’,<sup>22</sup> Habermas has partially softened his position on the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, while still retaining a cautious attitude given the potential for fundamentalism. In reply to his religious critics, he states: ‘whether religious communities will remain visible in the future is an open question . . . those religious interpretations of the self and the world that have adapted to modern social epistemological conditions have an equal claim to recognition in the discourse’.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, the revival of religion as a political impetus is a significant challenge for secular democracies, forcing Habermas to acknowledge the ideological nature of the secular public sphere over and against its assumed neutrality. Nevertheless, the twin principles of participation and reasoned discourse remain at the heart of the Habermasian conception of the public sphere without fully appreciating the economic and gender-based hurdles that have been built into its construction.<sup>24</sup>

As Nancy Fraser explains, when ‘public sphere’ is taken to mean ‘everything that is outside the domestic or familial sphere’, it ‘conflates at least three analytically distinct things: the state, the official-economy of paid employment, and arenas of public discourse’.<sup>25</sup> When Habermas writes of the public sphere, he is only referring to the latter; namely, to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Graham, ‘What’s Missing?’, 234.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Martin Riesebrodt, ‘Fundamentalism and the Resurgence of Religion’, *Numen*, 47:3 (2000), 266-287.

<sup>23</sup> Jürgen Habermas, ‘Reply to My Critics’, trans. Ciaran Cronin, in Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds, *Habermas and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), pp. 347-390 at p. 348.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Lisa McLaughlin, ‘Feminism and the Political Economy of Transnational Public Space’, *The Sociological Review*, 52 (2004), 156-175, also in Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts, eds, *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), 56-80 at 57 (reprinted from Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 109-42).

participation in rational discourse that is distinct from both the state and the official economy. However, women have found themselves excluded from such participation, at first formally and then informally. Formal and legal exclusions from the public sphere on the grounds of biological sex, race and economic status have gradually diminished, but this has not eradicated social inequality and informal exclusion. On the contrary, the dominant class continues to make decisions concerning the manner of discourse and the issues to be discussed, such that subordinate groups are silenced (even in the media).<sup>26</sup> Feminist research reveals, as Fraser notes, that: ‘men tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men; men also tend to speak more than women, taking more turns and longer turns; and women’s interventions are more often ignored or not responded to than men’s’.<sup>27</sup> As a rejoinder, women and other subordinate groups have formed counterpublics<sup>28</sup> in which to strengthen their voice and challenge the prevailing view of what constitutes the common good and warrants inclusion in the discourse of the public sphere. It is only through such counterpublics that sexual harassment, rape and domestic violence have been given prominence as legitimate subjects of common interest, as opposed to being dismissed from mainstream attention as ‘private’ or minority issues.

Public theology, I suggest, needs to take up the position of asking ‘what is missing’ in its account of itself, in order to broaden its version of who counts and of who and what matters. It is not sufficient to ask this question from a position of privilege and then to include a few token voices; rather, serious theological discourse on issues affecting women and women’s participation in the public sphere is required, alongside a recognition of historical privilege that seeks to actively rebalance that privilege. For example, domestic violence is a matter of deep public concern; a public theological response to this issue needs to engage with the feminist critique of the Christian motif of self-sacrifice and the ways in which this has been used to legitimize the subordination of women.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, black theology and queer theology need to be part of the public theological agenda, if both social and religious justification of discrimination against blacks and homosexuals is to be tackled and the privileging of white, heterosexual men and women is to be corrected. Thus, the extent to

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<sup>26</sup> Even electronic media in a capitalist economy is run for profit and does not provide equal access for all persons; hence, although it can be a vehicle for giving voice to some marginalized groups, it does not always expand access to the official public sphere. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Esther McIntosh, ‘Belonging without Believing: Church as Community in an Age of Digital Media’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 9:2 (2015), 131-155.

<sup>27</sup> Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere’, 64.

<sup>28</sup> Fraser calls these ‘subaltern counterpublics’, *ibid.*, 67.

<sup>29</sup> See Esther McIntosh, ‘The Concept of Sacrifice: A Reconsideration of the Feminist Critique’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:2 (2007), 210-229.

which liberation and political theologies of Africa, Asia and Latin America constitute public theology is up for debate, just as Christian social ethics both interacts with and is differentiated from public theology. It is public theology's self-definition as dialogical rather than particularist that has kept issues of gender and race at the periphery of its concerns; that is, by viewing feminist theology, black theology and queer theology as 'one-issue' theologies, public theology has sought to retain a broader focus on the role of theology in the public sphere.<sup>30</sup> Yet, in order that public theology engages with criticisms of the Habermasian public sphere and criticisms of exclusionary theology, it is essential that it promotes a dialogical relationship with critical theologies as much as with public issues. Counterpublics and counter-theologies should be informing public theology, since these are the publics that push the discourse of the official public sphere beyond the status quo and 'render visible the ways in which societal inequality infects formally inclusive existing public spheres'.<sup>31</sup> Dialogical public theology has a vital role to play in evaluating and rectifying the exclusion and discrimination of women and minorities at the intersection of the public spaces afforded by the state and the church. As Graham points out: 'More nuanced understanding of the complexities of what happens when faith enters the public space may actually rehabilitate women of faith into the body politic as active citizens capable of directing spiritually and theologically grounded reasoning toward inclusive, constructive and emancipatory causes'.<sup>32</sup>

### **What is Missing?**

Writing for the *International Journal of Public Theology*, Heather Walton explains that while she is both politically and theologically active - a left-wing feminist, a church elder and an academic - she has 'a lack of interest bordering closely on distaste for most of what appears under the heading 'public theology'',<sup>33</sup> precisely because of its reliance on a model of rational discourse that has excluded women. Contrastingly, Nicola Slee presents 'an account of feminist theology which . . . is always and must always be public theology'.<sup>34</sup> Slee is referring to the sense in which feminist theology is bound up with a critique of the notions of 'public' and 'private' and as such sees theology and issues of public concern as inextricably linked.

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Nico Koopman, 'Some Comments on Public Theology', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 119 (2003), 3-19 at 7.

<sup>31</sup> Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', 65.

<sup>32</sup> Graham, 'What's Missing?', 244.

<sup>33</sup> Heather Walton, 'You Have to Say You Cannot Speak: Feminist Reflections Upon Public Theology', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4:1 (2010), 21-36 at 22.

<sup>34</sup> Nicola Slee, 'Speaking with the Dialects, Inflections and Rhythms of our own Unmistakable Voices', in Monro and Burns, eds, *Public Theology and the Challenge of Feminism*, pp. 15-34 at p. 15.

Unlike mainstream public theology, though, feminist theology begins with the experience of women in church, academy and society, critiquing the exclusionary nature of those ‘publics’ and the one-sided account of humanity that they offer. Conversely, by considering the perspective of women and other marginalized groups, we are able to broaden the description of what it means to be human.

In the attempt to speak in public, theology risks either the pitfall inherent in the move towards ‘bilinguality’ – that it speaks in vague terms that aim at universal intelligibility but produce only opacity – or the opposing pitfall of apologetics – whereby, in the aim to defend itself and its public relevance, theology retrenches down the path of tradition and adopts a position of ‘radical orthodoxy’.<sup>35</sup> On the one hand, the current global picture of growing secularism and religious resurgence makes the effort to speak in ways which are universally accessible and agreeable almost impossible; on the other hand, the patriarchal tradition is not a place of welcome and safety for women. Alternatively, feminist theology challenges public theology to recognize and listen to the experiences of women, not to assume that the male perspective or the male voice is sufficient, not to speak for others and not to assume authority in theological matters. Instead of aiming for universal intelligibility, public theology needs to start with the realities of everyday lives and speak with honesty from those contexts.

Examples from the Women-Church movement<sup>36</sup> demonstrate ways in which feminist theology combines issues of public concern with new liturgies, but only minor inroads have been made into mainstream theology; or, rather, the mainstream publics of church, academy and society have done little to take on board and change themselves in response to feminist critique. Hence, women-church exists in peripheral public spaces. In challenging the patriarchy of church and society, feminism does theology differently; it concentrates on dialogue, stories, poems and the creative arts and does not focus on doctrinal assent and institutional affiliation. Moreover, in so doing, feminist theology is open to diverse forms of the divine, such as Christa,<sup>37</sup> that are better able to promote social justice in community than the traditional emphasis on personal salvation. Furthermore, feminist theology responded to the criticism of ‘whiteness’ that came from womanist and *mujerista* theologies, and expanded its commitment to social justice and the ending of all oppressions, using the term

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<sup>35</sup> See John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> See Teresa Berger, ed., *Dissident Daughters: Feminist Liturgies in Global Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> As used, for example, by Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, second edn (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008), p. 52.

‘kyriarchy’<sup>38</sup> to address the multi-layered and interlinked oppressions bound up with race, class, sexuality and disability.

Similarly, public theology needs to employ a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ that acknowledges the misogyny in its traditions and sources, and does not retain a patriarchal hermeneutic of the Gospel. Public theology must challenge all oppressions in church and society, but in order that it is credible, it must first challenge its own sexism and homophobia; while there is oppression within the church, its message of liberation and hope has little traction. A convincing message requires an honest analysis about who has the power in public spaces and that analysis must include a commitment to change. Public theology must ask who is invited into dialogue and who has access, who is being listened to and whose stories are not being told. If we only hear from educated males, we are not hearing the whole story. Furthermore, the commitment to enter into dialogue with other faiths and with a non-religious audience is not genuine if its aim is to persuade the other; genuine dialogue means being open to having one’s own mind changed. For public theology, such dialogue requires that different ways of doing theology are respected and included, as Nelle Morton’s notion of ‘hearing to speech’<sup>39</sup> implies. Thus, we are prompted to be alert to the fact that theology is not only where we think it is (in the church and the academy), nor is it necessarily expressed in the ways we expect (church texts and academic publications); instead, it is also to be found in the silence of those who are not given a voice on the established platforms. To escape the traditional structures of power and its limitations, public theology needs to listen to the theological conversations occurring at the grass roots, in the workplace and on the streets; and on social media, since it is through blogs and other forms of digital media that those who are silenced can speak without interruption. It is essential to the integrity of public theology that it embeds the feminist critique and adopts both its receptive attitude to diversity and its reticence in claiming authority; as Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood attest:

One of the many strengths of feminist theologies has always been the ability to include many voices within the debate ... This is not the same thing at all as having no method and no cohesion, it is, however, about creating space for diverse voices to express what they experience about the divine among and between us. It is about respect and an overwhelming belief that the divine cannot

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<sup>38</sup> This term was introduced by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> Nelle Morton, ‘Beloved Image’ (1977), in *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

be contained by any one group whoever they may be and however blessed and sanctioned they believe themselves to be.<sup>40</sup>

### **Key Formative Moments**

As a suffragist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was one of the early campaigners for the rights of women in nineteenth century America. In conjunction with her indefatigable fight for rights such as equal pay, birth control and divorce, Stanton sought religious reform, arguing that the natural equality of men and women had been falsely distorted by men who claim support from the Bible. Amongst the eighteen grievances that she listed in *The Declaration of Sentiments* for the first Woman's Rights Convention, which met in New York in 1848, she included the following critique of Christianity:

He [man] allows her in Church, as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church . . .

He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God.<sup>41</sup>

Further, it became clear when the Church of England began the process of revising the Authorized Bible in 1870, without consulting any women, that misogynistic interpretations of biblical material would not be challenged. As a retort, Stanton and her committee of women resolved to produce a commentary on the passages of the Bible (approximately one tenth) that deal with women; the resulting publication was *The Woman's Bible*. At the time of publication, the women involved were dismissed as heretics and the message of the publication was largely ignored by the Church or deliberately avoided. There are inconsistencies in scholarship in *The Woman's Bible*; nevertheless, it represents an admirably brave undertaking that finds biblical passages supporting the equality of men and women, and thus concludes that the subordination of women in Christianity is solely due to its misinterpretation by men.

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<sup>40</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Controversies in Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> Eleanor D. Bilimoria, 'Editor's preface', in Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (Seattle: Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion, 1974 [1898]), pp. vi-viii at vi.

Stanton's belief in the inherent egalitarianism at the heart of the Gospel message finds greater purchase in the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza almost a century later. In 1983 Fiorenza published *In Memory of Her* in which she puts forward an argument for a feminist biblical hermeneutic of suspicion that questions androcentric interpretations of the text.<sup>42</sup> Given a lack of proof regarding the historical non-participation of women, Fiorenza proceeds from the assumption that they may well have contributed and that it is patriarchal recordings of history that have failed to acknowledge their contribution. Consequently, while she finds the Bible to be both a source of empowerment and victimization for women, she makes the radical assertion that biblical texts sustaining oppression are either untrue or misinterpreted, since, they are, after all, written by fallible men.<sup>43</sup>

Prior to Fiorenza's reformist biblical analysis, Mary Daly's revolutionary appraisal of misogyny in the Catholic Church hit the headlines in 1968 with the publication of *The Church and the Second Sex*.<sup>44</sup> Daly had hoped that the 1965 meeting of Vatican II in Rome would mark a turning point in the Church's attitude to women, but was dismayed that the few women present had to remain silent. Hence, borrowing Simone de Beauvoir's assessment of women as 'the second sex', Daly's work highlights the Catholic contradiction of both idealizing Mary and treating all other women as inferior. In her work, Daly acknowledges the sexism of certain biblical texts but also argues that such texts should be contextualized and not taken as a decree for the continued exclusion of women from positions of authority in the Church. In addition, she emphasizes passages of the Bible that express the equality of the sexes, such as Gen 1:27 'God created man in his image. In the image of God he created them. Male and female he created them' and Galatians 3:28 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus'.<sup>45</sup> Despite initial hostilities, Daly's work gathered support and led, in 1973, to the publication of her second and most well-known book, *Beyond God the Father*, in which she states: 'if God is male, then the male is God'.<sup>46</sup> Having recognized the damaging effect on women of the imagery of God as father-figure, Daly ultimately finds the patriarchy of the Bible and of institutionalized Christianity overwhelming and irredeemable, and thus, the

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<sup>42</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

<sup>43</sup> See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) and *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

<sup>44</sup> Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

<sup>45</sup> Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985 [1968]), p. 192.

<sup>46</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 19.

combination of her radical feminism and the intransigence of the Catholic Church leads her to a position of 'post-Christian feminism'. Nevertheless, her analysis of the maleness of God proved to be grist to the mill of a generation of feminist theologians seeking to reform Christianity.

For instance, Rosemary Radford Ruether, an active supporter of the campaign for the ordination of women in the Catholic Church, contends that: 'Male monotheism has been so taken for granted in Judeo-Christian culture that the peculiarity of imaging God solely through one gender has not been recognized.'<sup>47</sup> Yet, the impact of having only male imagery for God is to remove women from their direct relationship with God and to reinforce the rule of men, as though this is divinely ordained. In spite of this one-sidedness, institutionalized Christianity has been slow to admit that God imagery is not literal truth and should be adapted to reflect the equality of women and men. Ruether, therefore, argues that women should leave the sexism of the institutionalized church and form women-church (ekklēsia) in which liturgies make use of goddess imagery.

Around the same time as these feminist theologians were honing their ideas, African American women were arguing for an exploration of racism as well as sexism. Since the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, James Cone had been developing a theological commentary on the experience of African Americans, but Cone's work did not address sexism (the same criticism can be levelled at the contemporary black British theologian, Robert Beckford).<sup>48</sup> Through the thought of Delores Williams, womanist theology was emerging to fill the gap left by black theology and feminist theology, namely the experience of the dual oppression of being both black and female.<sup>49</sup> With the aim of liberating black women from androcentrism and social domination based on race and class, womanist theology re-reads biblical stories from the perspective of slavery and economic exploitation, seeking motifs of resistance and survival. Consequently, while feminist theology re-reads the story of Abram and Sarai from the point of view of Sarai, womanist theologians re-read this story from the point of view of the slave and concubine, Hagar (Gen. 16:1-16; 21:9-21). Moreover, in parallel with the feminist analysis of male God-language and symbolism, Williams tears apart the whiteness of patriarchal God imagery. She exhorts black women to

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<sup>47</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 53.

<sup>48</sup> See James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); see also Robert Beckford, *Jesus Dub: Theology, Music and Social Change* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> The term 'womanist' is a black folk expression coined by Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1983).

find God in themselves, asking ‘who do you say God is’?<sup>50</sup> Further, it is not only the image of God the Father that legitimizes the oppression of women. In addition, womanist theology asserts that the image of Jesus suffering on the cross has also been used to keep black women in a subordinate position; hence, the image of a black female Christ (Christa), who identifies with and frees them from their suffering, enters the arena.<sup>51</sup>

In conjunction with the threefold oppression of gender, race and class experienced by African-American women, other marginalized groups also use their experience to write new theologies appropriate to the issues with which they are faced in their daily lives. Women in Africa, Asia, Central and South America are claiming their right to have their voices heard and to do theology in public. Of particular significance is Ivone Gebara’s Latin American ecofeminism. Borne out of her experience as a Catholic nun living and working with extremely poor women in the Brazilian *favelas*, Gebara sees the links between androcentrism and anthropology (as does Ruether from an American perspective) and strives for better health care and sanitation. In a profoundly brave interview for *Veja* magazine in 1993, Gebara challenged the Vatican stance on abortion by affirming that terminating a pregnancy is not necessarily a sin for women living in poverty; she was subsequently silenced for two years, but thereafter resumed speaking out against the oppression of impoverished women.<sup>52</sup> Correspondingly, from the perspective of a Latin American woman living in the United States of America, Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s *mujerista* theology advocates restorative justice for diasporic Hispanic people;<sup>53</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan dissects the negative effects of the missionary belief that liberation for women is bound up with conversion to western Christianity;<sup>54</sup> while The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians fights against the limitations to self-determination placed on African women by western imperialism and deconstructs ‘the decisively ambiguous impact of Christianity in their lives’.<sup>55</sup> Colonialism and the remnants of Christian fundamentalism that it has left behind presents an ongoing struggle as former colonies, such as Jamaica and India, disentangle the discourse of domination and the

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<sup>50</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Jacquelyn Grant, *White Woman’s Christ and Black Woman’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, ‘Justice as Reconciliatory Praxis: A Decolonial *Mujerista* Move’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4:1 (2010), 37-50.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Kwok Pui-Lan, ‘The Image of the ‘White Lady’: Gender and Race in Christian Mission’, in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *The Power of Naming* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books and London: SCM Press, 1996), pp. 250-258.

<sup>55</sup> Teresia M. Hinga, ‘Between Colonialism and Inculturation: Feminist Theologies in Africa’, in Fiorenza, ed., *The Power of Naming*, pp. 36-44 at p. 41.

elevation of the fairer-skinned from their indigenous identity and hopes for future progress. While the writing of *Di Jamiekan Nyuu Testament* gives Jamaicans a New Testament in Patwa, it does not resolve issues of land rights and justice for the underclass (issues that are also pertinent for public theology in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa).<sup>56</sup>

Deliberately, expanding the boundaries of what counts as theology creates positive opportunities for previously silenced minorities, including those who do not conform to the 'heterosexism' of Christianity. Carter Heyward writes:

Many feminists, gay men, and lesbians have begun to 'come out' of concealment and put themselves visibly on the ecclesial line as representative of those women and men who, throughout Christian history and the ecumenical church today, have seen that the liberal Christian emperor has no clothes – no sense of the misogynist, erotophobic, and oppressive character of his realm.<sup>57</sup>

Heyward's argument is that Christianity operates on the basis of a heterosexist theology; that is, an assumption that male domination of females is both natural and divinely ordained. Further, this heterosexuality is bound up in the portrayal of God as 'he' and the church as 'she', so that, in effect, being Christian means being heterosexual. Thus, liberal Protestantism encourages the individual to be true to his/her God-given nature, so long as doing so fits within the heterosexist norm. Consequently, subservient women and 'closeted' homosexuals are tolerated within the Church, but 'to press seriously for women's liberation or for the affirmation of gay and lesbian sexual activity is to fly in the face of the idealistic tradition itself, in which femaleness and sexual activity are, de facto, ungodly'.<sup>58</sup> Hence, Marcella Althaus-Reid's ground-breaking work challenging the heterosexism of Christianity speaks of 'indecent theology'.<sup>59</sup> Bringing liberation theology and queer theory into conversation, Althaus-Reid searches for a different face of God, freed from the shackles of traditional Christianity and present in the lives of 'deviant' persons. Her monograph entitled *Queer God* is a radical quest to expose the sexual foundations of theology and to do theology from the perspective of the sexually excluded.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See the special issue on 'Matters of the Caribbean' of the *International Journal of Theology*, 7:4 (2013).

<sup>57</sup> Carter Heyward, 'Heterosexist Theology: Being Above It All', in Fiorenza, ed., *The Power of Naming*, pp. 172-180 at p. 178.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>60</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Queer God* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).

## Lessons for Public Theology: The *imago Dei* and Transgender

Any dominant group will value its concerns above those of a subordinate group and it is for this reason that public theology must proceed with a hermeneutic of suspicion. If public theology continues to use biblical sources and their interpretation uncritically, it proceeds as if decades of feminist, black and queer theologies have not happened; it adopts the position of the dominant class. Whenever public theologians seek to deliberate on a matter of public interest they must stop to consider whose interests are being represented, ensuring that there are opportunities for minorities and subordinate groups to have their voices heard. It is only by engaging in dialogue with counterpublics that the false ‘we’ of a dominant group, assuming it speaks for the common good of all persons, can be avoided. Similarly, it is by hearing and incorporating the critiques of mainstream theology put forward by counter-theologies, rather than viewing them as optional extras or side-issues, that public theology can guard against bias and injustice. In particular, public theology is located at the intersection of the gendered public sphere and the patriarchal *imago Dei*. Unless public theology levels self-critique at its understanding of the public sphere and expands its conception of the *imago Dei*, its engagement with public issues will favour the dominant class.

A particularly challenging area for a society and a theology demarcated on gender lines is the acceptance of transgender persons. As a burgeoning field of study and contestation, public theology could helpfully open up the debate by listening to the conflicting voices from a number of different publics. On the one hand, the Church of England, for example, has recognized the need to contemplate the existence of transpersons. In 2000, Carol Stone became the first transsexual priest in the Church of England, having transitioned from male to female with the support of her bishop. Then, in 2005, the ordination of Sarah Jones marked the first openly transgender priest in the Church of England. Yet, in its 2003 document *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*, the Church of England begins to consider its position on transsexualism, but falls back on the binary of ‘male’ and ‘female’ in the biblical text without properly critiquing the conflict between binary interpretations of the text and current scientific and psychological evidence regarding the existence of transsexuals.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, as Christina Beardsley points out, the document reaches conclusions without

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<sup>61</sup> The Archbishops’ Council, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003), esp. pp. 221 ff.

speaking to transpeople:<sup>62</sup> once again, the Church's position has been decided by a hierarchical leadership without listening to the personal accounts of the minority group on whom it is pronouncing judgement.

In wider society, transpersons have been heard and the demand for the legal right to change gender has been enshrined in law in the UK, with the passing of the Gender Recognition Act 2004.<sup>63</sup> Thus, since April 2005 it has been possible to obtain a new birth certificate in accordance with a change in gender and to marry as a person of that gender, without undergoing sex reassignment surgery. Nevertheless, the Church of England is exempt from accepting acquired gender for the purposes of marriage. Such an exemption reinforces the notion that the Church still holds to a binary conception of humanity and of sexuality and a limited conception of the *imago Dei*. On the contrary, transtheology sets out its argument for the full acceptance of the diversity of human persons by building on the need identified by feminist, black and queer theologies to free the *imago Dei* from oppressive and exclusionary perceptions.<sup>64</sup> Since humanity exists in multiple forms, the *imago Dei* cannot be claimed by only one group or representation, but must be capable of being imagined in just as many diverse and pluralistic configurations as those in which humanity is embodied. In this respect, transtheology goes further than other counter-theologies in its expansion of the *imago Dei*, seeking to move beyond adding black, female and homosexual identities onto the restrictive white, male, heterosexual norm. Rather, as B. K. Hipsher states: 'We must be critical enough to open up the possibilities for human expression to include the full range and fluidity of human sexuality and sexual expression and embrace the concept of surgical and hormonal gender reassignment'.<sup>65</sup>

However, minority groups need to be conscious of hearing other voices while pursuing their need to be heard. When feminists, such as Germaine Greer and Janice Raymond, have questioned the helpfulness of the definition of 'woman' as used by transwomen, such questioning has been met with extreme aggression and 'no-platforming'

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<sup>62</sup> Christina Beardsley, 'Taking Issue: The Transsexual Hiatus in *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*', *Theology*, 58:845 (2005), 338-346 at 342-343.

<sup>63</sup> Both the Act and its amendments are available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/7/contents>

<sup>64</sup> Transtheology is a relatively new field combining academic and personal accounts of stigma and acceptance; see, for example, Justin Edward Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003) and Susannah Cornwall, ed., *Intersex, Theology and the Bible: Troubling Bodies in Church, Text and Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>65</sup> B. K. Hipsher, 'God is a Many Gendered Thing: An Apophatic Journey to Pastoral Diversity', in Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, eds, *Trans/formations* (London: SCM, 2009), pp. 92-104 at p. 97.

rather than open debate.<sup>66</sup> Feminists have spent decades revealing the extent of sexual discrimination and male violence that biological women face on a daily basis. In turn, this has led to the strong case for female-only spaces, and the battle against social and theological constructions of women as possessing feminine characteristics that are contrasted with the masculine characteristics supposedly possessed by biological men. Consequently, feminists questioning the use of the term ‘woman’ by transpersons are making the point that being born female in a patriarchal society is a different experience from being born biologically male and then transitioning to female. Secondly, identifying as a woman because of having feminine rather than masculine characteristics supports a male fantasy of a delicate and submissive woman that feminists have been arguing against, and it fails to challenge socially-constructed definitions of masculinity or to expand the notion of what it is to be a man.<sup>67</sup> Thirdly, for a transwoman to demand legal access to female-only spaces in order to avoid male violence fails to challenge male violence. Thus, when those who question the trans use of the term ‘woman’ are exposed to vitriolic abuse, labelled transphobic (or TERFs) and told to ‘check their cis-privilege’, not only is sexual discrimination being ignored, biological women are being silenced.<sup>68</sup>

In the struggle to have sex dysmorphia recognised and transdiscrimination outlawed, self-identification, rather than biology, has become the standard by which a person’s gender is ascribed. However, when Rachel Dolezal insisted that she identified as black, despite being biologically white, she was condemned and ostracised by the black community.<sup>69</sup> Someone who is biologically white does not experience the discrimination encountered by someone who is biologically black, but neither does a biological male experience systemic and pernicious sexism. Public theology could usefully step in here with the aim of listening to all of these counterpublics and the requirements of their members. Furthermore, we need to hear the concerns of transpersons without threatening and suppressing those born with female bodies, without disregarding the oppression of those born with female bodies and without

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<sup>66</sup> Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (London: Anchor, 2000 [1999]), esp. p. 422; Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (London: The Women’s Press, 1980); Ben Quinn, ‘Petition Urges Cardiff University to Cancel Germaine Greer Lecture’, *The Guardian* (23 October 2015).

<sup>67</sup> For examples of the fantasy woman aspired to by some transpersons, see the pseudonymous blog <http://thenewbacklash.blogspot.co.uk/> [accessed 12 January 2016], esp. ‘Woman is a Male Fantasy: Autogynephilia’.

<sup>68</sup> For examples of the threats levelled at so-called TERFs (trans exclusionary radical feminists) and transpersons supportive of hearing the argument put forward by Germaine Greer, see, for example, <http://aoifeschatology.com/2015/10/26/whos-afraid-of-germaine-greer/> [accessed 12 January 2016]; see also Julie Burchill, ‘Don’t You Dare Tell Me to Check My Privilege’, *The Spectator* (22 February 2014).

<sup>69</sup> For her own account of the reaction, and the destructive effect it had on her life, see Chris McGreal, ‘Rachel Dolezal: I Wasn’t Identifying as Black to Upset People. I Was being Me’, *The Guardian* (13 December 2015).

reaffirming the gender stereotypes that link women with femininity and men with masculinity. Most importantly, public theology cannot continue to make uncritical use of biblical and hermeneutical sources that legitimize the subservience of women and promote oppressive binary categories of humanity. If public theology is to contribute to the pressing issue of self-identification, it needs to speak out against women's experience of discrimination in church and society, but it will only have a credible voice if it roots out any theological justification of sexism and denounces male violence against biological women and transpersons.

### **Looking Towards the Future**

A constructive methodology for the future of public theology has to begin by looking at who is included in its canon and where it finds its theology. Just as black university students are asking 'why is my reading list white', female theology students are asking 'why are there no women on my theology bookshelf'. These questions are pertinent in the three publics of church, academy and society, where the prevailing experience is of male authority and dominance; moreover, it is predominantly of white, straight male authority and dominance. As Fiorenza argues, wo/men previously 'excluded from institutions of knowledge and power must be allowed to participate in articulating the full circle of human perception and imagination'.<sup>70</sup> Although even Fiorenza does not go far enough, since use of the term 'allow' suggests that those in power have the right to grant some form of access to others, just as the term 'tolerance' implies putting up with those who are different rather than fully accepting their difference as legitimate. It is, therefore, not sufficient for elite, white, heterosexual males to include a token black person, woman or homosexual amongst its ranks; rather, it must critique its whiteness, its maleness and its heterosexuality, because not to do so is to retain privilege and power unchallenged.<sup>71</sup> To truly challenge historical privilege and dominance, we have to engage in the uncomfortable task of analysing how whiteness is perceived by blacks, how maleness is perceived by women and how heterosexuality is perceived by homosexuals. We have to take concrete steps to amend historical privilege and unconscious bias. Public theology, as a dialogical discipline, should be engaged in open

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<sup>70</sup> Fiorenza paraphrasing Anna Julia Cooper, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Feminist Liberation Theology as Critical Sophiaology', in Fiorenza, ed., *The Power of Naming*, pp. xiii-xxxix at p. xiii. Fiorenza uses the nomenclature wo/men 'in order to destabilize the essentialist notions of woman and indicate that from the perspective and positionality of wo/men who are multiply oppressed, the term is also inclusive of disenfranchised men' (ibid., at p. xxxv n. 1).

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, George Yancy, *Look a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

debate that stimulates the process of changing public spheres and rendering them more inclusive.

Theology reading lists are one place where we can start: both including female and black theologians who do not necessarily write about ‘women’s issues’ or matters of race, but who do theology from the context of their experience as a woman or a black person, and making feminist and queer theologies part of the core reading and discussion, not optional extras that can be avoided, both in church and the academy, not as a special branch of theology, but simply as theology *per se*. Yet, expanding theology curricula is not sufficient in itself. In its pursuit of relevance in contemporary issues, public theology will only be credible if it engages in self-reflection that challenges rather than consolidates the interests of elite, white, western men. Before mounting an intelligible response to the rise of IS or the burning of black churches, public theology needs to engage in a critique of the racism, misogyny and homophobia on which it is founded and which it still retains in its sources. Moreover, it needs to engender and embody change. Despite years of feminist liturgies, mainstream Christianity has done little to incorporate them; it has not challenged its right to allow access to others or applied the right to be admitted through fully opened doors, and so it has missed out on the opportunity ‘to reform malestream knowledge about the world and G\*d in order to correct and complete the world’s and the church’s one-sided vision’.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, even though same-sex couples are more visible in society, the church is still dragging its heels on granting full access and acceptance to lesbian and gay persons. If public theology is going to be liberative for the oppressed, it has to find a theology that supports the equality and full humanity of all persons. In short, it is essential that public theology asks ‘who is missing’ and practices ‘hearing the other to speech’. When Dylan Chenfield, who describes himself as a Jewish atheist, decided to confront the image of the white, male God by printing the trope ‘I Met God, She’s Black’ on a T-shirt, he soon found that his shirt was in high demand by the #BlackLivesMatter movement:<sup>73</sup> this open conversation about who God is and how that relates to contemporary issues and the everyday struggles of human persons, conducted outside of the established church and the high profile academy, is a prime example of germane public theology.

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<sup>72</sup> Fiorenza, ‘Feminist Liberation Theology as Critical Sophiaology’, in Fiorenza, ed., *The Power of Naming*, p. xiii. The term ‘malestream’ is borrowed from Dorothy Smith to indicate that the mainstream is from the male point of view. Fiorenza first used G\*d in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994) to acknowledge the inadequacy of human language while also avoiding the conservative, male Jewish convention of using G-d.

<sup>73</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/03/i-met-god-shes-black\\_n\\_6406928.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/03/i-met-god-shes-black_n_6406928.html) [accessed 11 June 2015].