The Church Faces the Future
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Editorial
  Tom Frame

Toward Redemption in Theological Education
Teaching and Learning Theology
  Don Saines

Theology and the Church’s Challenges in Australia and the Pacific
  Stuart Brooking

The Theological Component of World Conflict
The Example of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1914–18
  John A. Moses

What is Public Theology?
  Scott Cowdell

Religion and Human Rights
  Hilary Charlesworth

Book Reviews
  An Australian resource for pastoral care
  A ministry of word and activism
  Exploring the strangeness of theology
  Justice, law, forgiveness
  Top try, great goal
  ‘He is our peace’ (Ephesians 2:14)
  One way to find an absent God

Book Notes
What is Public Theology?

Scott Cowdell

A new constellation has appeared in the theological firmament. Alongside now-familiar galaxies discovered in the last half-century, such as political, feminist and liberation theologies, and the bright stars more recently catalogued, like post-liberal theology and radical orthodoxy, we now have something called ‘public theology’. University centres in America, England, South Africa and Australia bear its name, as does the new International Journal of Public Theology, and there is a Global Network for Public Theology, while theologians like me are now having ‘public theology’ added to their job descriptions, which in my case is wedded to the further designation of ‘contextual theology’—an extra tank on the booster rocket propelling me high up in the realm of theological relevance!

Public theology as a special category is a product of the post-modern condition in general and the post-9/11 context in particular. It will help to clarify these dependencies.

First, a word about modernity and post-modernity. Privatised religion began to look attractive after Europe’s thirty-years’ war in the early seventeenth century, with non-partisan reason thought to offer a surer basis for social life and prosperity than warring religions. Subsequently social contract, market and economy began to replace church and belief as the

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glue holding our Western world together. A tolerable echo of Christendom survived for over two centuries, with a Christian vision of sorts preserved in shared Western values, though of course with the dogmatic, ecclesial and sacramental claims of Christianity rendered private and volitional. If church leaders played by these new rules they could retain social prominence and some political influence, but this long compromise has now begun to collapse thanks to post-modernity undermining the foundations of non-partisan reason. Nowadays, fully deregulated individualism, a pluralism of world views, and the power of consumer capitalism are combining to write a new script for Western identity. Church leaders now find themselves competing in a gaggle of voices, and sidelined in keeping with the numerical decline and social marginalisation of Western Christianity. Hence a new lease of life is sought—a program of ‘fight back’; if you like—aiming to restore clarity and confidence to the Church’s public engagement.

As for 9/11 and its impact, post-modern pluralism has allowed powerful religious claimants to bid for naming rights on a yawning void of public meaning. This licenses religion to recover a public prominence for its claims not always granted by Western modernity. A so-called clash of civilisations, lit by the touch paper of 9/11, has significantly radicalised religious options, with strident voices rallying the globally aggrieved and victims. On both sides of this supposed cultural divide, however, what we actually find is just the same sort of self-assertive neediness, squaring off in what is better understood as a clash of fundamentalisms. Then a third kind of fundamentalism weighs into this sibling rivalry via the so-called ‘new atheism’—Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchins and the like—declaring ‘a plague on both your houses’ to Christianity and Islam.

It is readily apparent why a new public theology agenda might almost inevitably emerge under the defining pressure of these post-modern, post-9/11 conditions—a Christian intellectual project of calm and constructive intent, committed to dialogue rather than browbeating, testifying to the continuing possibility of peace, and of mutual understanding despite post-modernity’s attenuation of shared meaningfulness. A public theology conceived in this way gives witness that Christianity is a reasonable undertaking committed to human thriving, in a public realm increasingly given over to antipathetic one-upmanship. And from this starting point of public theology in respectful, open engagement with all comers, Christian distinctiveness is recoverable as such public theology is a strategy in the making of a movement.

Let me try, hence continuing, to be a critical thinker and an engaged theologian. The work of public theology is a movement.

First I distinguish the public sphere in its highly diversified yet surprisingly subtly so. The obvious ways in which liberal and radical theology have sought to engage newer publics are now not enough.

Extremism in western politics is equally in loop. A Christian engagement does not deny the Christian faith’s discipline of public expression—articulating today’s Christian discontents and satisfied selves in public space, the powers in the fields of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. It is not the same as constructing a simply theological one.

There is a long history of Christian liberalism, and a long history of its branding. I am not relying on any new name of a religious category, but rather than accommodating the world as it is by liberal theology, Christians and Muslims or Jews...
distinctiveness and even prophetic critique can emerge. So I suggest that such public theology is best understood as more a mood, or a method, or a strategy in theology, called forth by the times in which we live, rather than a movement with specific content.

Let me now try to situate public theology in the theological firmament, hence defining more closely what it is supposed to be, also offering some critical theological reflections about it and about today’s other publicly engaged theological options. That way we can better see how a version of public theology might play out in our own thinking and ministerial practice.

II

First I distinguish between two theological approaches that I think are highly invested in contemporary culture, though in the latter case quite subtly so. Then I will set out two more mainstream theological alternatives, with liberation and feminist theology on the Left, opposite post-liberalism and radical orthodoxy on the Right, between which we can locate the newer public theology.

Extreme liberalism and extreme conservatism in our churches are equally in love with the world, in my view. Theological liberalism which denies the distinctiveness of Christ and scripture, valuing worship and faith’s disciplines chiefly as software for personal therapy and creative self-expression—essentially trading Gospel for spirituality—seems to be replicating today’s culture of therapeutic individualism. Private meaning and satisfied self-acceptance is the guiding agenda, which poses little threat to powers in the public arena. This is essentially a defeated and withdrawn Christianity, accepting Western modernity’s privatised agenda for religion. It is not the stuff of saints and martyrs—neither evangelistic, nor necessarily theologically orthodox, and only superficially ecclesial.

There is also a Christian conservatism defining itself against such liberalism, as it also does against fundamentalisms of a different religious branding. I refer to its rejection of much in the modern agenda, in the name of a revealed worldview offering salvation from the world rather than accommodation with it, dismissing the peaceful coexistence sought by liberal theology. However, it is sociologically commonplace to define fundamentalisms of whatever stamp—whether Catholic or Protestant, Muslim or Jewish—as products of the urbanised modern West, and as
essentially reactionary movements remaining deeply indebted to the modernity they oppose. So, for example, Christian fundamentalism retains modernity's typically individualistic focus in its view of salvation and holiness, modernity's rationalism in its propositional account of revelation, and modernity's obsession with controlling the errant other—the deviant and the foreign—as modernity's colonising spirit always set out to do.

In more recent, post-modern times, some Christian fundamentalism has extended modernity's individualism and has even drawn close to liberal Christianity by itself embracing today's universal Western priorities of wellness, happiness and prosperity. Oddly, then (to use two Australian examples), Francis MacNabb-style liberal Christianity and fundamentalist Hillsong are very similar in their adherence to the agenda of contemporary culture. Both represent a withdrawal from engagement in public meaningfulness although conservative Christianity can match its anti-foundationalism in doctrine with a renewed political militancy. What cannot be established by debate on shared premises in the public domain can still be affected by political influence, and by synergy with others whose agendas overlap sufficiently. Hence, we observe strangely passionate marriages of convenience nowadays, such as that between Jewish Zionism and millennial Christianity on the far Right of American politics, or that between fundamentalism and the Internet—from the Al-Qaeda hideaways of Pakistan to crisis meetings of the Traditional Anglican Communion.

Hence both liberal and conservative wings in Christianity today can be understood to share much of the wider cultural Zeitgeist, aping its methods, agendas and even enthusiasms. If none of this is for you, however, then there is a range of more mainstream theological and ecclesial options to the Left and Right of a centre occupied by the kind of Christianity that 'public theology' tries to name.

On the Left of mainstream theology's engagement with today's world, and I mean Left in its political as well as theological sense, is the cluster of liberation-oriented theologies that arose from the late-1960s ferment. They are indebted to critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Marxism and its critique of truth as the abuse of power, and feminism with its unveiling of deeply rooted Western patriarchalism—also to colonial revolutionary movements questioning the myths of Western superiority. More recent conversation partners are environmentalism and queer theory. Together these radical perspectives represent the mother of all 'black armband views of history.

Latin and South American theologians proclaimed a body of Christian thought as the Church's largely unacknowledged representatives. They named the churches' subversive work in the liberation theologies. These churches furthered the end of colonialism, and the banks of a post-modern globalisation.

To the Right, however, opposite these movements' critique of the liberal Christian establishment, the theo-cons, basing it on scripture and reason, have summoned the liberal churches to a renewed evangelical commissary, interpreting current events and foreign policy. Here political movements' churched version of 'public theology' is more promising.

The difference between the Left and the Right in their critiques of liberalism and their proposals for a witness they are each Others has to do with the Church's job to pass from its current entrapment in the Euro-Christian model of public life, the best way forward for the Church into the present, and a radical commissary of liberation. The Left is moving away from the Church's current entrapment, in teaching and theology and also in its self-identified intentionality as an agent of Christian civil society. The Left is the kind of Christian civil society that can help to redefine 'Church militante' in the age of secularism, Augustinianism, liberation, and Milbank, Catholic social politics, and radical orthodoxy.
What is Public Theology?

views of history. Liberation theology reinvented church and society in Latin and South America from below. Likewise, black theology in America proclaimed a black Christ in solidarity with the Civil Rights Movement. God’s largely unquestioned masculinity and that of ‘His’ ordained representatives were confronted by feminist theology with its rediscovery of subversive women’s stories from scripture and tradition. Post-colonial churches furthered the blurring of modern categories that accompanied the end of colonial hegemony, reinventing foreignness and European-ness in a post-modern celebration of cultural hybridity.

To the Right of centre in mainstream theological engagement today, opposite these movements grounded in secular critical theories, we find the post-liberal and radical orthodoxy movements, offering just as much critique of the modern world as you will find on the theological Left, but basing it on scripture and tradition rather than secular wisdom. To be sure, the liberation, feminist and other theologians of the Left are committed interpreters of scripture, but it tends to be viewed through the eyes of critical social theories. For the post-liberals and radical orthodox, however—for Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank, to name these two movements’ chief protagonists—the Gospel itself is more powerful than every secular critical perspective, while the Church’s trinitarian dynamic is more promising than any secular social theory.

The differences between these two movements play out not so much in their critique of modern and post-modern culture, but in the type of witness they anticipate. Hauerwas, for instance, believes that it is not the Church’s job to be improving things in wider society, hence risking its entrapment in today’s secular culture of therapeutic individualism. Rather, the best way for a church to help society is to be a good church, modelling a radical communitarian alternative in the Gospel which wins converts away from the organised triviality of post-modern life. In word and sacrament, in teaching and formation, post-liberals rebuild the Church as an intentional community living out God’s story in the midst of a dwindling Christian civilisation, much as Benedictine monasticism did during Europe’s dark ages. Milbank shares a post-liberal commitment to the ‘Church militant here in earth,’ but his self-styled ‘post-modern Christian Augustinianism’ is committed to no less than Christendom’s restoration. Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward and other leading voices of radical orthodoxy attack modernity’s faith in secular autonomy with
breathtaking audacity, insisting that you just cannot understand the world and have a viable human life together without God—not knowledge, not the arts, not the polis and not human society. The roots of this movement in Anglo-Catholic Christian socialism will not be missed, and indeed there is a joint commitment in both post-liberalism and radical orthodoxy to the world-making imaginative power of eucharistic liturgy, despite their different agendas for the church's public role.

III

So to the Left and Right of centre in mainstream theology today are powerful movements seeking an end to the control of Christian imagination by modernity's agenda. There is significant scope for mutual criticism between these camps—the Left see the Right as too pious, while the Right see the Left as not pious enough. The Right see the Left too reliant on critical voices from the secular world, with some identifying these critical voices as secular echoes of the Bible's own message (this is a fair point—Jesus and the prophets were not critically under-equipped). But, then, the Right have too pure and disconnected a view of the Church, as if it never learned from the cultures in which it abided, developing its mind in constant conversation with wider human reason, science and social theory. Not to mention the fact that the intentional Christian communities beloved by post-liberalism depend on modern Western Enlightenment tolerance for their flourishing—Hitler would not have put up with the Amish, to put it bluntly. As for radical orthodoxy, to ignore the many secular Cyrus-figures through whom God has reached out to God's people is to underestimate what universal ambitions the God of Jesus Christ actually entertains. Surely there is room for a mediating position, and here is where the new agenda of public theology deserves attention.

It is time for a clearer definition of this 'public theology'. When University of London-based Jesuit theologian Michael Kirwan went looking for such a definition in his new book on the various political theologies, he actually drew on the website maintained by Charles Sturt University's Public and Contextual Theology (PACT) Strategic Research Centre based in Canberra.\(^\text{2}\) Australia's foremost advocate of 'public theology', the Uniting Church's Clive Pearson, names several defining characteristics on the website:
What is Public Theology?

- public relevance to issues of the day;
- offering intellectual rigor in support of the Church’s practical engagement, seeing itself as a resourcing initiative, which
- does not confine God’s interests to the purely ecclesial, personal and salvific, but which
- addresses theology’s ‘three publics’ [as identified by Catholic theologian David Tracy], namely the society, the academy and the Church, with a willingness to use the language of secular discourses (e.g. human rights),
- recognising the non-privileged status of its voice in the post-modern marketplace of ideas.

Significantly, and controversially, Pearson’s definition concludes that ‘unlike other types of theology, it does not seek to “convert”, but is concerned with the well-being of society.’

This is an admission that will disappoint many while encouraging others that in public theology (so defined) they have found what they are looking for. It is easy to imagine how both Right and Left wings will react to this modest, public-spirited arriviste. The liberation and feminist theology Left will see it as a kindred spirit for its focus on the world not the Church, though perhaps bland and insufficiently partisan. The radical orthodox Right will find it a more or less execrable echo of the culture Protestantism that Karl Barth deplored, and in John Milbank we find what amounts to a point-by-point dismissal of views such as Pearson’s, which he would contend are too weakly Christian. Both radical orthodox and post-liberals despair of such public theology for its lack of christological and ecclesial distinctiveness.

Questions are also raised about its effectiveness. Radical orthodox theologian William T. Cavanaugh points to the Church’s witness in General Pinochet’s Chile as an example of public theology falling badly. Roman Catholic attempts in Chile at finding common ground with the abusive Government proved useless. Instead, it was the Church’s eventual mobilisation of its eucharistic communities in protest against Pinochet’s dictatorship, strengthening social unity in the face of torture’s power to silence and isolate people in their individuality, that made all the difference—a Church true to the Gospel, knitting together with eucharist the social body that torture’s pervading threat had undone.
To conclude, let me suggest how we might play on the strengths of ‘public theology’, without succumbing to its potential weaknesses, by keeping a few key theological principles in view. First, we remember the doctrines of creation and incarnation, giving concrete, programmatic expression to God’s investment in the real, natural and historical world—the world God loves. American orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann further reminds the anxious modern Church, eager to be of use in the world and concerned for its declining ‘relevance’, that the Church’s unique and irreplaceable gift is to help reveal the world’s true divine calling and blessedness. Next, a Christian eschatological perspective ensures that no earthly power or institutional structure can exhaust the fullness of God’s claim, so that public theology is denied any Kingdom of God on earth. Then we recall the deeply ecclesial nature of Christianity, as integral to the divine economy. This ensures that public theology is spared the captivity of well-meaning pulpit oratory and remains the concern of all God’s people in their shared praxis.

Indeed, to separate transforming action in the world from conversion and Gospel proclamation puts asunder what Christian mission has always joined together, revealing also an insufficiently christological and trinitarian sense of God. Radical orthodox theologian Graham Ward helpfully reminds us of the inevitable coalescence of being, knowing and doing in any adequate Christology, enfolding Christian belonging and believing in a posture of active engagement. Surely the God who transforms society’s structures is engaged in a dimension of Christian conversion, as the world is more closely conformed to the mind of Christ. Likewise, authentic conversion cannot be imagined without the sanctifying work of God’s Spirit spilling over through a new Christian’s engagement in the wider world. Besides, we should not underestimate the converting power of Christ at work whenever the Church witnesses to God’s healing love for the world. Schools and hospitals have always gone together with word and sacrament for good reason.

Seen against the background of Christianity’s whole imaginative vision, no really adequate public theology will forget its ecclesial grounding in God’s creative, incarnate, Trinitarian being and action, calling Christians to witness and engagement against the eschatological horizon that puts all human action in proper perspective.
n the strengths weaknesses, by remember the programmatic world—the Schmemann use of use in the Church’s unique calling and ensures that no ill of God’s God on earth. is integral to the captivity of all God’s people from conversion has always and trinitarian. Ward helpfully and believing in social society’s, as the world, authentic con of God’s Spirit the wider world. then of Christ at love for the world. and sacrament imaginative vision, grounding in all Christians izon that puts all

Notes

1 Dr MacNabb is ‘Executive Minister’ of St Michael’s Uniting Church, Collins Street, Melbourne, preaching a theological liberalism of the Richard Holloway/John Shelby Spong kind.


