



This is the Author's version of the paper published as:

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Title: "Who or What is the "Public" in Public Theology?"

Year: 2007

Journal: St Mark's Review

Volume: 2007(2)

Issue: November

Pages: pp27-34

ISSN: 00363103

URL: www.stmarksntc.org.au

Keywords: Public theology Christianity Australia

Who or what is the “Public” in Public Theology?

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About what or to whom are we speaking when we refer to “the public” in Australia? This seems to me a matter of some importance if we are to speak sensibly about *public* theology as it relates to this country and its people, in the context of the desire of Anglicans to be active beyond the confines of their own community and the immediate concerns of their theological tradition.

Defining the public

We might begin by asking whether the word “public” means different things in Australia than elsewhere in the world? Does it define different spatial realms or groups of people in, for instance, the United States where faith has been essentially privatised, in Britain where the Church of England continues as the Established Church of the realm (and presumes an entitlement to address the public quite apart from any official expectations that it will do so) or in Russia where the Orthodox Church is reclaiming its place as the moral conscience of the nation? There is also the non-geographic ‘public’ realm of cyberspace where, for instance, a private individual with a web-cam and an internet connection can remain entirely within the confines of their home and make their life a very public spectacle or issue provocative public statements to a global audience.

In a socially diffuse, culturally pluralistic and technologically constructed nation like Australia, understandings of ‘the public’ are largely shaped by context and there are many overlapping senses or depictions of the public. So we have become familiar with social, political and legal definitions or usages such as public transport, public housing, public relations, public good and public duty. From what I can discern from this diversity, “the public” is usually understood in Australia by what it isn’t rather than what it is, in two general ways.

First, the “public” is that group of people outside the circle of one’s family, friends and closer acquaintances. Second, places that are beyond what we regard as personal and private, most meaning our homes, are referred to as being “public” places. Therefore, “the Australian public” refers to the largest undifferentiated gathering of people possible within this nation. When we speak of “the public square”, we have in mind a place that is owned and occupied individually by no-one but collectively by everyone. In comparison with elsewhere in the world, I am led to conclude that the notion of “the Australian public” is incredibly fragmented (it barely exists as an entity in my view) despite public affairs being conducted in a well pegged-out square that we all inhabit.

The remit of public theology

This view of “the public” is shared by most Australian Christians and is, in my view, unproblematic from either a theological or ecclesiological viewpoint. So when speaking of doing “public” theology, its practitioners usually have in mind two things. First, concerns about human life that are shared by the Church and those outside it, which the Church wants to address from the vantage point of its theological insights to protect or promote the common good. Second, concerns about human life that are not shared by those outside the Church but which the Church believes impact upon the whole created order and need to be addressed collectively to protect or promote the common good. In concentrating on the “public” either as a people or a place, public theology is also concerned, as second-order activities, with securing the Church’s entitlement to contribute to public conversation in a religiously plural society and with how the Church communicates its insights to those beyond its membership.

One objection and a reply

This general outlook is not, of course, shared by some post-Liberals. The American theologian Stanley Hauerwas contends that the Church is not, in fact, called to address the public other than with the claims of Jesus in the expectation of conversion. Only when Jesus has been embraced as Lord and Saviour does the Church’s voice on any matter make sense. Thus, he vehemently rejects “Constantinianism” because it “attempted through force of the state to make the world into the kingdom [of God], which attempted to

make the worship of God unavoidable, which attempted to make Christian convictions available to all without conversion or transformation.”¹

A characteristically Anglican reply is William Temple’s short book *Christianity and the Social Order* published in 1942 to coincide with his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury. He argued that church was bound to interfere in civil matters — essentially to engage in public theology — on four distinct grounds:

[First], the claims of sympathy with those who suffer; second, the educational influence of the social and economic system; third, the challenge offered to our existing system in the name of justice; fourth, the duty of conformity to the “Natural Order” in which is to be found the purpose of God.²

For Temple, the church is “bound to interfere” because it is by vocation the agent of God’s purpose, outside the scope of which “no human interest or activity can fall”. Temple was equally succinct in his description of the manner of the church’s interference.

[First], its members must fulfil their moral responsibilities and functions in a Christian spirit; second, its members must exercise their purely civic rights in a Christian spirit; third, it must itself supply them with a systematic statement of principles to aid them in doing these two things, and this will carry with it a denunciation of customs or institutions in contemporary life and practice which offend against those principles.³

Temple’s approach to public life obliges the Church to focus on those particular concerns about shared human experience that emerge from its understanding of the Gospel. These are things that the Church, and only the Church, can offer to social and political life. Meanwhile, the followers of Jesus acting as citizens rather than as members of the Church are to participate fully in social and political life while being always and everywhere conscious of Christian principles.

Public theology and public discourse

There are several general questions that arise from my very provisional definition of public theology. First, what right does anyone or any group have to address the public? Second, how is public conversation regulated and by whom? Third, what obligations are imposed upon those who want to speak to the public and what obligation has the public to listen? Fourth, what conventions must be observed by those who speak and how are these conventions communicated? Fifth, are there some groups with no entitlement to address the public and who should never be heard? Sixth, who determines the matters about which the public ought to be addressed and in what manner? Seventh, what responsibilities apply to the speaker and the hearer when a matter of real public interest is addressed publicly? Eighth, when is a matter correctly considered public and when is it properly deemed private and how does this bear on the mandate of the state and its obligation to act on behalf of its constituents?

These are not, of course, straightforward questions and some could remain without adequate answers either because our society cannot achieve a genuine consensus or because the majority of citizens would refuse to have non-private conversation regulated in this way. The commitment of liberal democratic societies to freedom of speech presupposes a willingness to allow the ignorant to project their ill-informed opinions on insignificant matters in precious public forums. Most of us share the sentiment that is regularly misattributed to Voltaire: “I disapprove of what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it”.⁴ Questions about the character and conduct of public conversation need, therefore, to be left the table while we note that an inability to provide compelling or satisfactory answers will probably make some of the arguments and conclusions of the public theologian problematic or partial, to some people in some contexts.

Anglicans and the Public

The Establishment of the Church of England from the time of the sixteenth century Reformation and the quasi-Established status of the Church in England throughout the British Empire in subsequent centuries have made it difficult for most Anglicans to avoid the practice of “public theology”.⁵ The Anglican Church of Australia has a long history of creative public conversation conducted in public spaces about matters of public interest.

There is “the public” that is the shared life of the parish church or ministry unit where matters of local importance are discussed. There is the “public” that is the corporate life of the archdeaconry or the diocese where regional concerns are dealt with. There is the “public” that is the general life of the national church where issues affecting the whole country are debated. There are, then, several publics in which an Anglican theological discourse is conducted and they overlap with several secular publics with whom the Church has a common cause. With 3.7 million self-declared members according to the 2006 census, it is virtually impossible for Anglicans to engage in a theological conversation with each other without being overheard by those who are not Anglicans.

But the Anglican Church of Australia faces four particular challenges in relation to its interaction with “the public”. *First*, the Anglican view of the public has been slightly skewed by the Establishment of the Church of England which has led to the presumption that the Australian Church is entitled to speak and bound to be heard because it speaks more or less from the centre of the Christian community. *Second*, having never been completely weaned from the privileges of a subtle quasi-Establishment, Australian Anglicans expect the public (very often meaning government) to do what the Church is not prepared to do for itself or which it is unable to do among its own membership because it lacks moral authority or material resources. I am thinking of things like the regulation of assisted reproduction technology and the preservation of the Sabbath principle in a deregulated labour market. *Third*, Australian Anglicans do not intentionally spend much time with the undifferentiated population in the public square talking about public issues because they tend to talk to themselves in private places about personal matters. *Fourth*, Australian Anglicans are unsure about determining whether a matter is concerns just the Christian community or an issue of genuine public concern because they inhabit, as Bruce Kaye has explained, a ‘Church without Walls’.⁶ This inability to distinguish between ecclesial and public concerns ranges from the entitlement of parents to discipline their children to one’s attitude towards salary sacrificing and taxation.

These challenges have yet to receive the attention their social and spiritual importance deserves. But as the composition of “the public” becomes more variegated, as many Australians lose the capacity for speaking and hearing clear public speech, and as public spaces are disturbed by many more people with an ability to shout, both the content

and the conduct of public theology needs to be constantly reviewed and continuously revised.

Distinguishing general theology from public theology

The description of public theology outlined above has to do with concerns that are clearly not limited to, or contained within, the Church. For instance, those who apply theological insights to ecological questions, immigration policy or parenthood arrangements are probably engaged in public theology whereas those who are agitating for or against lay presidency at holy communion, the necessity for a second (and subsequent) blessing of the Holy Spirit or whether all Christians should give one-tenth of their pre-tax income to the Church, are not, in a strict sense, engaged in public theology. The trouble with the whole notion of public theology, and the sub-discipline formed around it, is that it can mean nothing and everything at the same time. To date, definitions that I have seen of public theology have not tended to be specific or detailed. By way of example, in a recent article by the Reverend John Henderson, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Australia, on 'The public voice of the church in Australia', there is no definition of the public and no account of whether the Church needs to speak in a particular way when addressing its own members and in another when addressing what he refers to as 'public issues'.⁷ The failure to define "the public" mutes the prescience of the article.

The website maintained by the Public and Contextual Theology (PACT) Special Research Centre of Charles Sturt University states that public theology is simply 'concerned with the political and social implications of Christianity'. A short statement Associate Professor Clive Pearson on 'What is Public Theology?' (linked to the same website) explains that 'this relatively new discipline ... is concerned with how the Christian faith addresses matters in society at large. It is concerned with the 'public relevance' of Christian beliefs and doctrines' and assumes 'that Christian engagement in the major issues of society requires an intellectual as well as a practical grounding ... and is relevant for all humanity, not just Christians'. He says there are 'several audiences' for public theology'. They include 'the world, the Church and the academy' and that 'public theology is located as one voice among many in the marketplace of ideas'.

My view is a little different. I believe the task of public theology is shaped by whom we understand to “the public” to be and given substance from our vision of the “public” square.

The world and the church

The best way of negotiating the critical distinction between what might be termed general theology —which is conducted in the Church — and public theology — which is conducted mostly in the world — is to ask whether the theological insight or statement being passed off as public theology arises from, or has any bearing on, the related concepts of the public interest and the common good. If the point and purpose of a discussion is to further the interests (however these are understood) of the Anglican Church alone rather than the undifferentiated Australian community as a whole, the discussion cannot be said to involve the practice of public theology. If the conduct and continuation of a debate is mainly about enhancing or extending the Church’s influence or agency in an increasingly secular society, this should not be considered public theology.

In essence, I am asking that we not confuse evangelism and apologetics, ecumenism and church growth with public theology if we are seeking to promote public theology as a sub-discipline with its own specific charter and method. This is my contribution to clarifying some important tasks for Anglicans to embrace as their Church endeavours to speak publicly but not officially to the Australian people and the Australian nation.

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¹ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996, p. 25.

² William Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order*, Penguin, London, 1942, p. 17.

³ Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order*, pp. 31-32.

⁴ The phrase was actually first used by Evelyn Beatrice Hall, writing under the pseudonym of Stephen G Tallentyre in *The Friends of Voltaire* (1906), as a summation of Voltaire’s beliefs on freedom of thought and expression

⁵ For a discussion of the enduring effects of the Establishment of the Church of England on Australian religious life see my *Church and State: Australia’s Imaginary Wall*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2006.

⁶ See Bruce Kaye, *A Church Without Walls*, Collins Dove, Melbourne, 1995.

⁷ John Henderson, 'The public voice of the church', *Lutheran Theological Journal*, vol. 40, no. 2, August 2006, pp. 62-71.