

A Response to the Seminar

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In response to the Seminar as a whole, and to the excellent papers presented in it, I wish to make four points:

1. In dealing with the issue of public theology, it is necessary for Western Christians to realise that, in numerical terms, *Western Christianity is a minority within Christianity as a whole*. The centre of gravity of Christianity is no longer in Canterbury or Rome or Geneva. It is probably around Kinshasa or Bangkok. Nor is Western Christian theology necessarily at the leading edge of Christian theology worldwide. This is not a fact to discourage Western Christianity. It is simply a description of how we actually are today, under God's providence. From the New Testament onwards we know that it is often God's way to pass from those at the centre of the faith to those at the edge of it for the proclamation of the gospel, and the leadership of the church. So in the early church God passes from the Jews to the Gentiles for leadership. So it has happened many times, and again in our time. It is God's way, and for us this passing on of the mantle gives to Western Christianity *a new liberation now to be prophetic*.
2. What, then, is public theology for us in Western Christianity? I tend to take a minimalist view, as Professor Robin Gill does. I see public theology primarily in terms of a Christian theology which seeks to influence public policy, in a language and a framework which that wider society can understand and appreciate. However, I accept that others would give it a wider definition, and this, I agree, is not unreasonable. For I admit, moving from my minimalist perspective, that public theology can be widened in Western cultures, for two reasons. First, in contemporary western societies we need to admit to the *totalitarian tendencies of public bureaucracies*, that is, their tendencies to interfere in more and more parts of our lives. Despite the political rhetoric of the privatisation of much of society, the fact is that bureaucratic regulatory frameworks

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increase interference in citizens' lives. Second, there is the fact that in Australia the churches together provide an *enormous educational, medical, welfare and retirement infrastructure*. It is calculated, using at least one set of criteria, that approximately one half of all federal, state and local expenditure in these areas pass through the church's hands at some point. For the churches, this presents a problematic theological situation. On the one hand, in these days of apparent increasing secularism, it gives the churches an enormous opportunity for engaging in Christian witness (*marturia*) and service (*diakonia*). On the other, there is the temptation to see this enormous enterprise (which involves perhaps twenty times the turnover of the turnover of parishes) as a kind of psychological 'security blanket' for the churches' fear of irrelevance in the community. So we can say: 'We may be down in numbers, but look at our community activities!' In this dilemma, we need humility, honesty, clarity and a lack of self-delusion. Here public theology is called upon to help. Here, in our situation in Australia, I believe that we should initially work in a fairly tightly defined area of public theology, as I noted at the beginning of this second point. Moreover, we should explain that this is what we are doing. That would be our contribution. Others internationally will work in wider, and different, areas. They will make their contributions. Those working in a wider area are, of course, in danger of saying nothing much about anything. We, I believe, should simply make our contribution to public theology from our specific situation.

3. These facts lead on to the third point. We need to face the issue of *Erastianism*, that is the question as to what extent the church receives its authority and its agenda from the agenda of the state. In the Australian churches, as in the churches of the British Isles, historically there have at times been strong trends of both Erastianism and anti-Erastianism. With the enormous financial involvement of funds from the public purse available to the church in its educational, medical and welfare activities, it would seem that there could well now be a kind of *de facto Erastianism* in contemporary Australian church life. In that case, the question would arise as to what extent the church's public theology is influenced by such a *de facto* Erastianism. An alternative question might be as to what extent there is a dichotomy between the church's formal theological stance on issues, on the one hand, and its pragmatic *de facto* view of the same issues, on the other. This, of course, could tend to produce a serious hypocrisy.

4. Finally, we face the issue of where public theology sits. One of the difficulties in theology since the 1960s in Western societies has been the confusion between *dogmatics* (the church's teaching within the household of faith) and *apologetics* (the presentation of the church's teaching to those outside that household, using the language, thought-forms and philosophical frameworks of wider society to commend the faith). On the whole in recent years, in nations influenced by the traditions of the British Isles, we have been stronger in producing apologetics than in producing dogmatics. As a result of this confusion, difficulties for those within the household of faith have occurred when apologetics have been presented as if they were dogmatics. This has led to the conservative reaction in the church of using dogmatics as if they were apologetics, and thus seeming to be incapable or unwilling really to communicate theologically at all. Public theology can, of course, be both dogmatic and apologetic. It is both a matter of expounding within the household of faith what we are engaging in, and why, and also of communicating the implications of the faith within us to the wider society, in terms which that wider society can truly appreciate. Thus, in each exercise of public theology, we need to explain, in each action, whether we are engaging here in discourse within the church, or in discourse with the wider society. One, of course, may precede the other. However, we need to be precise as to what we are doing in each exercise.