



Doing Evangelical Public Theology: The Gardener Approach as a Methodology

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ABSTRACT

Even though the subject of Public Theology is popular and widespread, it lacks a definite and authoritative methodology and so the search for a methodology continues. As a contribution to the search for a methodology for this relatively new brand of theology, this paper developed a theological model based on the gardener's vocation. It argues that the work of a gardener represents a powerful metaphor for understanding the task of the public theologian because the two vocations are strikingly analogous in nature and scope. The Gardener Approach ensures that public theological discourses are not only biblically grounded but also contextually sensitive, politically engaging, practically oriented, and accessible to the public. The paper is organized in two sections. Using a comparative approach, the first section draws parallels between the tasks of the public theologian and the gardener. With the results of this step as a framework, the second section establishes five methodological steps for doing evangelical Public Theology based on the principles of gardening. The steps are: Preparing the socio-political soil (exploration phase); planting the theological seed (planting phase); maintaining the theological crop (maintenance phase); harvesting the theological fruit (harvesting phase) and distributing the theological fruit for consumption (distribution phase). The article contributes to the field of Public Theology by creatively and practically linking theology with agriculture in a way that emphasizes the centrality of Scripture in theological discourses and makes theologizing accessible to the ordinary researcher/reader without compromising academic standards.

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INTRODUCTION

Admittedly, all theologies—from systematic theology to practical theology—are public theologies because they are interested in all aspects of life.¹ The public presence, public influence and public

¹ Dion Foster, "The Nature of Public Theology" In *African Public Theology* edited by Sunday Bobai Agang, Dion Foster and H. Jurgens Hendriks (Cumbria: HippoBooks, 2020), 16; Dion Foster, *Living more decently in an indecent world? The virtues and vices of a public theologian* (Professorial Inaugural Lecture: Stellenbosch University, 2022), 11; Ronaldo de

consequences of all theological reflections and engagements are not in doubt. Nico N. Koopman expresses this thought in his assertion that “church [and the Christian faith] exists in public, is a part of it and impacts upon it both knowingly and unknowingly.”² Jürgen Moltmann argues that Christian theology is by nature public and must “engage with the political, cultural, educational, economic and ecological spheres of life, not just with the private and ecclesial spheres.”³ Strictly speaking, there is nothing like “private” theology because theology influences the life of the theologian and the theologian’s life influences and is influenced by the society in which he/she lives.⁴ Therefore, the main task of theology is to facilitate meaningful, sustainable and impactful encounters between the Christian faith and the holistic life of the individual and the society.

Nonetheless, the increasing secularization of the world has led to the contention that religion in general, but Christianity in particular, can be practiced at home or can perform ritualistic roles during public ceremonies but should not influence people’s public life.⁵ Even though the secularization theory fails to give an adequate description of “lived spirituality, theologies, cultural and social beliefs”⁶ that are found in many social and religious contexts around the world, it prevails in many societies today when it comes to the issue of the role of religion in human life. As a result of secularization, the traditional theologies (for example, systematic theology, practical theology, biblical theology/studies) which are by nature public have not effectively facilitated the encounter between the Christian faith and the public sphere. In addition, the traditional theologies do not engage non-theological fields of study and so have limited scope, which hinders their ability to adequately engage the public space.

The need to revive and emphasize the church’s effort in transforming the world through a meaningful encounter with the public sphere has led to increasing interest in the discipline of Public Theology in recent times. Public Theology takes “place in public places and spaces, where public opinion is indeed formed and even where public policies are debated and decided.”⁷ It operates differently and exists alongside the traditional theological disciplines to perform a task that no single discipline can perform.⁸ In this sense, Public Theology may be understood as a reasonable and practical engagement of the public space with Christian theology in a manner that upholds the core message of the gospel.

Smith notes that even though the past few decades have witnessed unprecedented popularity and acceptance of the field of Public Theology, there is not (yet) a “definite and normative methodology” for this theological discipline.⁹ A survey of literature on Public Theology, available to the researcher, confirms that lack of an authoritative methodology. One should not be surprised because the field of Public Theology is still relatively new. As a contribution to the search for a methodology, this paper formulates a model for doing Public Theology based on the principles of

Paula Cavalcante and Rudolf von Sinner, “Special Issue: Public Theology in Brazil,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 6, no. 1 (2012), 1.

² Nico N. Koopman, “Public Spirit: The Global Citizen’s Gift – a Response to William Storrar,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 5, no. 1 (2011): 94; see also Nico Koopman, “Some Contours of Public Theology in South Africa,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 14, no. 1 (2010), 123.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Ellen T. Charry, *A Passion for God’s Reign: Theology, Christian Learning and the Christian Self* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 24.

⁴ Foster, “The Nature of Public Theology,” 16.

⁵ Foster, “The Nature of Public Theology,” 15.

⁶ Dion Forster, “Revisiting “Can public theology bridge the divide?” Some tentative reflections,” In *Space and Place as a Topic for Public Theologies*, edited by Thomas Wabel, Katharina Eberlein-Braun, Torben Stamer, pp. 131-152 (Zurich: LIT Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, Wien, 2022), 139.

⁷ Dirk J. Smit, “Does it Matter? *On whether there is Method in the Madness*” In *A Companion to Public Theology*, eds. Sebastian C. H. Kim and Katie Day (1st edition) (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 83.

⁸ Foster, “The Nature of Public Theology,” 18.

⁹ Smit, “Does it Matter? *On whether there is Method in the Madness*,” 67. One finds researchers adopting methodologies for Systematic Theology (such as Grant Osborne’s model) for their research in Public Theology. For more on this approach consult Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006).

gardening. This model, referred to as the Gardener Approach, metaphorizes the public theologian as a gardener who engages the public through his/her activities and with what he/she produces.

With the above introductory notes, I proceed to the next section to examine the origins and development of the field of Public Theology.

The Emergence and Development of Public Theology

The emergence, nature and development of Public Theology is surrounded by complexities. In his keynote lecture at the International Conference on Public Theology in Bamberg in 2011, Dirk J. Smit outlined six theories related to the origins of Public Theology.¹⁰ The most prominent theory is the one that holds that “Public Theology” was introduced into North American theological discourse by Martin Marty (in 1974) and was later developed and popularized through his works and the works of other scholars.¹¹ This theory traces classic narratives about Public Theology to the theme of “Theology in the naked public square.”¹² Even though Marty did not explicitly define the expression “Public Theology”, he gave a clue in the following statement: “The main strand of American religious thought has drawn together the work of various figures who have interpreted the nation’s religious experience, practice, and behavior in the light of some sort of transcendent reference.”¹³ Marty’s thoughts are further traced to Robert Bellah’s use of the expression “real Public Theology” in American public discussions on civil religion in the late 1960s. Bellah argued for a well-defined civil religion in America that could exist side-by-side with the church and operate in the public sphere. Marty first introduced the term “Public Theology” and later “public church” as a form of one such civil religion advocated by Bellah. Marty argued that the church and theology must influence the American public space. Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King Junior later became influential public theologians who represented this kind of civil religion. A review of existing literature shows the enormous contributions that Marty and other scholars like David Tracy and Wolfgang Huber have made the field of Public Theology.¹⁴

The formation of The Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT) and the emergence of *International Journal for Public Theology* (IJPT) have also contributed immensely to the development of Public Theology. The GNPT was launched in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2006 but its founding meeting took place in Princeton, in the United States, in May 2007.¹⁵ This 2007 meeting also founded an academic journal, *IJPT*. According to Kim, the aim of the GNPT and the *IJPT* was to create a platform “to conduct interdisciplinary research in theology and public issues in global and local contexts... in dialogue with different academic disciplines such as politics, economics, cultural studies and religious studies, as well as with spirituality, globalization and society in general.”¹⁶ The GNPT and the *IJPT* have both contributed to the promotion of theological contributions on public issues from both global and local perspectives. The GNPT organizes regular conferences/consultations to provide the platform for presentations on issues of public concerns. Through these conferences, many scholars have provided political directions for their societies. One of such meetings was hosted by the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at Stellenbosch University in South Africa in 2016. The meeting yielded the 2020 publication *African Public Theology* edited by Sunday Bobai Agang, Dion A. Forster and H. Jurgens Hendriks. This book deals with a number of issues pertaining to the African continent and

¹⁰ Dirk J. Smit, *The Paradigm of Public Theology: Origins and Development*, keynote address delivered at a conference on ‘Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology’, University of Bamberg, Germany, 23-25 June 2011.

¹¹ See Kim Sebastian, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate* (London: SCM Press 2013); Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, “Doing Public Theology in African Christianity: A Reflection on Communiques by Churches in Ghana,” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies*, 7 no.11 (2021): 190-200, 192.

¹² Smit, “The Paradigm of Public Theology: Origins and Development,” 11.

¹³ Martin E. Marty, “Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience,” *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 4 (1974): 332.

¹⁴ For more insight on this consult David Tracy, ‘Three Kinds of Publicness in Public Theology’, *International Journal of Public Theology* 8, no. 3 (2014): 330–334; see also Foster, *Living more decently in an indecent world?*, 12.

¹⁵ Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, 6.

¹⁶ Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, 6.

serves as an example of ways in which Africans have benefited from the activities of the GNPT. Other parts of the globe have also benefitted from the activities of the GNPT in similar ways.

Having examined the origins of Public Theology, I proceed to demonstrate the close relationship between the task of the gardener and that of the public theologian.

The Gardener-Public Theologian

This section brings out parallels between the work of the gardener and that of the public theologian. It argues that the gardening vocation not only provides human existential needs but also serves as a tool for theological/ethical reflection, formulation and application. Before unpacking the argument, it is appropriate to clarify the meaning of the term “gardener” because of the different meanings it can assume in different contexts. The word “gardener” may refer to a person who cultivates flowers, and maintains lawns by sodding, reseeding, mowing, pruning and applying fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides. In some contexts, the gardener’s work also includes removing snow and ice from roadways, building entrances and parking lots during winter as well as landscaping for buildings and properties. However, in the context of this paper, the “gardener” refers to a person who cultivates crops for public consumption (use) and appreciates the aesthetic value of crops. Though gardening activities usually take place around one’s house, “gardening” in the context of this paper may take place anywhere, whether far from or near the house. Therefore, the word “gardener” is used in the sense of farming rather than the act of maintaining a family’s lawn, mowing the grass, and taking general care of it. It is with the understanding of the “gardener” as a farmer who cultivates for personal and public consumption that one should analyze the Gardener-Theologian metaphor espoused below, based on the nature and scope of the tasks of the gardener and the theologian.

a. Biblically based

Public Theology is biblically grounded or based on biblical theology.¹⁷ The public theologian endeavors to understand God’s word and to relate it to public life. The Bible is the first and final authority in such a theological formulation. The Bible must, however, be read in relation to the worldview of the receptor community so that its application can be meaningful and relevant. Public Theology must be based on credible and persuasive biblical interpretation and application.¹⁸ The biblical foundation is crucial to qualify one’s theology as evangelical.

Similarly, the work of the gardener is based on biblical principles, though not every aspect of it can be deduced directly from the Bible. An example of gardening principles from the Bible is the practice of land rotation which is rooted in the demand for a Sabbatical rest for agricultural lands (cf. Lev. 25:4). Even though, in contemporary times, crop rotation may not be the norm in some societies, the biblical principle to ensure that the land has adequate nutrients to support crops is applicable. Thus, the work of the gardener must be based on biblical principles to ensure environmental sustainability.

b. Problem-solving oriented

Public Theology is meant to provide a political direction, thus, addressing the needs of society.¹⁹ A public theologian is a community-minded person who provides “orientation, direction, and even guidance for policy-making and decisions about public life.”²⁰ The task of the public theologian requires identifying problems and proffering solutions to them based on critical analysis and engagements. Public theologians speak against such anti-social practices as oppression, exploitation, inequality, unethical cultural practices, corruption, racism, and bribery. Therefore, public theologians

¹⁷ Foster, “The Nature of Public Theology,” 20.

¹⁸ Smit, “Does it Matter? *On whether there is Method in the Madness*,” 71.

¹⁹ Foster, “The Nature of Public Theology,” 21. The term “political” in this sense encompasses “political, economic and social” issues.

²⁰ Smit, “Does it Matter? *On whether there is Method in the Madness*,” 82.

have a prophetic voice that rebukes, warns, critiques, and opposes wrongs; all these are geared toward the transformation of the society.²¹

The problem-solving dimension of Public Theology is not lacking in the gardener's task. Whatever the gardener cultivates contributes solution to the society's nutritional/health, economic and aesthetic needs. As the theologian interprets his/her environment and proffers solutions to human needs, so the gardener interprets his/her environment and addresses human needs in the light of what can be produced.²² The gardener is a community-minded person who takes an active part in decisions affecting the public. The life of the community depends on what people eat and what they eat comes from the gardener. Therefore, holistic policymaking cannot take place without taking into consideration the views of the gardener. Gardening also serves as means of developing and promoting research, reflection, innovation, and creativity, all of which promote development.²³ Hence, the gardening vocation contributes to societal development and transformation by raising researchers and inventors.

c. Inter-Contextual in approach

Public Theology takes place in a wide range of contexts (that is, different communities, different regions, and different disciplines).²⁴ Smit says "[b]eing inter-contextual, being widely divergent and different, belongs to the very nature of what is today known as Public Theology."²⁵ The public theologian learns from various issues, concerns and patterns in diverse contexts to acquire "deeper and more nuanced insights."²⁶ This feature of Public Theology is important in the age of globalization where the concerns of local communities easily attain a global nature. The interconnection of global and local issues has led to the coinage of the term "glocal" (derived from "global" and "local"). Because of glocalization, the public theologian focuses on the local (micro) context without ignoring the global (macro) context. Public Theology requires the theologian to dialogue with past and present scholars, thereby engaging different contexts.

In gardening, the land serves as the embodied context which mediates the exchange of God's blessings and human obedience. The land "is both context and content of [God's] promise, and it is both agent and patient in the divine economy."²⁷ Gardening, like theologizing, has an inter-contextual nature because it takes place in diverse contexts, each of which has something to contribute to the overall understanding of this vocation. Gardening practices such as land preparation, planting, management practices, pest control, harvesting, storage and marketing have both local and global dimensions. The gardener learns from what is happening in other farming contexts (both local and global). Gardeners who limit themselves to their farm cannot be successful in this age of globalization.

d. Interdisciplinary in scope

The scope of Public Theology goes beyond a single theological field such as biblical studies, practical theology, or systematic theology to draw on other disciplines such as economics, sociology, ecology, health, education, political science, and history, among others.²⁸ In some contexts, the public theologian needs to know about such religions as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and African Traditional Religions, among others. The public theologian, therefore, needs to be knowledgeable in many areas (fields). As noted earlier, the interdisciplinary nature of Public Theology is one of the main

²¹ Foster, "The Nature of Public Theology," 22.

²² Carmody Grey, *Philosophy, Theology, Agriculture: The Missing Link* (University of Oxford: Public lecture, 2021), 3.

²³ Grey, *Philosophy, Theology, Agriculture*, 3.

²⁴ Foster, "The Nature of Public Theology," 22.

²⁵ Smit, "Does it Matter? *On whether there is Method in the Madness*," 86.

²⁶ Foster, "The Nature of Public Theology," 22.

²⁷ Grey, *Philosophy, Theology, Agriculture*, 5.

²⁸ Foster, "The Nature of Public Theology," 18; John de Gruchy, "Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre," *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1/1 (2007), 39.

distinguishing features of this theological paradigm. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, it sometimes requires collaboration between the public theologian and scholars from other fields to undertake the task involved.

Gardening is also an interdisciplinary field, drawing from agriculture, economics, health, sociology, accounting, marketing, ethics, and philosophy, among others. The gardener needs to know the economic, health and social values of crops as well as the soil texture and climate before deciding what to cultivate. The gardener needs to study and follow ethical principles. The promotion and sale of the harvested crop require marketing and accounting expertise. More so, the gardener must be a philosopher because gardening activities are based on the metaphysical interpretation of the universe as “a single cosmic order which is simultaneously moral and physical.”²⁹ In addition to metaphysics, the gardener also learns and applies aesthetics in their work. The foregoing underscores that successful gardening requires the possession and application of knowledge from diverse fields.

e. Multilingualism

The public nature of Public Theology makes the theologian encounter personalities of diverse linguistic traditions³⁰ Because the public theologian deals with people of different linguistic backgrounds (accents, vocabulary, syntax, and semantics), he/she ought to be multilingual in order to be able to listen to people of different cultures, experiences and then communicate what he/she learns from them to the general public.³¹ Here, one is not talking about the various dialects such as Bono-Twi, Hausa, Swahili, or Yoruba. Rather, one is concerned about the theologian’s interaction with people of different backgrounds with unique diction/language. For example, the theologian needs to know how to speak to a lawyer and then how to communicate what is learnt to the public. Similarly, the theologian has to be abreast with jargon in the sporting discipline to be able to interact meaningfully with sportsmen and sportswomen.

The multilingual nature of Public Theology is not lacking in the gardening enterprise. The nature of the gardener’s work makes them encounter a lot of people in the public space. Gardening is not a “private” job; it is inevitably “public” just as Public Theology is “public.” The gardener learns to communicate with the researcher who visits his/her field, with the taxi driver who transports the produce from the farm, and with the trader who buys and sells the farm produce.

Since the close analogy between the tasks of the gardener and the public theologian is striking, the methodology of the gardener has much to offer in the search for a methodology for doing evangelical Public Theology. The next section outlines the key principles involved in the use of the Gardener Approach for the formulation of evangelical Public Theology.

Using the Gardener Approach to formulate Evangelical Public Theology

“The Gardener Approach” (also “the Farmer Approach”) is the theological research methodology based on parallels between the works of the gardener (farmer) and the public theologian.³² This theological model applies basic principles of crop production to the formulation of evangelical Public Theology. The working analogy is drawn from crops that require nursery and the active involvement of the gardener in the production process.

The expression “evangelical public theology” is used in this paper to denote theological engagement with the public space in a way that takes the Bible seriously. Thus, the Bible is the final authority when it comes to the formulation of evangelical public theology. This definition and the analysis of the nature and scope of Public Theology (in the previous section) reveals at least three non-

²⁹ Grey, *Philosophy, Theology, Agriculture*, 5.

³⁰ Foster, “The Nature of Public Theology,” 20.

³¹ Smit, “Does it Matter? *On whether there is Method in the Madness*,” 76.

³² The invention of this approach to theology is rooted in my multifaceted backgrounds as a farmer, a Bible Translator, a biblical exegete and commentator, a theologian, and an Christian ethicist, among others. In deriving this methodology from the gardening/farming vocation I leaned heavily on my experiences in the agrarian environment in which I was brought up.

negotiable partners in evangelical public theological discourses; namely, Scripture, the socio-political context and historical theology.³³ Any given evangelical theological model should, therefore, account for the preparation of these partners, the interaction among them to yield a theological construction and the application of the resulting theology. To achieve this, the Gardener Approach suggests the following five steps.

- Step 1 (Exploparation³⁴ phase): Exploring and preparing the socio-political soil
- Step 2 (Planting phase): Planting the theological seed
- Step 3 (Maintenance phase): Maintaining the theological crop
- Step 4 (Harvesting phase): Harvesting the theological fruit
- Step 5 (Distribution phase): Distributing the theological fruit for consumption

Each of these steps is outlined briefly below.

Step 1 (Exploparation phase): Preparing the socio-political soil

What socio-political soil (environment) exists for cultivation?

The first step in the Gardener Approach is the exploration and preparation of the socio-political soil for the planting of the theological seed (the biblical teaching about the subject matter). From the theological perspective, the collection of data for this step may be done using empirical, non-empirical research tools or a mixed approach. The preparation of the socio-political soil requires such activities as demarcating, exploring, clearing, and tilling. Each of these sub-steps is outlined briefly below.

a. Demarcating the socio-political land

Land is an important resource in the gardening enterprise. There should be land available for cultivation before the gardener can undertake any farming activity. Once land has been acquired there is the need to demarcate it, note its boundaries, and fence it (protect it from intruders). The gardener ought to have a clear purpose and focus of the exercise before land preparation begins. The gardener's own needs and/or the need of the community may be the key reason for the cultivation.

Similarly, the Gardener-Theologian needs to be clear about the problem that has necessitated the theological research. The community experiencing the problem is the context within which the theologian's task takes place, just as the gardening field serves as the context for the gardener's task. This community for which theology is formulated is referred to as the "receptor community." Theological demarcation and fencing require the theologian to make the research problem specific, brief, clear, and yet, informative. This step helps to define the space within which the Gardener-Theologian would operate.

b. Exploring the Socio-Political Land

The gardener's vocation (including land preparation, nursing of seeds, maintenance, harvesting and storage) depends largely on the context in which he/she works. To obtain adequate knowledge about the gardening context, the gardener conducts a number of critical contextual analyses. First, the gardener examines the soil type/profile, color, texture, structure, porosity, density, consistency, aggregate stability, as well as the climatic conditions of the land. Second, the gardener considers both his/her economic situation and the economic status of consumers. Third, the gardener examines the social context of the farmland which includes the physical, topographical, and climatic relationship

³³ These three parties alone will qualify the outcome equally as a Systematic Theology. The interdisciplinary nature of the formulation makes Public Theology different from a systematic theological formulation. Therefore, the reader should bear in mind the need to dialogue with relevant disciplines in the process of formulation Public Theology.

³⁴ The term "exploparation" has been coined from the words "exploration" and "preparation" to denote the two main activities that take place in the first step of gardening; namely, exploration of the land and the preparation of the soil/land to receive the crop.

between the gardening field and nearby farmlands. Fourth, the gardener considers the religious/spiritual beliefs and practices associated with land and its related activities in the society in which the farmland is located. Fifth, there is the need to survey the philosophical “properties” of the farming environment—the aesthetic quality of the land and that of the crop to be cultivated.³⁵ Grey argues that gardening emerges “from a *theoria* of the whole”³⁶; meaning, successful gardening requires philosophical contemplation of what the world truly is and an appreciation of its unity. Obviously, the interdisciplinary nature of the work of the gardener comes to play even in the survey of the farmland.

Similarly, preparing grounds for the theological seed requires an exploration of the socio-political land (the receptor community). This is important because Public Theology is a form of “contextual theology” that shapes and is shaped by “influence on the sites, locations, and situations in which it is practiced.”³⁷ Among others, the public theologian ought to explore the social, political, religious, economic and philosophical worldviews of the theological environment. Each of these aspects of the worldview of the receptor community is outlined below. (1). *Social context*: This refers to the particular circumstance or general environment that forms a social framework for individual or interpersonal relationships and behavior in the receptor community. The concept of personhood, the system of inheritance, social norms, social groups and the social status of women, widows and children are all part of the social context. (2). *Political context*: This refers to how the society is organized and ruled. It has to do with governance, and how decisions of public interest are taken and implemented. In most traditional African societies, for instance, the political worldview centers on the chieftaincy institution. (3). *Religious context*: This deals with the religious beliefs of the receptor community including beliefs about God, lower divinities, ancestors, magic, witchcraft, and spirits, among others. It also has to do with how, when and why human beings relate to the transcendent and the supernatural spiritual realm. (4). *Economic context*: This refers to how the economy of a community works as well as how agents of the economy interact and behave. (5). *Philosophical context*: This has to do with what the receptor community thinks about knowledge, existence, reality, truth, values and logic, among others. The survey of these dimensions of the socio-political land/soil enables the Gardener-Theologian to come to terms with the factors that underpin the theological challenge and be better equipped to interpret the environment so as to meaningfully engage theologically within it.

c. Preparing (clearing and tilling) the socio-political soil

After demarcating and exploring the land, it is cleared and prepared to receive the seed/seedling (crop). This is followed by the removal of stumps from the land. Tilling, comprising the digging up of the soil to allow air and water to penetrate more easily, is also done. Ridging or bed preparation may also be prepared where necessary. All these are done to provide a conducive environment for the crop.

Correspondingly, the Gardener-Theologian needs to prepare the socio-political land to receive the crop. The clearing of socio-political land involves reaffirming the research topic and clearing it of ambiguities. To make the socio-political soil more conducive for the theological crop, the Gardener-Theologian tills the theological land by loosening and linking the worldview of the receptor community to the general biblical worldview so as to allow the free flow of theological air through the socio-political soil. Later, when the theological crop is planted, additional links may be established. The Gardener-Theologian also removes stumps from the socio-political land by noting and “removing”³⁸ aspects of the worldview of the receptor community that contradict the Christian faith.

³⁵ Grey, *Philosophy, Theology, Agriculture*, 4.

³⁶ Grey, *Philosophy, Theology, Agriculture*, 6.

³⁷ Michael S. Hogue, “Toward a Pragmatic Public Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 78(2) (2010):346-374, 353; see also see also Dion Foster, “Can contextual theology bridge the divide? South Africa’s politics of forgiveness as an example of a contextual public theology,” In *Contextual Theology Skills and Practices of Liberating Faith*, edited by Sigurd Bergmann and Mika Vähäkangas (London: Routledge, 2021), 16-29.

³⁸ In the process, the theologian critiques the traditional worldview and then corrects wrong aspects of it.

Step 2 (Planting phase): Planting the theological seed

How might a suitable theological seed be planted successfully?

In theological circles, the biblical data is the most important and authoritative source, similar to the significance of the seed in the gardening enterprise. The biblical component is non-negotiable; without it, there is no authentic evangelical theology. Unfortunately, there is a lot of theology that comes from liberal institutions that are not even remotely biblical. This applies equally to the public and other branches of theology. The liberal scholars in these institutions object to the normative or authoritative status of the Bible. Their theology does not share the substance of biblical faith. The Gardener Approach is intended to deal with liberalism in contemporary theological enterprise by metaphorizing the biblical data as the seed that cannot be ignored in the gardening exercise. The aim of the planting phase is to identify a credible (suitable) seed, nurse it and transport the (theological) seedling from the nursery bed to the field for planting so that gardener's work will have life and will not be in vain. The planting of the seed requires two key steps as follows.

a. Selecting and nursing the theological seed

After adequate analysis of the land/soil, the gardener chooses the appropriate seed and prepares it for planting. Even though the choice of the seed depends on the climate and the properties of the soil available, the seed is the controlling factor in the entire gardening vocation, right from land preparation to distribution. The impact of the seed on the gardening vocation can be noted and outlined below. First, the seed/crop informs the land preparation. For example, the way one would prepare a piece of land for cultivating yam is different from how the land would be prepared for planting maize. Second, the seed/crop determines the kind of cultural (maintenance) practices. Third, the crop determines what fruit will be produced, how it would be stored and what nutrients the community will gain. Given the outstanding relevance of the seed/crop in the gardening vocation, the gardener ought to ensure that the seed survives by all means because a gardening field without a crop is not a garden at all.

Similarly, after the contextual analyses, the Gardener-Theologian selects and nurses the theological/biblical seed. The selection of biblical text(s) is informed by the context of the receptor community. The Gardener-Theologian should select texts based on the problem and the socio-political condition of the receptor community. The point is that even though the Bible must be central and authoritative in the theological formulation, specific issues require specific texts for addressing them in the same way that specific seeds require specific soil to thrive. Therefore, the socio-political soil determines the text(s) selected for study.

b. Transplanting the theological seedling

In gardening, seedlings are raised in nursery beds with sufficient care and protection from adverse weather conditions, pests and diseases before later transplanting them onto the farming field. Transplanting involves carefully removing an actively growing seedling from the nursery bed, safely transporting it to the farmland, and successfully planting it for further growth and production. In this process, one has to be careful not to lose any seedling. To ensure successful transplanting, the field should be prepared well to provide the right environment for the survival of the seedlings in the new environment.

Two environments are involved in the transplanting process; namely, the original environment of the seedling (that is, the nursery environment) and the gardening environment (field) where the seedling is transplanted. The gardener needs adequate knowledge about the two environments to successfully transplant the seedlings. Some contextual issues to consider include the temperature of the nursery bed, the soil type, the water level, and any other factor that makes the seedling flourish in its original environment. Successful transplanting of seedlings requires the gardener to bridge the gaps between the nursery environment and the gardening field.

In the theological arena, transplanting corresponds to biblical exegesis, that is, the interactive process of arriving at the meaning of a biblical text in its original context and its relevance for the contemporary context.³⁹ Thus, a key aspect of theological transplanting is to determine the meaning of the text in the biblical context and carefully, meaningfully, naturally and practically transfer it into the contemporary context.

One of the important management practices on the nursery bed is to protect the seedling from adverse weather conditions. For example, the seedlings are usually protected from the effects of sunshine and wind by covering nursery beds with sheds or agro-nets. Correspondingly, the Gardener-Theologian needs to guard against misreading and misapplication; if not, the theological seedling (biblical teaching in its original context) may not arrive on the farming (socio-political) field as healthy as it was on the nursery bed. Fig. 1 below depicts the (theological) transplanting process.

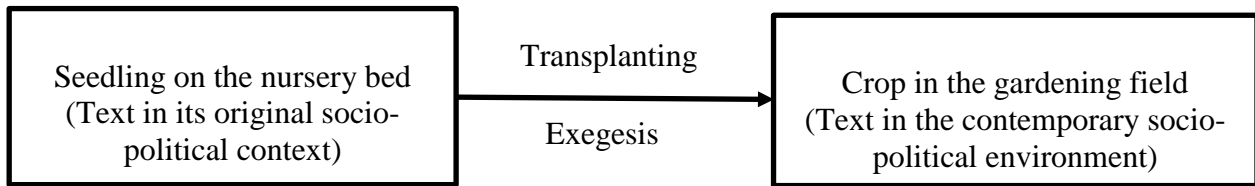


Fig 1. A Diagrammatic Representation of Theological Transplanting

The Gardener-Theologian needs to note and bridge certain gaps that exist between the biblical world and the contemporary world.⁴⁰ This requires a negotiation between the two contexts; namely, the context of the biblical text and the context of the receptor community. In this section, I outline how key gaps could be bridged in the theological transplanting exercise.

i. Bridging the cultural gap

There is a huge cultural gap between the ancient community which first received the biblical text and the contemporary society. The term culture refers to the summation of human behavior, institutions, and norms as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in a community. Eleven aspects of culture—namely, political, religious, economic, legal, agricultural, architectural, clothing, domestic, geographical, military, and social categories—are normally considered in biblical exegesis.⁴¹ Practices like the wearing of sackcloth (Jonah 3:8), holy kiss (Rom. 16:16) and head covering (1 Cor. 11:4-16) are culturally related. There is, therefore, the need to bridge this gap in order to appreciate the biblical text in the contemporary context. Regarding geography, the contemporary reader cannot picture expressions such as going “up” to Jerusalem from Caesarea (Acts 21:12) or “down” from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:30) unless the person is well-versed in the geography of the biblical world. One has to know the legal system of ancient Israel to understand that Elisha’s request to inherit a double portion of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kings 2:9) was a request to be Elijah’s successor and not to have twice Elijah’s spiritual power.⁴² These are a few examples of the cultural issues that contemporary interpreters are confronted with.

Bridging the cultural gap requires the Gardener-theologian to explore the historical background of the text. The historical context refers to the history behind the text, similar to the history of the origin of the seed. It deals with the authorship, the purpose, the date, and the audience of the text.⁴³ The main

³⁹ Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 10-13.

⁴⁰ These gaps have been taken from William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 13-16; Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991), 80-81.

⁴¹ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 80.

⁴² Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 85.

⁴³ Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 69; Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 38.

questions to consider are: Who wrote the text? Why was the text written? When was the text written? And who was/were the audience of the text?

The Gardener-Theologian needs to determine the contemporary relevance of a biblical practice that is rooted in the culture of the biblical audience. Roy B. Zuck gives four principles for deciding whether or not a cultural practice, situation, command, or percept in the Bible is transferable to one's culture today, an outline of which is presented below. (1). "Some situations, commands, or principles are repeatable, continuous, or not revoked, and/or pertain to moral and theological subjects, and/or are repeated elsewhere in Scripture, and therefore are permanent and transferable to us."⁴⁴ An example of a practice revoked is the Nazarite's hair (Jud. 13:5; 1 Sam. 1:11; cf. 1 Cor. 11:14). (1) "Some situations, commands, or principles pertain to an individual's specific non repeatable circumstances, and/or nonmoral or nontheological subjects, and/or have been revoked, and are therefore not transferable to today."⁴⁵ Paul's instruction to Timothy to bring his (Paul's) cloak and scrolls falls under this category (2 Tim. 4:11-13). (3). "Some situations or commands pertain to cultural settings that are only partially similar to ours and in which only the principles are transferable."⁴⁶ The command that parents should write God's commandments on their doorframes and their gates (Deut. 6:4-9 esp. v. 9), for example, has the transferable principles that parents should keep scriptures before their children and teach them but it does not require the same practice as the Israelites were commanded to do. (4). "Some situations or commands pertain to cultural settings with no similarities but in which the principles are transferable."⁴⁷ The sinful woman's act of pouring perfume on Jesus' head (Matt. 26:7-8) to show her love does not seem to have similar practice in many cultures today. However, it has the transferable principle that we must love Jesus sacrificially. It is important to note that the meaning of behaviors (practices) may change from one culture to another; therefore, one has to be careful when transferring biblical cultural practices into another culture.

ii. Bridging the literary gap

There is a literary gap between the biblical text and literature that many modern readers of the Bible are familiar with. Literary gap has to do with the form (genre), structure and movement of the text.⁴⁸ Literary genre refers to the kind of literature, usually determined by literary technique, tone, and content. Examples of biblical genres include: narrative, law, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic, parable, and epistle. Each of these literary types has specific features that distinguish it from others. Just as each seed/crop has a special way of cultivating it, so each biblical genre has specific principles for their interpretation and application. This means the way a biblical text will be studied depends on its type. The Gardener-Theologian needs to know and apply the principles for interpreting various genres. This helps the interpreter to appreciate the sense of the overall thrust of the passage.⁴⁹

Another literary gap that needs to be bridged is structural gap.⁵⁰ The structure of a text has to do with the way the text is put together (or organized), for example, in terms of its plot, characterization, setting and narrative sequence for biblical narratives.⁵¹ Structural analysis requires the Gardener-Theologian to study main divisions and subdivisions of the text. The Gardener-Theologian needs to take note of such organizational patterns as repetition, antithesis, parallelism and concentric arrangement, among others.⁵²

⁴⁴ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 92.

⁴⁵ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 93.

⁴⁶ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 93.

⁴⁷ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 94.

⁴⁸ Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 83; Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 124.

⁴⁹ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 135.

⁵⁰ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 135; Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 88.

⁵¹ W. Randolph Tate, *Handbook for Biblical Interpretation: An Essential Guide to Methods, Terms, and Concepts* (second edition) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 164.

⁵² Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 91-93; see Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 138-142 for more on this.

The third aspect of literary gap is movement; that is, the progression of the text from the beginning to the end.⁵³ Each biblical passage shows a certain movement that needs to be discovered to aid the exegetical process. Discovering the structure and movement requires the Gardener-Theologian to search for words that carry the main ideas. The main ideas are introduced by such words as “next”, “therefore”, “then”, “while” and “but” among others.

iii. Bridging the grammatical gap

Language barriers may also hinder one’s effort in transplanting the theological seedling successfully. There is an appreciable difference between biblical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew. Therefore, even contemporary Jews, need to study biblical Hebrew to fully appreciate the biblical text. The Hebrew text can, therefore, prove very difficult for a non-Hebrew speaker.⁵⁴ Differences in sentence structure between the biblical (source) language and one’s language, for example, and the occurrence of words in the biblical text without equivalence in one’s language are two of the challenges that the exegete/translator encounters. The Gardener-Theologian has to deal adequately and appropriately with all these barriers to ensure that the theological seedling reaches the gardening environment in holistic health.

Bridging the grammatical gap requires the Gardener-Theologian to investigate the meaning of and relationship between the words, phrases, clauses, and sentences of the passage.⁵⁵ There is the need to analyze the keywords and phrases in the text to determine their meaning and relevance in the text. Such grammatical elements as verb tenses, genitive phrases, and conditional clauses are also analyzed at this point. In determining the meaning of words, one has to consider the usage of the word by the author in the same book, or in another book. The author’s own definition of the terminology, contextual antithesis and contrast and the custom and general usage that was prevalent in the author’s time give clues to the meaning of biblical expressions.⁵⁶

Bridging the grammatical gap further require reading the text within its literary context. The literary context (similar to the interaction between the seedlings and their environment) has to do with the literary materials that surround the text under consideration.⁵⁷ Literary context may be immediate context or larger/wider context. A sentence is also studied in the context of a paragraph, a paragraph in the context of a chapter, a chapter in the context of a section or the entire book, and a book in the context of the whole Bible.⁵⁸ The immediate context has the greatest influence on the meaning of a text and should, therefore, be considered very carefully.

c. Arranging the theological crops in the field

Even though the seedlings may be brought into the field in no particular order, they are planted the in a coherent, logical, well-arranged and organized manner. To maintain its orderliness and avoid wasting of resources, crops which die out are replaced. The transplanting process is not complete until the seedling has adapted to the new environment and is now capable of growing to maturity.

⁵³ Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 89.

⁵⁴ Translation becomes an important tool, in this regard, in bridging the grammatical gap. Bible translation has to do with the process of rendering the biblical text from its original language (Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic) into a language that is more accessible to the theologian and the contemporary audience. The translation must be natural, faithful, accurate and acceptable. The Gardener-Theologian who lacks working knowledge of the biblical languages may rely on available translations.

⁵⁵ Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 104-105; Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 105-106.

⁵⁶ For more on this consult Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 106-109.

⁵⁷ Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 74-75.

⁵⁸ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 39-40

Correspondingly, the theological transplanted seedlings ought to yield well-arranged theological crops that are well-adapted to the new socio-political environment. The Gardener-Theologian achieves this by synthesizing the exegetical findings under appropriate theological/biblical motifs. Thus, the individual exegetical findings are like the seedlings; they must be arranged and put together to form a fully-fledged and well-defined theological crop. Thus, the final outcome of the theological transplanting process is biblical theology suitable for the socio-political environment at hand.

Step 3 (Maintenance phase): Maintaining the theological crop

What cultural (maintenance) practices might yield the best theological harvest?

In gardening, the set of activities that are performed after planting a crop until it is harvested are referred to as cultural practices; including weeding, pruning, watering, fertilizer application (manuring), shading and mulching, among others. These practices are described as “cultural” because they are tried and tested activities that have become part of the gardening tradition. They have become the way of farming that informs contemporary farming/gardening activities. Not all of these practices are applied to a particular crop. The choice of the cultural practice to apply depends primarily on the crop in question and secondarily, on the soil type. Any cultural practice applied must be tried and tested. It is important for the gardener to take cognizance of the already-existing cultural practices before attempting to add their own management practices. In the process, the gardener dialogues not only with past gardeners but also with contemporary ones. The gardener’s interaction with his/her contemporaries may come in the form of studying how other farmers in the vicinity manage their crops.

The importance of cultural practices in the gardening activity compares well with the relevance of historical theology in the formulation of evangelical Public Theology. The deposits of theological reflections across generations constitute an important religious resource for theologizing in the contemporary context. Yet, such a reflection must not ignore contemporary views. The layers of church tradition cannot be complete without considering the thoughts of both past and contemporary theologians. A Public Theology that dissociates itself from “historical tradition not only isolates itself from an important source of potential religious insight” but also stands the chance of falling into avoidable theological pitfalls.⁵⁹ Therefore, the Gardener-Theologian must endeavor to “re-engineer” both historical and contemporary practices.

The (public) theologian may use either the synchronic or diachronic approach to study of historical theology. The synchronic approach focuses on what selected theologians or a specific theological tradition said about the subject matter in a specific historical epoch. The diachronic approach studies the development of Christian thought on a specific theological subject throughout church history. Whatever the approach used, the study of the historical data enables the theologian to learn from the mistakes of their forebears, avoid them and refine their theology.

Step 4 (Harvesting phase): Harvesting the theological fruit/crop

What theological fruit (crop) is matured for harvest?

a. Pollination

At the right time, the crop begins to flower and bear fruit. Pollination is an essential part of this process. It involves the transfer of pollen grains from a flower’s anthers to the stigma of the same flower (self-pollination) or of another flower (cross-pollination). Pollination leads to the formation of a flower which develops into a fruit.

Just as there can be no fruit without the interaction of pollen grains, so can there not be any theological fruit without the interaction among the various components—biblical theology, historical

⁵⁹ Linell E. Cady, “A Model for a Public Theology,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 80(2) (1987): 193- 212, 202.

theology and socio-political situation—that form the framework for Public Theology. The public theologian ought to formulate the theological fruit through a credible and critical interaction among these components. The pollination metaphor also underlines the interdisciplinary nature of Public Theology.

b. Harvesting

The harvesting of fruits (crops) comes after all land preparation, sowing, germination, growth, fruit-bearing and maturity have taken place. The quality and quantity of the gardener's harvest depends on the gardener, the soil, the crop and the cultural practices involved. A good harvest requires a visionary gardener, well-prepared soil, quality seed and appropriate cultural practices. Here again, the fruit available for harvest depends on the kind of seed sown; the heavy influence of the seed in the gardening vocation is again proven.

In the Gardener Approach, the harvesting of the theological fruit requires the formulation of a theological principles based on the results of the first three steps (through theological cross pollination). Thus, the mature theological fruit for harvest must not only be interdisciplinary in nature but also historically, contextually, and biblically informed in order to effectively address the needs for which the theological crop was cultivated. Further, the theological fruit must be organized clearly, logically, and as a unified whole.

Step 5 (Distribution phase): Distributing the theological fruit for consumption

How should the theological fruit be stored, distributed and consumed?

a. Storing the theological fruit

There is the need to preserve (store) the theological harvest just as the gardener stores his/her harvest. The Gardener-Theologian should not limit their theological formulation (harvest) to rhetorics (public debate) but must also document their findings to make them available to and useful for both present and future generations just as the farmer preserves some of the viable seeds for plantation in subsequent seasons. This may be achieved through the publication of papers, and books. Symbolic and oral means of storage may also be suitable for some contexts. Storing the theological fruit is basically a means to the end of distributing it for consumption.

b. Distribution for consumption

Without consumption⁶⁰ the gardener's efforts have been in vain. The theological fruit must, therefore, be distributed from the gardening site to the public for consumption. The distribution requires the services of drivers, head potters, and marketers, among others. For distribution to be done effectively, the gardener has to indicate clearly what is to be sent to the various consumers or marketers for further distribution. The gardener also educates the public about the various ways in which the harvest can be used and how they might get the best out of it.

Theology is done to address problems through its application (consumption). Without distribution and application, theology only remains an academic exercise that has no impact on society and the public arena. But evangelical Public Theology is practical and, therefore, must be applied for the transformation of society. Therefore, after harvesting and storing the theological fruit/crop, it needs to be distributed for consumption. The Gardener-Theologian must invite the public to consume it. The distribution of the theological harvest has to do with the task of indicating what specific parties (agencies) are to do in addressing the socio-political needs of the receptor community. In other words,

⁶⁰ The author is aware that not all crops/plants are cultivated for consumption into the body. The term "consumption" is, therefore, used in the broader sense to mean "usage" whether taken as food, used for beatification, or used for green manuring, among others.

distributing the theological fruit means stating clearly a political roadmap for the society and indicating the role of the various agencies in the full implementation of the roadmap. The role of the individual, the church, the society, and the government are to be stated clearly. The Gardener-Theologian needs to actively participate in the application of the formulated theology and inspire others to apply it too.

The interactions among the various partners and the processes involved in the formulation, and distribution of the theological fruit for consumption as depicted in the Gardener Approach (analyzed above) can be represented diagrammatically as follows.⁶¹

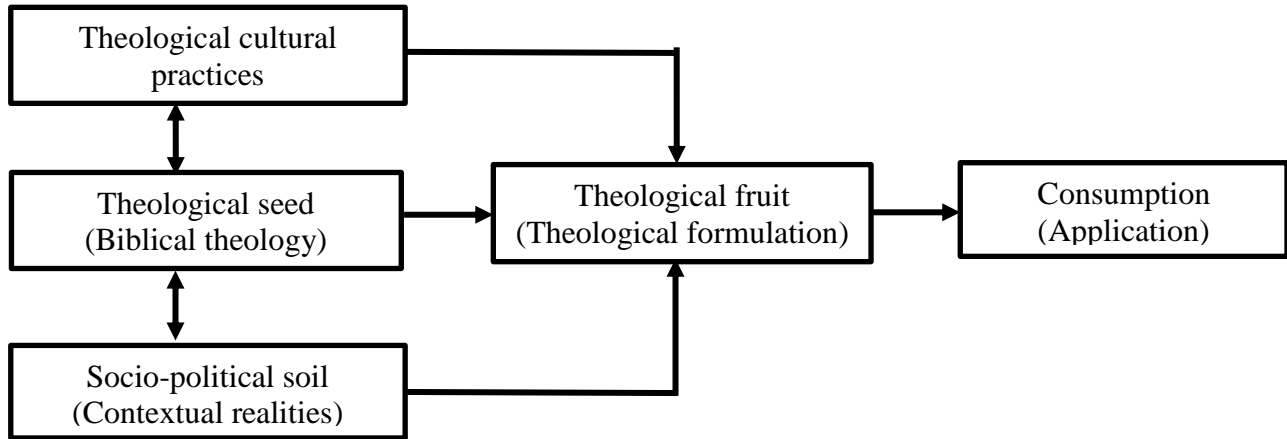


Fig. 2: A Diagrammatic Representation of the Gardener Approach

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that the work of the gardener provides a useful model for formulating evangelical Public Theology. The Gardener Approach emphasizes on the centrality of the Bible in theological discourses. The Bible is indispensable in the theological enterprise just as of the seed (crop) is indispensable in gardening (farming). By making Scripture an indispensable partner in theological/ethical formulations, the Gardener Approach promotes the evangelical perspective on the place of the Bible in theological/ethical formulations and hence guards the theologian against liberal tendencies. The Gardener Approach is easy to work with because farming/gardening is a common vocation and the theological principles derived from it are not far-fetched. Agriculture is the primary context for human life in almost all human societies, and so the Gardener Approach is accessible to theologians of all socio-political contexts. Finally, the Gardener model though formulated with Public Theology in mind, can be adopted and/or modified for other theological sub-disciplines such as systematic theology and practical theology.

⁶¹ The two-directional arrow between the theological seed and the socio-political soil shows that each of these factors affects the other. The soil type determines the kind of seed one can cultivate; yet, once the seed has been selected, it also informs how the land/soil should be prepared for cultivation. Similarly, the interaction between the theological seed/crop and the theological cultural practices is represented by the two-directional arrow between these two partners. The centrality of the theological seed (biblical data) is depicted by the middle position it occupies, located between historical theology and contextual realities. The contribution of each of the three partners to the formation of the theological fruit is also shown by the arrows from the partners to the theological fruit. At this point (theological fruit), the three partners do not stand individually but “form part” of the resulting fruit. The fruit is then distributed for consumption as depicted by the single-arrowed line.

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