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Christian Scripture and Public Theology: Ruminations on their Ambiguous Relationship

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Abstract

This article explores the relatively neglected topic of the role of scripture in public theology. It proffers a provisional taxonomy of approaches to relating scripture to public theology, with a view to demonstrating that there are various ways in which scripture and scripture scholarship play a vital role in public theology, broadly construed. It then discusses in more detail three of the eight approaches, focusing especially on recent works by Gerd Theissen and Paul Hanson, and illustrating the value of inner-biblical critique for public theology with reference to the themes of violence and justice.

Keywords

Scripture and public theology, Theissen, Hanson, inner-biblical critique

These ruminations on the relation between scripture and public theology are proffered in the spirit of one seeking to learn rather than to pronounce.¹ They take their bearings from the Christian tradition, so references to scripture are to the church's (or

¹ An abbreviated version of this article was presented as the opening plenary paper at the second triennial consultation of the Global Network for Public Theology in Australia (1–5 September 2010). In the same session, Professor Elaine Wainwright presented another perspective on the role of scripture in public theology, in a paper entitled 'Engaging the biblical text and public issues in creative and critical dialogue'. While I refer both to scripture and to the Bible, scripture is my primary category because it more clearly identifies the Bible as in some sense authoritative for Christians.

combined Jewish and Christian) scriptures. One steeped within another religious tradition such as Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism might well conceive of the relation between scripture and public theology differently.

Regarding the relation between scripture and public theology, three preliminary questions serve to provide perspective and offer orientation. First, what does the decision to make room to discuss the role of scripture (and scripture scholarship) in relation to public theology imply about the understanding of public theology held by the Global Network for Public Theology, if indeed a shared understanding is discernible? At a minimum, it seems to imply a view of public theology as broader than either theology's or the church's direct impact on national, state or institutional public policy initiatives, a view expressed by some who have played a part in shaping the profile of public theology. Second, has the 'second wave' of public theology paid sufficient attention to scripture and its relation to it?² Since public theology focuses upon today's publics — and today's public concerns — what do scripture and scripture scholarship contribute to public theology? In an explicit or overt sense, the answer would seem to be: minimally. Yet the voice of scripture should surely be heard in Christian public theological discourse.³ And third, what does the notion of 'scripture' imply for theological engagement with the public (or diverse publics)? It is perhaps salutary to recall that scripture remains authoritative for the church, even if the precise nature of that authority is qualified with reference to

² To my mind, the 'first wave' of public theology includes various liberation theologies, the political theologies of Metz and Moltmann and the work of theologians such as David Tracy who discerned that in a pluralist context Christian theology's audience must be larger than the church. On the rise of public theology as a recognizably differentiated subdiscipline, see E. Harold Breitenberg Jr, 'What is Public Theology?' in Deirdre King Hainsworth and Scott R. Paeth, eds, *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 3–17 at pp. 6–13.

³ Until relatively recently, there was reason for concern about the level of engagement between biblical studies and Christian theology generally. See David Fergusson, 'Theology Today – Currents and Directions', *The Expository Times* 123:3 (2011), 105–12 at 110. For a fuller discussion of the relation between theologians and the Bible since the Enlightenment, see Miroslav Volf, *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 5–15.

such factors as critical or normative content (*die Sache*), tradition (or antiquity), reason, experience or communal discernment over time.⁴ For some, scripture was shaped by the church and is therefore secondary to the church's teaching office; for others, scripture is the touchstone of truth on matters of faith and practice; for others still, scripture is primary and is therefore a necessary, if not sufficient, source of doctrinal and moral authority. Whether one sees the church as a biblical people, perhaps the more satisfying perspective theologically, or the Bible as the church's book, perhaps the more satisfying perspective historically,⁵ the reality is that those whose world-view, moral vision and communal ethos have been shaped by Christian faith relate to the Bible not only as a religious or cultural 'classic' but also as a norm for faith and practice, both personal and public.⁶

According to Amy-Jill Levine, 'The task of biblical scholarship is not merely one of arid academic exercise. It is one with potential import for politics, for justice,

⁴ On the role of *Sachkritik* in twentieth-century biblical interpretation, see Robert Morgan, 'Sachkritik in Reception History', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33:2 (2010), 175–90. Since the authority of scripture implies interpretive nuance, perhaps it is time to add public pertinence, accountability and benefit as yet another dimension of the church's necessary qualification of biblical authority. In other words, perhaps the authority of scripture is also contingent on whether and how appeal to it can be shown to contribute to the public or common good.

⁵ On this contested question regarding the status of scripture, see Francis Watson, 'Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture: Why They Need Each Other', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12:2 (2010), 118–43 at 131–7.

⁶ On the status of the Bible as a 'classic', see David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). See also Krister Stendahl, 'The Bible as a Classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103:1 (1984), 3–10. Among the various implications of the notion of 'scripture' for engagement with publics other than the church, one must, at a minimum, think dialectically. This is certainly so for the relation between scripture and public discourse because publics broader than communities positively oriented to the Bible do not share fundamental biblical and theological premises. On dialectic as a methodological resource for public theology, see David J. Neville, 'Dialectic as Method in Public Theology: Recalling Jacques Ellul', *International Journal of Public Theology* 2:2 (2008), 163–81. See also the 'both/and' perspective advocated by Chris Marshall, 'What language shall I borrow? The bilingual dilemma of public theology', *Stimulus* 13:3 (August 2005), 11–18. Marshall integrates in a nuanced manner what he describes as 'common-currency' and 'distinctive-discourse' approaches to public theology. The relation between scripture and other potential sources of theological, moral and interpretive guidance such as tradition, reason and communally tested experience is also dialectical, as is the relation between scripture and scripture or the normative content (*die Sache*) of scripture, since the Bible is not univocal.

and for the spirit'.⁷ I concur, albeit without conceding Levine's use of the term 'merely', which implies that biblical scholarship is generally an arid academic exercise but may, on occasion, be more than that. Moreover, her contention that 'the task of biblical scholarship ... is one with potential import for politics, for justice, and for the spirit' is not one upon which she elaborates by showing how this is so. This study takes up this task by exploring the work of Gerd Theissen and Paul Hanson on the role and continuing relevance of the Bible in a pluralist context. It also proposes that the interpretive notion of inner-biblical critique has a significant role to play in public theology. To encourage further reflection and dialogue on the role of scripture in the enterprise of public theology, however, the first part of this paper provides a provisional taxonomy of approaches to the relation between scripture and public theology.⁸

Relating Scripture and Public Theology: A Taxonomy of Approaches

Classifications can be as concealing as they are revealing, however much they may seem to detect (or impose) order on data that is not self-classified. One person's classification may hinder no less than help another's analysis of whatever is under investigation. Moreover, to classify is not necessarily to evaluate, a more important higher-order exercise. In view of the paucity of studies directly concerned with the role of the Bible (and biblical scholarship) in public theology, however, this

⁷ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), p. 166.

⁸ In an earlier study on 'The Role of Scripture in Public Theology', Bruce Birch applies to public theology Richard Mouw's fourfold taxonomy of appeals to scripture: doctrinalism, pietism, moralism and culturalism. See Bruce C. Birch, 'The Role of Scripture in Public Theology', *Word & World: Theology for Christian Ministry* 4:3 (1984), 260–68 at 264–6, building on Richard J. Mouw, 'The Bible in Twentieth-Century Protestantism: A Preliminary Taxonomy', in N. O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds, *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 139–62.

provisional taxonomy of approaches to relating scripture and public theology is proffered to provoke further reflection on this matter.

Retrieving the Bible as a Public Resource

From the perspective of global Christianity, especially Africa, Asia and Latin America, the Bible is undoubtedly a public book, as Philip Jenkins and Sebastian Kim have shown.⁹ In a post-Enlightenment context within the industrialized West, however, perhaps the most important mode of relating scripture to public theology is the exercise of retrieving the capacity to perceive — or rather to perceive again — the public dimension of the biblical witness.¹⁰ A collection of texts that begins with the creation of the cosmos and ends with its renewal centred on a city (the new Jerusalem) can hardly be said to focus on the private, rather than public, sphere. The Bible is as concerned with power politics as with prayer, with social structures as with ‘spirituality’, with money matters as with mercy and with jubilee justice as with ‘justification’. As a result, there is, as Heather Thomson puts it, ‘scriptural warrant for public theology’. She also notes scripture’s importance in nurturing the spirituality that supports public theology, whether in the lives of individual theologians or in the ecclesial communities within which they are shaped, sustained and supported.¹¹ Here Thomson echoes Bruce Birch on the Bible’s essential role in shaping Christian

⁹ Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), which expands upon observations made in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Sebastian C. H. Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere* (London: SCM Press, 2011), pp. 27–56.

¹⁰ On the pietistic privatization of biblical interpretation, see Tim Gorringer, ‘Political readings of Scripture’, in John Barton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 67–80 at p. 67.

¹¹ Heather Thomson, personal communication. See also Heather Thomson, *The Things that Make for Peace* (Canberra: Barton Books, 2009).

individuals and communities capable of engaging with the wider world in an edifying way:

The church, as those persons who claim to be the covenant people of God and the body of Christ, is shaped continuously by Scripture and its influence in worship, preaching, study, and life together in the community of faith... Here is where Christians receive nourishment in a biblical identity that allows them to stand as an alternative to the world and its values while at the same time living their lives for the sake of that world and its brokenness.¹²

If Miroslav Volf is correct that, in a pluralist context, theology's capacity to shape society is contingent upon its ability to shape Christian communities,¹³ this makes the formation of a 'biblical identity' within the context of the church that much more pressing. Integral to that ecclesial formation, moreover, is the recognition of the public dimension of the biblical record.

Biblical Exemplars for Public Theology

In 'Biblical Patterns for Public Theology', Howard Marshall explores four biblical texts with a view to extrapolating principles for Christian social responsibility.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, three of his selected texts focus on prophetic figures; surprisingly, none relates to Jesus, although Marshall does refer to Jesus' teaching in support of a broadly evangelical approach to Christian involvement in public life. Plumbing

¹² Birch, 'The Role of Scripture in Public Theology', 264.

¹³ Volf, *Captive to the Word of God*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁴ I. Howard Marshall, 'Biblical Patterns for Public Theology', *European Journal of Theology* 14:1 (2005), 73–86.

biblical texts for ways in which they might inform Christian participation in public life has a venerable history and is an approach to relating scripture and public theology that will continue to bear fruit.

Challenges of Public Theology for Christian Conceptions of Scripture

The purpose and foci of public theology pose challenging questions regarding the role, status and value of scripture. Is scripture a normative source for public theology and, if so, is it normative in the same way as for traditional systematic theology or dogmatics? Do the precise foci or concerns of public theology lead to a different understanding of scripture's role in relation to it? Indeed, do scripture and scripture scholarship even have a role in relation to public theology, especially with respect to its theory or method and praxis? In this study, the last of these questions is implicitly answered in the affirmative, but each is worthy of detailed investigation and has the potential to bring greater clarity to the relation between scripture and public theology.

Scripture-reading as a Public Exercise

This approach to the relation between scripture and public theology focuses on making scriptural texts and either scholarly study of or confessional attachment to such texts more accessible and comprehensible to a public broader than a single community of faith. Perhaps the most straightforward version of such an approach is that of the Jesus seminar, which has purposefully made available to a broader public, both within the church and wider society, the processes and results of academic

biblical scholarship. As explained under the heading of ‘The agenda of the Jesus Seminar’,

The Seminar had to agree on two questions that established the course of its deliberations. It first had to decide how it would reach its decisions. It then had to determine how it would report the results to a broad public not familiar with the history of critical scholarship over the past two centuries and more.¹⁵

Both the democratic deliberations and the published results of the Jesus seminar are contested, but the objective of making the results of biblical scholarship publicly accessible is surely one specific mode of public theology. There is also the dialogical ‘scriptural reasoning’ project, whose procedure of meeting in interfaith groups to learn from each other’s interpretations of Jewish, Christian and Islamic scriptures might be taken as a form of scripturally focused public theology.¹⁶

Relating Scripture to Public Discourse in a Pluralist Context

Such an approach begins with scripture but seeks to find ways of relating scripture to public discourse within a pluralist context so as to contribute to such discourse in an edifying way.¹⁷ One version of such an approach is to explore key scriptural passages

¹⁵ See Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), p. 35.

¹⁶ The Society for Scriptural Reasoning was formed in 1995. For a collection of studies on ‘scriptural reasoning’, see David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold, eds, *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), also published in *Modern Theology* 22:3 (July 2006). See also Jeffrey W. Bailey, ‘Sacred Book Club: Reading Scripture across Interfaith Lines’, *Christian Century* 123:18 (5 September 2006), 36–42. (The Society for Scriptural Reasoning is different from the Jewish Society for Textual Reasoning.)

¹⁷ See, for example, the discussion of Gerd Theissen below.

or themes as points of contact with issues under discussion in broader public discourse. Justice might be one such broad concern, or poverty or ecology. Finding points of contact between scripture and public discourse is relatively straightforward, but the manner in which biblical perspectives are brought to bear in the context of public discourse(s) — in which the church's premises are not shared — is critically important. All too often, 'biblical' perspectives simplistically proffered in public discourse simply confirm the public's prejudice against turning to the Bible for insight, enlightenment or edification.

A variation on this approach is to focus on the public pertinence of distinctive or 'publicly suspicious' scriptural themes such as creation, covenant, salvation, divine Spirit active in the world or moral accountability to a transcendent 'Other'. After all, having something distinctive to contribute to public discourse is no bad thing. The church has long dealt with such themes either 'in house' or as part of its mission and evangelism, but surely one mode of public theology is to explicate such themes in more conversational ways that do not presuppose either a religious world-view or a privileged access to truth.

Scripture under Public Suspicion

A further approach to relating scripture to public theology is brought to light by recent developments in biblical hermeneutics, which includes the exercise of exploring the contemporary meaning, relevance and 'authority' of texts written in times and circumstances largely alien to our own. In 1984 Birch remarked, 'The emergence and continued importance of liberation theologies is one of the most significant

developments of our time for the impact of theology on public life'.¹⁸ He also noted the profound significance of biblical interpretation for theologies of liberation. Any liberationist interpretive approach to the Bible is inevitably a mode of public theology by virtue of its advocacy stance on behalf of a significant proportion of the world's population. Among biblical scholars who have adopted a liberationist interpretive stance, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza stands out for explicitly drawing connections between biblical scholarship and public theology — or, put differently, for nudging biblical scholarship toward becoming a mode of responsible public discourse.¹⁹ She is a leading exemplar of the biblical scholar as public theologian. Richard Horsley might also be mentioned in this connection.²⁰ So might Christopher Rowland.²¹

Liberation readings of biblical texts have proliferated into multiple modes of ideological critique of scripture in response to the historically damaging impact of scriptural texts in relation to the politics of wealth distribution, gender, class, race relations and ecology. Such critique was theoretically possible from within, but it seems that an external and antagonistic standpoint of suspicion fostered by intellectuals such as Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud was necessary to demonstrate how damaging and demeaning scripture could be — or, at least, could be used.

¹⁸ Birch, 'The Role of Scripture in Public Theology', 261.

¹⁹ Her major works in this vein include *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2001); *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001); *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). For a bibliography, see 'The Published Works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25:1 (2009), 221–40.

²⁰ It is no accident that a collection of studies published in honour of Horsley focuses on the role of the Bible in the public sphere. See Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Ellen Bradshaw Aitken and Jonathan A. Draper, eds, *The Bible in the Public Square: Reading the Signs of the Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

²¹ See, for example, Christopher Rowland, 'The First will be Last, and the Last First': Practical Theology and Equality', in William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton, eds, *Public Theology for the 21st Century: Essays in honour of Duncan B. Forrester* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2004), pp. 331–50.

Scripture 'Speaking back' in a Publicly Responsible Way

Ideological critique of biblical texts is a necessary and important mode of public engagement with scripture. Unless due diligence is given to such ideological critique, in which scripture is contested and deconstructed, biblical scholarship will be represented naively and/or counterproductively in the public domain. Apart from reactionary responses to such critique, however, one wonders whether enough has been done to enable scripture to 'speak back' to critical theory in a meaningful and edifying way. After all, the Bible does not speak with one voice only, and many who find it necessary to engage in ideological critique of scripture nevertheless find the Bible indispensable to their faith and spirituality. Biblical scholar Jione Havea is currently engaged in relocating the Bible in relation to critical theory by placing biblical texts in conversation with each other,²² and my own work in New Testament theology and ethics trades on inner-biblical critique as a (complementary) alternative to external ideological critique of scripture.²³

Toward a Public Hermeneutic of Scripture

²² Among a number of studies of which I am aware, see, for example, Jione Havea, 'Releasing the Story of Esau from the Words of Obadiah', in Alejandro F. Botta and Pablo R. Andiñach, eds, *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, Semeia Studies 59 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), pp. 87–104.

²³ Wainwright, in her as-yet unpublished paper on 'Engaging the biblical text and public issues in creative and critical dialogue', contests my distinction between inner-biblical and external ideological critique of scripture, at least with respect to her own critical engagement with biblical texts. She advocates a twofold interpretive dynamic in which critical engagement (in light of crucial contemporary concerns) facilitates a reconstructive reclamation of biblical texts.

Clive Pearson has signalled the need for a public hermeneutic of scripture.²⁴ Precisely what Pearson has in mind must await the publication of his thoughts on the matter. In the meantime, Paul Hanson has developed a five-faceted hermeneutic for a biblically informed political theology.²⁵ His purpose is to develop an interpretive process that enables scriptural meaning to be conveyed in such a way that it relates responsibly, as well as relevantly, to current political, social and economic concerns. While a public hermeneutic of scripture may well turn out to be somewhat different from Hanson's proposed interpretive process, it will likely be similar in key respects.²⁶ For this reason, Hanson's proposal is outlined in the third part of this paper.

No doubt this eightfold taxonomy of approaches to relating scripture to public theology requires refining, but the remainder of this study focuses on three of the eight approaches: first, relating scriptural themes to public discourse within a pluralist context, here in conversation with Gerd Theissen; second, Paul Hanson's interpretive process for a biblically informed political theology, which undoubtedly pertains to the role of scripture in public theology; and third, the value of inner-biblical critique for relating scripture to public theology.

Relating Biblical Themes to Public Discourse in a Pluralist Context: Gerd

Theissen

²⁴ Clive Pearson has been a member of the executive of the Global Network for Public Theology since its inception and is on the editorial board of the *International Journal of Public Theology*.

²⁵ Paul D. Hanson, *Political Engagement as Biblical Mandate* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), pp. 35–41. In this connection, see also Tim Gorringer, 'Political Theology', *The Expository Times* 122:9 (2011), 417–24. For Gorringer, Christian political theology takes its bearings from scripture, understood as an extended 'argument' or tradition, as defined by Alasdair MacIntyre. In my view, much the same applies to Christian public theology.

²⁶ For a comparison between public and political (as well as liberation) theology, see Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, pp. 20–25.

In *The Bible and Contemporary Culture*, Gerd Theissen takes for granted the pluralism of contemporary Western culture, even to the point of recognising that the status of the Bible as a cultural classic — let alone as authoritative for Christian faith — can no longer be presupposed.²⁷ In this situation, he is concerned with ‘how the Bible fares in public consciousness’.²⁸ For Theissen, the Bible is worthy of defending as a resource for public discourse, both because of its culture-shaping impact in the past and because its language and core concerns provide people generally with the wherewithal to reflect upon and to communicate about common challenges. In at least three ways, he perceives the process of ‘understanding the Bible as a path to understanding ourselves’: first, it provides orientation to the history that has shaped so much of the world, including central ideas about humanity, morality, history and divinity; second, by virtue of the Bible’s diverse religious symbolism, it is able to facilitate understanding and empathy between people with different religious convictions; and third, the Bible can serve to enable people to arrive at a better self-understanding, whether by agreement or disagreement with its core content.²⁹ Concluding his opening chapter on ‘why any educated person should know the Bible’, Theissen avers that the Bible can serve as a stimulus to recovery of a sensibility of the religious dimension of reality.³⁰

From a Christian theological viewpoint, Theissen’s perspective may smack too much of functionalizing scripture by stressing its cultural utility rather than recognizing its capacity to serve, with the Spirit’s prompting, as divine address. This raises the question, already posed, whether the role of the Bible with respect to public

²⁷ Gerd Theissen, *The Bible and Contemporary Culture*, trans. David E. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). The English translation is excerpted and adapted from *Zur Bibel motivieren: Aufgaben, Inhalte, und Methoden einer offenen Bibeldidaktik* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2002).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

theology leads inevitably to a different conceptualization of its status and authority. For Theissen, in any case, ‘An open, public study of the Bible, intended for everyone, irrespective of belief or disbelief, is in accord with the Bible itself’.³¹ By this he means that the Bible, especially in its canonical shape, was never intended as an esoteric collection of documents. However much the Hebrew scriptures or New Testament writings may have been the result of faith speaking to faith, they were, nevertheless, open to scrutiny by a public broader than Israel or the church and, indeed, address matters of universal concern. Thus, Theissen grounds his approach to the Bible and pluralist contemporary culture in the Bible itself, at least in a general sense.

In a chapter on ‘biblical essentials’, Theissen interprets biblical faith in accordance with the socio-cultural theory that ‘religions are historical symbol-systems, structures made up of symbols, constructed by human beings in order to worship God’.³² This truth-bracketing approach serves his interest of identifying biblical symbols, themes, motifs and features that, in his view, have the capacity to facilitate dialogue in a pluralist social environment. For Theissen, moreover, dialogue prompted and nurtured by biblical faith must occur in no less than three public spaces: the wider non-religious (or secular) sphere, the inter-religious domain and interconfessional (or ecumenical) fora.³³ As Theissen puts it at one point, ‘We are ... looking for those aspects of the Bible that promote dialogue in a pluralistic society. Any understanding of the Bible has to prove its worth in three dialogues: dialogue with secular society, with other religions, and among different Christian

³¹ Ibid., p. xviii.

³² Ibid., p. 28.

³³ Cf. the three publics of theology identified by Tracy in the opening chapter of *The Analogical Imagination*, pp. 3–46. Tracy’s three publics are wider society or general culture, the academy and the church. See also David Tracy, ‘The Role of Theology in Public Life: Some Reflections’, *Word & World: Theology for Christian Ministry* 4:3 (1984), 230–39, in which Tracy advocates a revised correlational method for theological engagement in the public sphere.

denominations’.³⁴ Aware that many are dubious of the Bible’s capacity to facilitate dialogue, especially in relation to the non-religious and inter-religious worlds, Theissen nevertheless considers that certain elemental features of the Bible reach out beyond the borders of Jewish and Christian faith to engage people with different convictions.

In a third chapter, Theissen identifies two core convictions of Christian faith — belief in one God and belief in a redeemer — along with a cluster of fourteen elemental biblical motifs that, in his view, hold the promise of facilitating dialogue that will strengthen social cohesion in pluralist contexts. His (non-exclusive) list of indispensable motifs include creation, wisdom, miracle, alienation, hope, conversion, exodus, substitution, divine indwelling, faith, love, status reversal, judgement and justification. In this particular chapter, Theissen aims primarily at analysis and description rather than at bringing core Christian convictions and elemental biblical motifs into dialogue with non-religious perspectives, but that is the point toward which he heads — in the following chapter.

Close to half of Theissen’s book comprises a discussion of ‘the Bible in dialogue with a pluralistic world’, the title of his fourth and largest chapter. This final chapter has three main sections: the first dealing with the Bible in dialogue with contemporary secular culture, the second on the Bible in dialogue with non-biblical religions and the third on the Bible in inter-confessional dialogue. Given the focus of this study on the role of the Bible in public theology, Theissen’s first section on the Bible in dialogue with secular society is most immediately pertinent. Here he retraces his steps to reconsider the two core convictions of Christian faith and his fourteen elemental biblical motifs with a view to correlating them to analogous non-religious

³⁴ Theissen, *The Bible and Contemporary Culture*, p. 26.

ideals and values.³⁵ In so doing, however, he is not concerned solely to commend biblical faith as significant to non-biblical people, although that is his primary emphasis throughout. He also recognizes that such open dialogue may contribute to new insights about the Bible. New eyes sometimes see new things or old things in a new light.

For the illustrative purposes of this article, it is possible to convey only a broad sense of Theissen's apologia for the Bible in a predominantly secular environment. His first point is that the Bible may play a crucial role in challenging strictly secular institutions, which are often reductionistic and, as a result of excluding the religious, are often internally incoherent. But this strictly functional role for biblical religion is not Theissen's principal concern.³⁶

With regard to the first of Theissen's two core convictions of Christian faith, faith in one God, he asks: 'Are there ideas in the secular worldview that are convergent with the first premise of biblical faith?'³⁷ His answer is that more often than not, God is simply replaced in secular consciousness by reality *per se* or 'Being'. And people relate to reality *per se* or 'Being' in ways that are analogous to ways in which people of faith relate to God. Three such ways are experiences of transcendence, experiences of contingency (or sense of dependence) and experiences of 'resonance' (that deep sense of encounter with reality that evokes responses of belonging, gratitude, wonder and responsible action). While such experiences need not necessarily be interpreted in relation to God, the Bible interprets them as encounters with God. As such, the Bible's description and interpretation of such

³⁵ Theissen's approach is comparable to the middle-axiom or mediating-principles approach in Christian social ethics. On the challenge of relating biblical imperatives to public concerns within a pluralist social context, see Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 17–31, and also his article cited above, 'What language shall I borrow?'

³⁶ Theissen, *The Bible and Contemporary Culture*, pp. 76–7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

experiences offer language and imagery for expressing them while also challenging non-religious interpretations of such experiences.³⁸

Similar reflections are offered in relation to faith in a redeemer, the second of Theissen's two core convictions of Christian faith, which lead to a discussion of non-religious analogies for core biblical themes. 'Corresponding to the fundamental biblical motifs', Theissen writes, 'the secular consciousness provides convergent or alternative motifs. These will often raise the question whether they represent secularized biblical traditions or independent analogies produced by encounters with the same reality'.³⁹ Returning to his fourteen elemental biblical motifs, Theissen identifies 'secular analogies', 'counterparts' or 'convergences' to creation, wisdom, miracle, *et cetera*, with a view to providing his own evolutionary interpretation of such motifs.⁴⁰ For example, the motif of wisdom, whose secular analogy is the regularity of nature presupposed by the physical sciences, is interpreted as revealing humanity's natural belongingness in, and dependence upon, the natural world.

For Theissen, finding secular analogies to fundamental biblical motifs is not an end in itself. Rather, these correlations or convergences open up possibilities for creative dialogue that hold the promise of better understanding, both of persons with different mindsets and of the Bible itself. The anticipated dialogue is bi-directional, and Theissen is enamoured of the potential of what he describes at one point as 'an open, public reading of the Bible'.⁴¹ While, for Theissen, 'the goal of dialogue with the secular world is to enable a religious understanding of reality' and the Bible's language and imagery 'enable secular perceptions to be restructured religiously',⁴² he means this not so much in the sense of conversion as in the sense of coming to

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 78–87.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 91–7.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 80.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 98–9.

appreciate that meaning precedes us. Within a strictly secular world-view, humanity is the source of meaning, whereas within a religious world-view, meaning precedes humanity and beckons us toward it. Thus, for Theissen, the Bible plays a critical role in facilitating movement from a secular to a religious sensibility.⁴³

Under Theissen's creative scrutiny, the Bible retains a significant role in a pluralist social context. That role is different from its ecclesial role but no less important in that core biblical themes facilitate an edifying dialogue between people of Christian faith and people with different convictions. This may not seem terribly significant, but fellow-feeling ensues when and where genuine dialogue occurs. The Bible thus has its place in building a more peaceable public space.

Interpretive Engagement with Scripture in Post-Christian Times: Paul Hanson

In his recent manifesto, *Political Engagement as Biblical Mandate*, Paul Hanson proposes a five-faceted hermeneutic for a biblically informed political theology.⁴⁴

While Hanson focuses on political concerns, primarily in relation to his native United States, his perspective is broader than simply national or international politics. In response to the question, 'What is the nature of biblical authority in relation to politics?', Hanson's answer is that this question requires an interpretive process that enables scriptural meaning to be conveyed in such a way that it relates responsibly as

⁴³ Theissen does not critically assess whether the objective of enabling a religious understanding of reality is worth pursuing. While a religious consciousness may inculcate a more magnanimous spirit, it may also result in a more mean-spirited approach to those with contrasting convictions. Openness to mystery may be no bad thing, but such openness does not always lead to openness towards others.

⁴⁴ Hanson, *Political Engagement as Biblical Mandate*, pp. 35–41. Hanson describes his interpretive proposal as 'a five-step hermeneutic for a biblical based political theology', but the steps are not necessarily sequential. The key point is that his proposed hermeneutic is a process entered into within the context of a community of faith concerned to be politically responsible in a pluralist context. Space constraints dictate that this article focus on Hanson's hermeneutical proposal, but the whole of his book pertains to the broad theme of this study.

well as relevantly to current political, social and economic concerns.⁴⁵ This process is grounded in worship and sustained by eschatological hope. For Hanson, the *fons et origo* of his proposed interpretive process is the biblically informed and theologically discerned distinction between God's ultimate authority and the relative authority of any human institution. A proper perspective on relative authority requires relational contact — being in touch with — ultimate authority, which, for Hanson, occurs in worship. As a result, 'worship is the most political thing the community of faith does'.⁴⁶

As a vision of the potential significance of worship for public theology, Hanson's perspective has much to commend it. Indeed, such a vision might even serve to provoke continuing liturgical renewal. But whether much worship across the spectrum of Christian churches comes close to facilitating a renewed appreciation of the distinction between ultimate and relative authority such that it thereby resources responsible political or public theology is another matter. Nevertheless, Hanson is surely correct that worship is indispensable to a politically engaged public theology concerned to remain tethered to and nourished by biblical roots.

If worship is the source of Christian political engagement for the public good, hope in the eschatological reign of God is its goal, not as something achievable solely by human means but as the vision against which all efforts and achievements are evaluated. For Hanson, authentic Christian theology must remain cognizant of the limited vision and virtues of any particular contributor to public debate. Christian individuals and institutions are no less inclined to speak out of self-interest than anyone else, which is what necessitates evaluation in light of the eschatological reign of God.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 6–7.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 36. (Hanson devotes the entirety of his second chapter to the theme of 'Worship — Touchstone of Christian Political Action'.)

In between communal worship and eschatological hope are three further dimensions of Hanson's proposed interpretive process. The first of these is a form of self-awareness. If people of faith are to contribute to public debate in meaningful and edifying ways, they need to be well schooled in biblical and confessional traditions. In other words, one must know one's heritage so as to be able to speak with both knowledge and conviction from out of that tradition. All participants in public discourse speak from a perspective that is informed and nurtured by a particular tradition or traditions. The responsibility of those who purport to contribute a Christian perspective to public debate is to know the breadth and depth of their heritage well. Otherwise, what is distinctive to Christian tradition will likely be muted or perhaps even lost.

Beyond deep grounding in biblical and confessional traditions, skill is needed to translate moral implications of Christian faith into reasonable discourse that is both comprehensible to people from different traditions and, as Hanson puts it, 'free of special pleading'.⁴⁷ What I take Hanson to mean by special pleading is disingenuous presumption that one's own perspective ought to be given privileged status. In a pluralist context, Christian perspectives proffered in public either compete on a level playing field or, in some circumstances, must combat the perception that religious viewpoints have no legitimate role in the public sphere. If people of Christian faith are to contribute meaningfully to public conversation about what makes for a better society or world, we need to develop both the skill and practice of 'biblical translation' into publicly accessible idioms.⁴⁸

The skill of biblical translation into publicly accessible idioms is no doubt refined by attentive listening to alternative viewpoints informed by other religious or

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 36–7.

⁴⁸ On this challenge, see Marshall, 'What language shall I borrow?'

philosophical traditions, which is the fifth aspect of Hanson's five-faceted interpretive process. In the public forum, deep grounding in biblical and confessional traditions coupled with the skill of biblical translation into publicly accessible idioms requires the reciprocal commitment to listen and to learn. Hanson's description of the promise and value of attentive listening to alternative viewpoints is reminiscent of Michael Walzer's argument for 'thin moral agreement' across traditions:

Awareness of the limitations of any individual's or community's grasp of complex aspects of modern society and world leads to an openness to cooperation with others and a pragmatic spirit willing to work with political alliances sharing the awareness that while 'perfect' political institutions and social structures are the illusory constructs of absolutists, concrete progress can be made in improving the quality of life of all citizens in areas such as quality education, universal health care, and equal opportunities in the workplace. In joining broad-based coalitions, participants will not set aside their specific, confessionally, and scripturally based identity, but will continue to be oriented by the moral compass that identity provides. At the same time they will enthusiastically encourage participants from other traditions to remain equally aware of and true to their systems of belief and morals, for to them cooperation reaching across religious boundaries does not entail exclusion, but mutual enrichment through honest and civil debate.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Hanson, *Political Engagement as Biblical Mandate*, p. 38. Cf. Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). The value of Walzer's 'moral minimalism' for practical ethics is explored by Philip J. Matthews, 'Moral Enquiry in a Pluralist Society: From Contention to Conversation' (PhD dissertation, University of Notre Dame Australia, 2009). The notion of 'thin moral agreement' probably has significant currency for public theology. In personal communication, Matthews observes that 'the thin aspects of Christian practice transcend into political life in ways impossible for the thick narrative of Christian theology'.

Like Walzer, Hanson recognizes that one cannot speak intelligibly, meaningfully or relevantly apart from an identity rooted in and shaped by a particular tradition. Also like Walzer, however, Hanson appreciates that in a pluralist context discussants in public discourse must reach across traditions in the hope of finding ways to work together to shape a better social order, whether local or global. In this cross-tradition conversation, we might hope to challenge and be challenged no less than to co-operate pragmatically, but Hanson is correct to contend that attentive listening to voices other than and perhaps even opposed to our own is an indispensable dimension of Christian engagement in public conversation.

The Pertinence to Public Theology of Inner-Biblical Critique

It was noted earlier that ideological critique of scripture in relation to public concerns such as wealth distribution, race relations and ecology is one mode of relating scripture and public theology. As indispensable as such ideological critique of scripture has been and continues to be, the Bible itself contains resources that are indispensable to any Christian public theology worthy of the name.⁵⁰ For example, the very public issues of violence and justice are with us now no less than in biblical times, and both radical questioning of the moral validity of violence and the quest for justice are integral dimensions of the biblical witness. The difficulty is that so, too, are the affirmation of violence by God and for God, as well as radically different conceptions of justice, some more restorative but others much more strictly retributive. In the Bible, to echo Qohelet, everything under the sun has its season

⁵⁰ Cf. Gorringer, 'Political Theology', pp. 417–24. From the biblical tradition, Gorringer focuses on 'three key themes for a Christian political theology': freedom, shalom and justice.

(Eccl. 3:1–8). How, then, are biblical interpreters conscientized to public concerns to respond to this jangling jumble?

If something is ‘biblical’, must it be affirmed for that reason? For those sensitized to the reality that conquest, war, slavery and both racial and gender inequalities have been defended on biblical grounds, the simple fact that something is biblical is insufficient to provide it with theological and moral sanction. Yet all churches continue to hold to some version of biblical authority. One may, of course, appeal to non-biblical norms as criteria to adjudicate the content of the Bible, but have we given sufficient consideration to where that ultimately leads? For whatever reasons, the Bible has proved itself indispensable over nearly two millennia; on the other hand, it has also proved itself incapable of resisting the machinations of persons and groups intent on using it to further their own self-serving interests, often with seemingly irredeemable public ramifications.

In grappling with this theological, moral and interpretive conundrum, Ellen Davis’ notion of inner-biblical critique, what she calls ‘critical traditioning’,⁵¹ helps to steer a responsive and, indeed, responsible course between a tradition-reactive hermeneutic of suspicion and a tradition-compliant hermeneutic of respect. Davis builds on the pioneering work of Michael Fishbane, whose *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* demonstrates that scriptural traditions are often preserved while also being reinterpreted.⁵² In other words, the Bible itself witnesses to a process in which the preservation of tradition goes hand in hand with interpretive innovation. Inner-biblical critique works analogously, retrieving biblical traditions while also reformulating and reinterpreting them in — and for — new contexts.

⁵¹ See Ellen F. Davis, ‘Critical Traditioning: Seeking an Inner Biblical Hermeneutic’, *Anglican Theological Review* 82:4 (2000), 733–51.

⁵² Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

In my work on New Testament texts of ‘eschatological vengeance’,⁵³ inner-biblical critique is authorized on the basis of an inner-biblical norm, namely, the publicly confronting life-story of Jesus as presented in the canonical gospels, critically appraised.⁵⁴ As is generally agreed, the rationale for Jesus’ mission and message was the reign of God. According to Moltmann, ‘As kingdom-of-God theology, theology has to be public theology: the public, critical, and prophetic cry for God — the public, critical, and prophetic hope for God. Its public character is constitutive for theology, for the sake of the kingdom of God’.⁵⁵ Moltmann’s remarks relate to contemporary Christian theology, but they pertain no less to the public, critical and prophetic mission of Jesus grounded in his peculiar vision of divine rule.⁵⁶

Clearly, one might appeal to other inner-biblical norms to authorize particular interpretations, especially when working with the Hebrew scriptures. The basic point, however, is that we all make interpretive choices based on a privileging of certain texts over other texts. Given the diversity of voices within scripture, that is inevitable. This should nevertheless be done self-consciously and critically, with a clear — and clearly articulated — rationale.⁵⁷ Part of this rationale, in my view, is what Charles

⁵³ This phrase is drawn from John J. Collins, ‘The Zeal of Phineas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122:1 (2003), 3–21; reprinted as a Facets booklet, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

⁵⁴ See David J. Neville, ‘Toward a Teleology of Peace: Contesting Matthew’s Violent Eschatology’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30:2 (2007), 131–61; ‘Moral Vision and Eschatology in Mark’s Gospel: Coherence or Conflict?’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127:2 (2008), 359–84; and ‘Faithful, True, and Violent? Christology and “Divine Vengeance” in the Revelation to John’, in Ted Grimsrud and Michael Hardin, eds, *Compassionate Eschatology: The Future as Friend* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), pp. 56–84.

⁵⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, ‘Theology in the Project of the Modern World’, in Jürgen Moltmann, Nicholas Wolterstorff and Ellen T. Charry, *A Passion for God’s Reign: Theology, Christian Learning, and the Christian Self*, edited by Miroslav Volf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 1.

⁵⁶ See David Neville, ‘Jesus’ Vision of God’s Fair Reign’, in Graeme Garrett, ed., *Into the World You Love’: Encountering God in Everyday Life* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007), pp. 36–49. Cf. Gerd Theissen, ‘The Political Dimension of Jesus’ Activities’, in Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina and Gerd Theissen, eds, *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), pp. 225–50. (I am grateful to John Squires for suggesting the relevance to my argument of Jesus as a public figure in his own context.)

⁵⁷ On the role of reason and critical assessment in relating scripture to public life, cf. Birch, ‘The Role of Scripture in Public Theology’, 266–7.

Cosgrove designates the ‘rule of moral-theological adjudication’,⁵⁸ which is analogous to the early church’s rule of faith, as articulated by Irenaeus, and Augustine’s interpretive rule of love.⁵⁹ To deal with biblical ambivalence regarding violence, a hermeneutic of *shalom* is needed to complement the church’s earlier interpretive rules of faith and love.⁶⁰ In the face of biblical ambivalence about violence, or what John Dominic Crossan describes as the clash between violent and nonviolent gods throughout the Bible,⁶¹ such a hermeneutic would enable biblical interpreters to commit to building a more peaceful world.

With respect to the theme of justice — surely one of the most pressing issues in a world of ever-widening discrepancy between the wealthy and the wretched of the earth — I have argued that inner-biblical critique is able to show two things: first, that although different conceptions of justice may be found in the Bible, certain prophetic traditions reveal justice to be an ultimate theological concern, not simply a penultimate moral concern; and second, that the Jesus-story refines that prophetic tradition in the direction of restorative, as opposed to strictly retributive, justice.⁶² Retrieving the biblical impetus towards a more transformative sense of justice has the potential to serve the public good in our own day. Thus, inner-biblical critical traditioning retains the distinctiveness of the biblical witness, or at least a significant dimension thereof, but also reminds us in the here and now that the Bible always did

⁵⁸ See Charles H. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 2–4, 154–80.

⁵⁹ See Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.10; Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 1.84–85, 95–96; 3.54.

⁶⁰ Cf. Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 60: ‘To the rule of faith and the rule of love, we should also add the rule of hope’. So long as Migliore’s proposed ‘rule of hope’ is *shalom*-shaped, I concur.

⁶¹ See John Dominic Crossan, ‘Divine Violence in the Christian Bible’, in Robert L. Jewett, ed., with Wayne L. Alloway Jr. and John G. Lacey, *The Bible and the American Future* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), pp. 208–36.

⁶² David J. Neville, ‘Justice and Divine Judgement: Scriptural Perspectives for Public Theology’, *International Journal of Public Theology* 3:3 (2009), 339–56.

address matters of concern to a broad public, not simply individual morality or private spirituality.

In conclusion, I have presented a provisional taxonomy of approaches to relating scripture to public theology, with a view to encouraging the voice(s) of scripture to be heard more audibly within the discourse that goes by the name of public theology. I have lingered for a time with the work of Gerd Theissen, who promotes ‘an open, public reading of the Bible’ and explores biblical motifs capable of provoking meaningful dialogue in a pluralist environment. I have also considered Paul Hanson’s five-faceted hermeneutic for a biblically informed political theology, convinced that some such interpretive process is adaptable to public theology in touch with its scriptural roots. Finally, on the supposition that the Bible contains resources that are indispensable to Christian public theology, I have commended inner-biblical critique as a biblically grounded and theologically responsible means of engaging critically with today’s public concerns.