Baptist World Alliance – Heritage and Identity Commission

General Council Meeting, July 2004, Seoul, South Korea

F. W. Boreham: The Public Theologian

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My Interest

I came to be interested in F W Boreham when I was serving as a pastor in Dunedin, New Zealand. The Knox Theological College was in my parish and when I raided their library I came across many books by F W Boreham. I discovered that he had also had his first pastorate in the region of Otago although 80 years earlier and I was drawn in by his way with words and his magnificent gift as a storyteller.

When I came to Victoria, Australia in 1992 to be a superintendent of churches, I bumped into so many people who said that they'd met Boreham. He had been their pastor at the Armadale Church or at the Kew Baptist church. I have met hundreds of people from different branches of the church and from no church who said: "I used to listen to Boreham's Wednesday lunch hour sermons at Scots Church in Melbourne's inner city in the 1930s, 40s and 50s." It was an institution. What amazed me was the number of people who could remember parts of his sermons that were preached 50 or 60 years ago! When I quizzed them more deeply, what they remembered was usually some truth that was wrapped up in a colourful story.

Then when I came to Whitley College, I was rummaging through the archives one day when I stumbled across two cartons of books that happened to contain Boreham's personal copy of his 55 books. For a historian, this was like discovering The Shroud of Turin! They had been donated by the Boreham family to the College soon after F W Boreham died and they had been sitting in the darkness and the dust for 30 years. They are now displayed in our College library.

I also found in these boxes of memorabilia, five scrapbooks containing many of the 3,000 editorials that Boreham wrote for the Hobart Mercury and the Melbourne Age, every week, for 47 years between 1912-1959. In those boxes I also found the plan in Boreham's handwriting of the structure of the book he was compiling at the time of his death, in which he was drawing together one of these editorials that was connected to each day of the year. 365 chapters.

I want to come back later to these editorials because they represent the focus of my enquiry and this paper but it is impossible to understand his writings without some knowledge of the person.

Boreham's Life

His life story is told in his autobiography—My Pilgrimage. It was Leslie Weatherhead who wrote to Boreham and said that his autobiography, My Pilgrimage, was one of the most helpful biographies for young pastors. His story is amplified in the biography or hagiography by Howard Crago whose dust cover states, "The story of F W Boreham by his close friend T Howard Crago." A reviewer for the Mercury

wrote of this book, “It is admiring, sincere, and, if Dr Boreham had weaknesses the reader would not know it.”

For those unfamiliar with him, and seeking not to spoil a good read, here very briefly are the major chapters of his life:

Chapter One
His birth in 1871 and upbringing in Tunbridge Wells, England. When I visited this town in Kent, it was good to sit in the St John’s Anglican Church where Boreham was nurtured in the faith. I appreciated the way that the current owners allowed me to see through the Boreham home and to sit by the fireside where young Frank and his nine brothers and sisters experienced the magic of storytelling from their mother. It was good to walk through the Tunbridge Common where walking with his father, Boreham developed his love for nature.

Boreham left school at an early age and while working as a clerk at a Brick Company, he went under a train and lost one of his legs at the knee. In his convalescence in hospital, two important things happened: Firstly, he learned Pittmans shorthand and he planned to train as a journalist. As a clerk he’d already learned to be accurate, systematic and courteous with people. Later as a journalist he learned to be observant, accurate and colourful in his way with words, qualities that prepared him for his later ministries. Secondly, in hospital, Boreham fell in love with a nurse. What complicated things was that she was a full blooded Catholic and he was a young convinced Protestant. What made it even more difficult was that he was only 14 and she was over 40! But he said, “to my dying day I shall never forget the face that in hours of anguish and delirium, seemed to me like the face of an angel. We both cried when we said goodbye to each other and whenever I been tempted to a too vigorous criticism of Roman Catholicism I have been confronted by the imperishable memory of Sister Kathleen. She would have thought it heaven to lay down her life for her Church or her patients.”[1]

Later, when many of his Baptist colleagues were railing against the Roman Catholics, Boreham was exuding an ecumenical spirit that was nurtured by friendships and through his wide reading. Here in Melbourne he preached in so many denominations and his Scots Church ministry for 18 years was the place in which he became a pastor to the city. Interestingly enough, Boreham said that the drift of his life was moving towards Quakerism.

Chapter Two
Marks his move to work in London, where his faith was fired by preachers, such as F B Meyer, D L Moody, C H Spurgeon and Joseph Parker at the City Temple. Boreham applied to be a missionary in China but Hudson Taylor turned him down because of his injured leg. He sensed a call to pastoral ministry and had the dubious honour of being the last person interviewed by C H Spurgeon for entry to Spurgeon’s College. Boreham always wondered whether his influence finished the old man off! While at a student pastorate at Theydon Bois, he engaged in some intensive pastoral care with a young woman called Stella, and so commenced a long and fruitful partnership.

Already Boreham was developing the itch to write and he had two articles published in a couple of newspapers. He also had published this 5,000 word book, Won to Glory. Looking back he thought this was a mediocre effort but it was a start.

Chapter Three
Was the New Zealand chapter where he became the first pastor of the Mosgiel Baptist Church, 10 miles from the city of Dunedin. After only three months of ministry Boreham sensed the inadequacy of his training so he sought out a senior minister who said, “You’ve got to keep on training if you’re going to be fresh and interesting.” “How do I do that,” he asked. The older pastor said, “Read. Read my dear man!

Read systematically and keep on reading: never give up." Boreham said, "What shall I read first?" His mentor said, "Begin with Gibbon."[2] And so Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire became his first incursion into the world of books. It got him into serious reading. He bought one book of history or a novel every week and they broadened him out. They made him as an interesting person. They helped him to see the social dimensions of the faith.

Boreham asked the editor of the local Taieri Advocate if he could coordinate with other local ministers to submit their sermons so that people who couldn't get to church could read a sermon. Being granted a regular column, Boreham did this but the other ministers left him to it.

He later picked out some of his best sermons, sent them to a publisher and these were published in the book, The Whisper of God—one of a series that put him alongside some impressive company.
Boreham became the editor of the New Zealand Baptist monthly magazine and in time his editorials were bundled together and The Luggage of Life became the first of 50 books of essays and sermons published by Epworth. These books, some of which went up to 15 editions sold into the millions. His publisher (Dr Sharp) at Epworth said, "It was the discovery of F W Boreham, [which was] the Book Room's greatest catch, from John Wesley's day down to my own."[3] While Boreham spent most of his life in the obscurity of the Antipodes it was through his books that Boreham achieved international prominence.

The acclaim that Boreham received on his preaching and lecture tours of North America and Britain bowled him over. His influence was best expressed when he was introduced to an assembly of Presbyterian ministers in Scotland in 1936 as:

> "The man whose name is on all our lips,
> whose books are on all our shelves and
> whose illustrations are in all our sermons!"

One night when Boreham was speaking at a meeting in Dunedin he missed his train, so, with time to fill in and seeing the lights on in the office of the Otago Daily Times he knocked on the door and asked if there were any writing opportunities. The editor responded negatively saying they had professional writers then he said, "There's always room at the top." He said, "Tomorrow's editorial hasn't been written. If you had to write it what would you say?" Boreham took up his pen and before his train arrived he wrote an article based on the talk he'd just given and this was published in the morning's ODT. It was the time of the Boer War and Boreham drew on his reading of Gibbon to compare and contrast the Roman Empire with the British Empire and he laced it with quotes from literature.[4]

This editorial on the issues of public concern, on war, service and Empire, marked the early beginnings of Boreham's work as an editorialist and a public theologian.

Chapter Four
From 1906 until 1916 Boreham lived in Hobart as the pastor of the Hobart Baptist Tabernacle. This was a period of maturing as a preacher and a civic leader. The church had the mayor of Hobart, state members of parliament and federal members. When the editor of the Hobart Mercury died very suddenly Boreham was asked to fill in which he did, writing editorials every day for three months after which he negotiated to write a Saturday editorial.

Chapter Five
Starts with Boreham's breakdown in health in 1916 and some time out, before moving to the Armadale Baptist church in Melbourne, where he was assured he would have strong administrative support to enable him to have time for writing. He agreed to continue to write editorials for the Mercury until they got a replacement but they never did this so, from Melbourne, he kept on writing Mercury editorials for a total of 47 years.

Chapter Six
Signals his retirement in 1928 at the age of 57, his work as an interim minister and guest preacher in Melbourne churches, his role as a keynote preacher for big Baptist and ecumenical occasions and as an international preacher and lecturer. Boreham also commenced writing a fortnightly editorial for The Age Literary Supplement. Later he wrote weekly editorials for The Age and occasional editorials for The Argus.

In 1959, he was visited by Billy Graham, who called to thank him for the way Boreham's books had enriched his evangelistic ministry. Two months later Boreham's son drove his sick father down the road to the Royal Melbourne Hospital. Boreham died in May 1959 but because in the car on the way to the hospital he had passed to his son a bundle of papers, his editorials kept appearing until September of that year!

Editorial Research
The 3,000 editorials that Boreham wrote between 1912 and 1959 have been the focus of my recent research. These editorials assumed a different format and style from his sermons and published essays. Because they've been hidden away on library microfilm they've never received any serious examination and critical evaluation. The distinctive thing about them was that they were written for a public audience rather than a Christian readership. This was the chief catalyst for my interest and intrigue. I wanted to ask:

- What were Boreham's themes?
- What do you say to your readers who open their newspapers on a Saturday morning?
- How do you capture the attention of readers who are right outside the church?
- How did he relate his faith to everyday issues, especially considering that he wrote during two World Wars, a depression and the emergence of Australian nationhood?

To help me think through these questions and evaluate his writing I considered the growing body of people who were calling for a public theology. In 1981 Martin Marty called for a "public church"—a church that was freed from navel gazing, liberated from petty congregational concerns, a church that was opened up to the world and engaging in the issues of the public arena.[5]

Scholars like Lesslie Newbigin called theologians to recognize the public nature of truth. He said "truth ought to be acknowledged as true for the whole of society."[6] David Tracey, Ronald Thiemann and others have called for a 'public theology' and have asked, "What might a public theology look like?"

Several years ago a discussion took place between two Christian leaders in America—Billy Graham, the well known evangelist and William Sloane Coffin, minister of the Riverside Church in New York, and known for his activism, especially in leading the opposition to the Vietnam War. These two respected each other greatly. William Sloane Coffin said, "The trouble with your preaching Billy, is that your Gospel never gets beyond the garden gate." In other words, he preached a gospel that was personal, a gospel that was domestic. This may have been the quality that enabled Billy Graham to have just universal appeal. It may also have been a matter of gifting.

But I have been challenged to think about my own preaching and the work of a local church in asking about the extent to which our gospel, our theology is both personally challenging yet also gets to work beyond the garden gate.

Asking the question, 'Was F W Boreham a public theologian', provided me with the lens through which to ponder new possibilities for doing theology in Australia. It has made me consider how seriously we allow our context to shape the work of the theologian. It has invited me to ask how in 2004 the issues such as the war in Iraq, the fear of outsiders seeking asylum, the obsession with television programmes

where we can be voyeurs into virtual communities—how might these and other matters in the public arena reset our theological agenda, the articles that we write, the courses that we teach, the sermons that we preach?

What Were Boreham's Major Editorial Themes?

Over 3,000 editorials, Boreham wrote on many different topics but here in headlines are his main ones.

The first major theme I've called Reverence for Life, which allowed him to indulge his passion for nature. He wrote about the discoveries of natural scientists such as Charles Darwin and he discussed the relationship between science and religion. Living in conservation conscious Tasmania he was a member of the Royal Naturalists Society and his editorials gave him a platform for promoting green issues.
He wrote about the role of beauty to society, the contribution of nature to all of life, his editorials protested about cruelty to animals, hunting, the destruction of the habitat of birds facing extinction and the careless clearing of forests. He called for the conservation of water, the establishment of National Parks, the importance of retreat, the simple lifestyle and a philosophy of play and leisure in the midst of oppressive employment laws.

In these editorials he drew out theological themes asking questions about the human love of nature, the yearning for the spiritual, the spirituality of the land, the bush and the sea, the way that our experience of nature might be a meeting place between the material and the mystical.

A second major theme revolved around his love of history. He challenged the Australian indifference towards history and in numerous articles he wrote about heroes in the Australian story—explorers, scientists, inventors. He hoped this would build a national spirit.

His approach to history was largely person-centred. He tackled the movement to institute just labour laws by writing about Shaftesbury and Wilberforce. He called for the equality for women by writing about the Bronte family. In this regard his style was akin to James McClendon's notion of "biographical theology" in which he advocates using life stories to reframe theology.[7]

Boreham wrote about cultivating a public memory, not only through books, but through architecture, monuments, memorabilia, anniversaries such as ANZAC, Australia Day, special days like Christmas and Easter, the development of pilgrimage (which since Boreham's death we have seen the growth of public remembering through the visits to such sacred sites as Gallipoli and now Bali).

A third major theme I've called A Vision for the Ordinary. Boreham wrote about ordinary things and ordinary people. He wrote about everyday things such as the weather, letter writing, envelopes, wet paint, black sheep and left-handedness. One could say that this approach was quaint and quirky. Boreham's method was very intentionally an adoption of the communication model of Jesus, especially the use of parables. Boreham tried to shock people, particularly to get the attention of readers of The Age on a Saturday morning and he deliberately tossed in explosives just to keep their attention.

The Australian Robert Banks records the epiphany that came to him when he read an article by the Scottish author John Baillie on A Theology of Sleep. Banks remarked how Baillie's juxtaposition of 'theology' with something as mundane as 'sleep' came as a shock. Further reflection and study led Robert Banks to discover the invitation to find God in the routine and to write a theology on All the Business of Life.[8] Readers of Boreham's editorials commented on experiencing a similar shock at seeing the ordinariness of many of his subjects. The interest in the realm of the ordinary may be seen in the popularity of authors like Robert Fulghum, whose books address the rituals of our lives and most recently philosophers like Alain de Botton in his books on travel and anxiety.

For Boreham the prophetic imagination was not about thundering tirades down on his readers, although his familiarity with Amos and other Hebrew prophets meant recognizing the need at certain times for tough talking and saying 'No'. Boreham believed that at the heart of a prophetic ministry was the need to develop a new way of seeing. He wrote extensively not of looking at things but like a telescope looking through things in order to see something more. In contrast to popular religious culture that often points to the miraculous, the sensational and the out of this world, Boreham pointed to ordinary things as a rich and surprising vein in which truth might be discovered.

Demonstrating the importance of this theme for contemporary Australians, David Tacey says, "Australian spirituality is, and will continue to be, grounded in the ordinary events and experiences of daily existence ... If we are looking for the God who produces otherworldly miracles and wonders, He will not necessarily be found in Australia."[9] Finding the sacred to be revealed in the ordinary, by ordinary people, indicates for Tacey the "radically democratic God".[10] As Tacey also writes of the spirituality revolution that is taking place outside traditional religion and away from the control of clergy, it is interesting to see in Boreham's editorials, very few references to the church. In not writing frequently about the church in his editorials he was mindful of his readers and was seeking to be invitational and inclusive. He was keen to highlight for them the sources of the spiritual that lay outside the limits and jurisdiction of the church. An extension of this thinking is that if God can be found in ordinary things, then, there's no sphere in which God cannot be experienced.

In his editorials, Boreham intentionally blurred the dualistic distinctions between the natural and the spiritual. Thomas Kenneally's definition of tea drinking as "the great secular sacrament"[11] exemplifies the way that Boreham sought the sacramental in ordinary things right outside the church. But Boreham went further by exploding the 'sacred' and 'secular' categories to heighten their essential integration.

A fourth theme is what I have called Realising full expression. On the personal level Boreham wrote about the uniqueness of the individual. He attacked society's drift towards homogenisation, the dehumanising effects of mechanisation whereby he said, "the essential tendency of machinery is to reduce everything—or lift everything—to one common level and make replicas of each other." He also asked, "What does it mean for society to enable children, the mentally disabled, women and the racially oppressed to find their full potential?"[12]

At a national level he wrote about Australia coming to full expression and national identity while still appreciating its British foundations. He did this with articles on celebrating Australian achievements, the role of ANZAC in nation building, identifying Aussie character and finding an Australian voice. Following the First World War there were numerous calls for an Australian voice. In his poem entitled 'Echoes', Frank Wilmot urged Australia to resist foreign influences when he said, "Australia, speak! …Speak in a voice of your own."[13]

Many of Boreham's editorials about developing an Australian voice were part of a conversation in the 1920s when Hilda Esson fuelled the debate with her stirring question, "Can't we do anything ourselves as Australians?"[14] Boreham pleaded for the writing of Australian music. He participated in the conversation about the unique features of an Australian artistic expression, which the literary critic, Vance Palmer said, involved Australians making a "spiritual adjustment" to their surroundings.[15]

Boreham loved art, he visited the art gallery weekly, he incorporated paintings in several of his books and he made many references in his writing to the works of art and artists. He challenged the neglect of the local landscape by Australian artists and their preference for the English landscape.

Boreham said, “Australians are blind to beauty…The Australian public is as yet unprepared to realize the beauty of the land of its adoption.”[16]

In many articles written for the commencement of the annual Tasmanian Art Festival in 1926 Boreham asked, “Is there such a thing as Australian art?”[17] Others were asking the same question and the first exhibition of Australian Modern Art in Sydney in 1926 and the return to Australia of artist Tom Roberts in the same year began to provide a positive answer. Echoing the concerns of Australian artists such as Frederick McCubbin[18]Boreham called for the emergence of a confident style that is drawn from the Australian landscape saying “the artists fear to depict Australia as it is . . . our colours and landscapes are painted like English scenes.”[19]Writing again on the subject in 1942, Boreham asserted that Australians must avoid the British inferiority complex regarding its art and he encouraged artists to depict Australian scenes in an Australian way.[20]

One area in which Boreham hoped Australia would increasingly find its full expression was in the field of literature. In 1927 he lamented:

> A great deal of Australian literature is simply English literature that happens to have been written in Australia. It is not essentially Australian; it is not descriptive of Australia; and a time may come when the fact that it was penned beneath the Southern Cross will pass from the minds of men.[21]

The outlook was not entirely bleak for in an editorial two months earlier to commemorate Australian Authors Week he cited poets such as C J Dennis whose writings were signalling “the beginning of things . . . the outbursts of Australian poesy . . . a new minstrelsy.”[22]

Boreham was a great lover of all forms of the arts. While he had in his earlier years been unsure as to the appropriateness of a Christian minister attending the theatre Boreham later came to “feel it a duty he owed himself to witness every first-class play and movie which made its appearance in Melbourne.”[23] He wrote, “We love the play, the film, the novel and the art gallery because, by means of them, we are able to explore new twists and turns of the life that we love.”[24]

Evaluating a Public Theology

Not all of Boreham’s editorials had readily apparent theological themes and many of them did not have clear public dimensions. But how might we evaluate a public theology and measure the significance of a theologian like Boreham or our own theology?’

Firstly, a public theology needs a public platform and needs to be addressed to a public audience. Boreham sought and took the opportunity of writing regularly for three leading newspapers that in his day were highly influential media for informing and educating readers.

He stood in a tradition of mainly pastors who were well read and adept with words—Thomas Jollie—Presbyterian minister who wrote for Argus and Australasian 1907-1927, Edward Kiek the Congregational minister who wrote for the Adelaide Advertiser from 1937-1959 and following Boreham was Dr Alan Watson 1959-1976, T Howard Crago 1976f, Jim Darling, Robert Brown, John Smith and Alan Walker in the Sydney Morning Herald.

The call for a public theology suggests at the very least a theology that is voiced through a public medium.

This may appear to be stating the obvious but a recent discussion about formulating an Australian contextual theology between Geoffrey Lilburne and Tony Kelly, largely conducted in the pages of the theological journal Pacifica (1999-2002), has focused on issues of methodology and the significance of the cultural context.[25] In the work of formulating an Australian theology, Lilburne calls theologians to a greater dialogue with "the history and the culture of this place." Kelly builds on his earlier call to theologians and the community of faith not to ignore other communities in the public sphere such as the community of science and the community of art. Bringing theology together with other disciplines such as ecology and cosmology, he contends, will make for a more integrated theology and is "a move to put our souls back into our bodies."[26]

In an article that seeks to overcome the stalemate in methodology, Frank Rees urges a 'conversational' alternative.[27] He offers some conversational starters for an Australian theological discussion saying that questions about identity, community, belonging, freedom, responsibility, worth and destiny in the Australian context, are useful suggestions for the direction of a public theology in Australia.

While this debate has been reawakened in a theological journal, a vital issue will be where this important conversation continues. While there will always be a place for specialist journals to promote theological research and provide a forum for theologians, it is crucial that dialogue on public themes takes place in public media and, in conversation with people representing disciplines other than theology.

The public medium will shape our theology in different ways whether we're given a few square centimeters in which to draw a cartoon like Victorian cartoonist Michael Leunig, whether we have thirty seconds to make a theological sound bite like Tim Costello or whether we have 250 words in which to write a letter to the editor.

A further dimension that arises is that a public theology may also mean a theology in which the public sphere shapes the theological agenda. In this capacity the public audience is not viewed as a passive receptor of the theologian's wisdom but the public actively suggests the issues and topics that the theologian needs to address.

The theologian becomes an audience to the public domain because the public sphere is a vital source for the subjects and questions with which the public theologian must reflect.

Remembering Newbigin's distinction between 'personal decision' and 'public truth', a public theology will also need to address issues of public concern.

In his book, The analogical imagination, David Tracy identifies the three major dimensions (or audiences) of the public sphere to which theologians must be listening and addressing: society, the academy and the church.

Clifford Green provides a more detailed classification of the public areas where theological engagement is needed when listing social philosophy, economics, politics, institutions, systems, corporate groups, national and international relations, the ecosystem and history.[28]

A public theology that is seeking to relate to Australia in 2004 would need to take seriously the matter of war, the issue of water and what might we say that has a theological edge to the matter of flagpoles, funding and patriotism? [These are key issues in Australia in the year 2004] And how do we define the public sphere? There are some of the issues that are affecting all Australians. But we all live in local communities and, therefore, we are also called to reflect theologically on issues within our postcode.

This call for a public theology cannot be left to professional theologians. There are so many localities and so many issues that its something we all need to consider and find how we can stimulate and encourage each other. A conversation merely among theologians will not realize the full potential that is inherent in the vision for a public theology.

The public theologian will best contribute to the construction of a theology not as a solo performer but in conversation with philosophers, economists, political scientists, business analysts, environmentalists, historians and others thinking about the public domain.[29]

The public theologian will not only initiate topics but will also respond to conversations that are already taking place and ones in which the theologian will not necessarily have the last word.

In this interdisciplinary conversation, the term 'public theology' may well need to be substituted for another name that adequately reflects the mutuality of the conversationalists and the multifaceted nature of the public discussion.[30] This vision for a conversation on matters of public concern heralds a theology that is prepared to 'lose itself' for the public good as it becomes integrated with other disciplines. It also envisages a theology that is not conducted and controlled by professional theologians but is open to the contribution and the scrutiny from people of other disciplines as they help to formulate a public theology.

Defining the sphere and deciding on the issues for reflection within the dynamic swirl of the public sphere are some of the challenges for a public theologian. If the theologian is to be open to the many ways that the public sphere might source, shape and inspire a theology, it will require that the theologian develop the ability to listen and interpret the context of both time and place.

Mindful of the hope that theology must be "followable"[31] and "liveable"[32] an effective public theology will suggest clear directions that will result in positive changes to the public sphere. A public theology of this quality might be a response to Manning Clark's plea for people with prophetic vision to state "the hopes and dreams… for some future human harmony" and "tell the story of what might be"[33]

In addition to having a public audience and being shaped by the public context, a public theology might also mean submitting to public criteria for evaluating its adequacy and verification.

David Tracy asserts that each public sector demands that the public theologian spells out the "criteria, evidence, warrants, disciplinary status" of his or her work instead of presenting a theology that is based on personal preferences.[34] Furthermore, in arguing a case on public grounds Tracy believes that theologians should defend each claim with philosophical arguments.[35]

Ronald Thiemann in Constructing a public theology disagrees with this approach, believing that Tracy's "desire to ground theology's publicness in general philosophical or metaphysical argument has the … effect of distancing theological reflection from the particular policy dilemmas that so bedevil public life today."[36]

Attentive to postmodern culture, Thiemann is less concerned with the need for public theology to provide overarching theories, validations and answers and is more intent on identifying and reflecting on the intersections or "the complex and ambiguous joints" where public issues and Christian convictions must meet.[37]

While there are disagreements over the exact grounds upon which a public theology should be presented or argued, it is appropriate to examine whether our theology is presented and argued in ways that are considered to be adequate and publicly credible and to ask how this might be determined.

An associated evaluative measure is the standard of mutual accountability. A theology also requires verification by theology's traditional authorities such as Scripture and church tradition. In addition to a theology being publically credible it is also necessary to ask whether the same theology also has validity from biblical authority and the tradition of the church.

A further criterion concerns the way theology is expressed in the public arena. If a theologian is respectful of the public audience it will mean that the needs and desires of the public are considered when determining the most effective way that theology might be communicated. Each public audience will have different tastes and levels of theological literacy. Being attentive to these needs might mean that one audience will require a public theology to be presented in a highly creative way to keep it engaged while another audience might require a theology that is more intellectually rigorous and defended with extensive rational explanations.

This involves attending to the language in which a theology is cast. This does not mean that theology (or other disciplines) must be shorn of their peculiar terminology but it does suggest the need for developing a common currency of words and images to expedite a rich exchange of thought.

Furthermore, a commitment to the effective communication of theology in the public domain does not mean that theology has to be 'dumbed down' but it requires an expression that strives for simplicity and clarity.

Boreham demonstrated a love of words, a fascination with stories, a love for colour, concreteness and detail that would help his readers to see. He strove for energy and writing that would be interesting. This meant that he was not very analytical. He sometimes skipped over some issues, not only because of the limits of space but because he judged they wouldn't hold the interest of his readers. He was sensitive to the issue of language and how theology might be accessible or acceptable in the public domain" and appropriate to the editorial medium?[38]

His approach could be described as a theology urging connections. In telling the stories of heroes, some triumph from history or a wonder from nature's showcase, Boreham was seeking to facilitate in his reader a discovery of the way that the story from life connected with God.

A related facet of theological expression is the tone of a public theology. Gordon Preece has stated that "one of the problems in much Christian public speaking is the attempt to be always prophetic, to thump the pulpit and speak in black and white tones."[39] It is interesting that Boreham by personality was a gentle man. He did not write in strident, categorical tones but he pitched his editorials in a more modest, open-ended style. He did not seek to have the last word. On the contrary he sought to evoke the reader's response and to encourage their ongoing reflection? As to his stance, he was not condescending but he valued his readers as companions on a mutual quest?

Boreham adopted the image of the pointers, those stars that point to the Southern Cross."[40] His style was therefore one of hinting, alluding. It was understated rather than blatant, suggestive rather than didactic. He encouraged people to search and hopefully to find God for themselves. His role as a 'pointer' and his teaching on the art of 'seeing more' was an indication of the way he encouraged and trusted his readers to share in the task of theology.

While the public theology debate has suggested numerous evaluative criteria for assessing Boreham's approach to theology, there are two other measures that I have applied. The first is consistency. Boreham certainly got top marks for longevity but was he consistent to his own standards? This question reveals certain traps for all public theologians.

Boreham addressed major public issues especially in his early years with the Mercury and this illustrated the value that his writing gained through his religious and civic leadership. That was the period when his writing was most vigorous and connected to the public sphere. But the pressures of the First World War affected him. After writing a multitude of editorials about the war these stopped almost overnight. His ill health and emotional breakdown prompted a turn from issues of war to matters of historical, biographical and literary importance.

Boreham's move to Melbourne meant that he was not attuned with local Tasmanian issues. His preaching, editorials and essays for his books all enriched each other causing Lindsay Newnham to call Boreham a skilful recycler, but the success of his published books reduced the local focus of his editorials.[41] He was writing for an international audience.

Then, as he became famous and responded to invitations to tour around the world for six months giving lectures he increased his practice of stockpiling editorials. He actually buried them for safe keeping in fireproof pipes in his backyard. It was an understandable practice to stockpile but it restricted his ability to be current and topical. The perils of success! From the mid-1930s, his contributions to the literary section of the Age affected his Mercury articles by increasing the number of editorials that addressed a literary theme rather than matters of general public concern.

The anxiety of the Second World War, health problems and the death of his daughter appeared to affect Boreham's editorial writing in the last two decades of his life, with evidence of him projecting his despair into his columns and becoming increasingly out of touch with national and international issues.

Boreham also later displayed an inconsistency in style. For years he disguised theological insights within stories and believed in keeping his editorials free from moralizing. Like the writer of the Joseph narrative in Genesis or the writer of the story of Esther Boreham believed one can write about God without naming God—that it may be more powerful to write a human drama which points readers to recognize the unseen but active God. So this was Boreham's practice for most of his editorial career. No divine name-dropping, no thick theological language, no text quoting. Until for some unknown reason he changed his style in 1943, and his articles acquired overt religious language and predictable devotional appeals. According to his son, the editor of The Age spoke to Boreham at this time and asked him to drop the religious bits off his editorials. To which Boreham replied, "If you are asking me to do this then I have written my last editorial." The editor relented and Boreham continued in his own way.[42]

The last evaluative measure is that of courage. Being faithful to a Christian theology in the public arena will sometimes involve saying things that are controversial and unwelcome. Boreham did not possess the provocative, pugnacious style of the Rev Alan Walker who, in a later era, wrote editorials for the Sydney Morning Herald and whose active campaigns against apartheid, the Vietnam War, nuclear weapons, alcohol and gambling embroiled him in regular controversy.[43] Boreham's personality was of a more peaceful kind and earned him enormous public respect across all parties.

However, at one point in his career he got embroiled in a public controversy that he fought out in the pages of the newspaper. In this debate he got hurt and he hurt the other person. From that time Boreham decided to avoid controversy. He did not keep this promise faithfully but this decision did limit his effectiveness as an interpreter of public issues, a public theologian and as a conscience to his constituency. Boreham knew this, for reflecting on this decision thirty-three years later he wrote, "I think I have been wrong. I think ... I may have shirked my duty."[44]

Despite these limitations, among his many roles as a pastor and poet and hymn writer, F W Boreham exercised for a remarkable number of years an important role as a public theologian. His advocacy for a

form of theology that built connections with life issues and related to other spheres of life represented an early call for 'a public theology'.

His concern that theology be attractive, comprehensible and accessible to ordinary people has great importance for people like us who are challenged by the call to talk and write about God in the public arena.

Notes

[1] F W Boreham, *My pilgrimage*, (London, The Epworth Press, (1940), 41-43.
[2] Boreham, *My pilgrimage*, 141-143.
[3] *Magazine of the Wesleyan Methodist Church*, 21 November 1929.
[4] Boreham, *My pilgrimage*, 149-151.
[5] Martin Marty, *The public church* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981).
[6] L Newbigin, *Truth to tell: The gospel as public truth* (Grand Rapids: W B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 2.
[7] J W McClendon, Jr., *Biography as theology: How life stories can remake today's theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 36-37.
[8] Robert Banks, *All the business of life* (Sutherland, NSW: Albatross Books, 1987), 9-10.
[9] David Tacey, *Re-enchantment: The new Australian spirituality*, (Sydney, HarperCollins, 2000), 111.
[10] Tacey, *Re-enchantment: The new Australian spirituality*, 121.
[11] Tom Keneally, *An angel in Australia* (Sydney: Doubleday, 2002), 114.
[12] F W Boreham, *Mercury*, 25 July 1942.
[13] Furnley Maurice [Frank Wilmot], 'Echoes', in *Poems by Furnley Maurice*, ed. Percival Serle (Melbourne and Sydney: Lothian Publishing Co. Pty. Ltd., 1944), 42-43.
[14] C Manning H Clark, *A history of Australia, 1916-1935*. vol. 6. (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1987), 138.
[15] Vance Palmer, 'Future of Australian literature', *Age*, 9 February 1935.
[16] Boreham, *Mercury*, 24 April 1926.
[17] Boreham, *Mercury*, 24 April 1926.
[18] Clark, *A history of Australia* vol. vi, 81.
[19] Boreham, *Mercury*, 24 April 1926.
[20] Boreham, *Mercury*, 17 January 1942.
[21] Boreham, *Mercury*, 12 November 1927.
[22] Boreham, *Mercury*, 12 September 1927.
[23] T H Crago, *The story of F W Boreham*, (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1961), 198-199.
[24] Boreham, *Mercury*, 5 April 1947.
[25] While *Pacifica* is not the only place where these two scholars have presented their views on an Australian theology, Geoffrey Lilburne's contribution in this journal is called 'Contextualising Australian theology: An enquiry into method',*Pacifica* 10 (1997): 350-364 and Tony Kelly's article, 'Whither "Australian theology"? A response to Geoffrey Lilburne', *Pacifica* 12 (1999): 192-208.
[26] Tony Kelly, *An expanding theology: Faith in a world of connections* (Newtown, NSW: E J Dwyer, 1993), 12-14.
[27] Frank Rees, 'Beating around the bush: Methodological directions for Australian theology', *Pacifica* 15 (2002): 293.

[28] C Green, 'Bonhoeffer's non-religious Christianity as public theology', *Dialog* 26 (Fall 1987): 275.

[29] Describing Paul Tillich's 'method of correlation', Frank Rees cites Tillich's testimony that doing theology 'on the boundary' between various cultural groups in society is "the best place to derive knowledge of God." Rees, 'Beating around the bush', 293, quoting Paul Tillich, *On the boundary: An autobiographical sketch* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 46-58.

[30] Barry Harvey questions the propriety of pursuing a 'public theology', believing that its advocates use language and suggest procedures that unwittingly keep faith contained. He asserts that the continued reliance on the category of 'religion' keeps theology locked in an iron cage and bracketed at the margins of society, in Harvey, 'Insanity, theocracy, and the public realm', 31.

[31] R F Thiemann, *Constructing a public theology: The church in a pluralistic culture* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1991), 51.

[32] Rees, 'Beating around the bush', 292.

[33] Clark, *A history of Australia, 1916-1935*. vol. 6, 500.

[34] David Tracy, *The analogical imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 10, 21.

[35] D Tracy and J B Cobb Jnr, *Talking about God* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 9.

[36] Thiemann, *Constructing a public theology*, 21.

[37] Thiemann, *Constructing a public theology*, 21-22, 24.

[38] Gordon Preece, 'Public speaking: Thick and thin theological language and "secular" ethical debate', *Ministry Society and Theology* 16 (2002): 22. The notion of 'thick' and 'thin' language comes from Clifford Geertz in *The interpretation of cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), chapter 1.

[39] Preece, 'Public speaking', 26.

[40] F W Boreham, *The crystal pointers*, (London, The Epworth Press, 1925), 8.

[41] Lindsay L Newnham, 'Recycling by Dr F W Boreham', *Our yesterdays* 5 (Melbourne: Victorian Baptist Historical Society, 1997), 78.

[42] Frank R Boreham, interview by author, Melbourne, 28 May 1999.

[43] Don Wright, *Alan Walker: Conscience of the nation* (Adelaide: Open Book Publishers, 1997), 114, 134, 162, 163, 165. Walker wrote Christmas and Good Friday editorials for the *Sydney Morning Herald* from the early 1970s.

[44] F W Boreham, *Ships of pearl*, (London, The Epworth Press, 1935), 160.