Editorial: Familiarity and Surprises

This particular edition negotiates a fine line between what is familiar and to be expected in a public theology and that which can surprise. The narratives that unfold remind us of the role played by high profile theologians who have often been cited in the history and ongoing practice of public theology. The pressing concern becomes how might the work of these distinguished scholars be employed by an emerging new generation wrestling with their companion issues. Hidden away in what is familiar is the occasional surprise. What is found set alongside such are newer voices from unexpected quarters, both in terms of origin (Finland and Ghana) as well as resources in the Christian tradition (asceticism and an entrepreneurial ecclesiology) not usually associated with a public theology.

Patrik Hagman has worked with a former student / now journalist **Liisa Mendelin** on presenting a rather unusual approach to a public theology. The discipline abounds in the language of social transformation, civil society and democracy. There is an expectation of overt action and prophetic discourse. Hagman and Mendelin make the case for the public role of asceticism. The very idea of this ancient Christian practice and the Desert Fathers—as well as the monastic lifestyle of later times—furnishing a mode of political resistance in the contemporary public domain is at face value surprising: it alludes, perhaps, to the importance of concealment and silence as argued by Jonathan Malesic in his *Secret Faith in the Public Square* (2009). What these authors have in mind is something rather different. The current analogies lie with the Occupy Wall Movement and two young adults' commitment to embark on a Buy Nothing Year. These case studies are seen as a way of moving beyond the mere academic discourse of public theology and allowing it to be active in an embodied manner. The passions are implicated and engaged. Who would have thought that Evagrius of Pontus (345–399 CE) would become an exemplar? Hagman and Mendelin envisage a contemporary asceticism that combines the well-established ideals of introspection and withdrawal with an emphasis on the imaginative capability of campaigning for a different order of desire in society—all the while working for necessary institutional change. What is being argued for here is more than a temporary incidence of ecofasting or walking instead of travel by car, however beneficial that might be in terms of consciousness-raising. Following David Fagerberg, Hagman and Mendelin

situate the ascetic life within a liturgical framework: this activism is not merely an exhibition of skills. It is concerned with nurturing virtues for an alternatively ordered society.

Patrick Amissah is addressing one of the recurring public issues that has been seldom addressed by a public theology. Back in 2015 Leslie Holmes published his *Corruption: A Very Short Introduction*. It set out to define this abuse, explain why it is a problem, and how its extent can be measured. Holmes then dug more deeply into its psycho-social and cultural explanation as well as investigating how corruption can permeate systems and structures prior to addressing what can be done in response. Holmes was well aware that the study of corruption cannot be ‘pigeon-holed’ into any one academic discipline: his own work was interdisciplinary. What was noticeable in a list that included anthropology, criminology, economics, politics and many others was the absence of theology. Amissah does not draw upon Holmes but he does make good on the silence of theology and biblical studies. Amissah needs to do that because his case study involves the exposure of corruption in the Ghanaian judiciary. Normally the judiciary would be regarded as one of the pillars of the democratic public domain. Amissah makes use of Scripture (the book of Amos in particular) to mount the case for a biblical indictment of corruption on behalf of a public theology and a civil society. The reason why this line of approach is plausible is because of the role of the Bible in public life in Ghana and the extent to which the compromised judges were themselves professing Christians.

This theme of the unexpected and surprising is also to be found in **Richard Brash’s** reading of John Webster. His subject matter was and continues to be familiar within the field of a systematic theology. Webster has been one of the foremost theologians of theology—dogmatics—in recent times. His insistence on letting theology preserve its integrity and proper function of explicating matters has created the impression that he has little to say on issues pertaining to politics and the public domain. Writing within the responsibilities of a systematic theology Webster’s approach is well-known: it is familiar. Brash sets out to do is demonstrate how what appear to be a rather narrowly confined theology has public consequences and offers a potential alternative set of ‘conceptual resources’ to the political liberalism of John Rawls. Webster invites us to accept our ‘givenness’ of the space in which we find ourselves and thus inhabit. It is the space in which we are creatures and out of which and through which we relate to the Creator who seeks the perfection of our creaturely being. There is a relationship to transcendent here which is different from that which can be found in the Rawlsian space made up of the call to being free and equal. For Webster there is no secular space; the analytic practice of Rawls is the exclusion of God.

The public theology Brash finds in Webster arises out of a more conservative theological tradition than is often for this discipline. Like the work of **Derek McDougall** it is seeking to examine how a public theology engages with a western post-secular society. The context is very different from the secularization thesis of an earlier time and the kind of responses this journal has published with regards to a public theology established within the theory of the Pancasila system in Indonesia. The current convention of describing living in a pluralist democracy is not the same in various parts of the world. Not all routes are through the secular. McDougall is writing with regards the west. His particular focus is upon the capacity of the political theologies of Rowan Williams, Oliver O'Donovan and Stanley Hauerwas to adapt to the post-secular public space. It remains an incomplete task, of course, given that pluralism is also marked by gender, generation and many other criteria.

In a manner not unlike McDougall **Roshnee Ossewaarde-Lowtoo** turns for insight into the present to an established doyen of a public faith from the past—in this case Reinhold Niebuhr. She does so in order to address ‘urgent economic and political issues’. Like Brash she fastens upon a familiar dogmatic practice—in this instance Niebuhr’s reading of sin and redemption. It is rather brave act: the language of sin does not travel so well in the public spaces of a liberal democracy that is now so attuned to the default virtue of tolerance and is primed to what Will Storr has discerned in the west as a culture that has become ‘self-obsessed’. His *Selfie* (London: Picador, 2017) represents a tour of frequent invocations to do with self-esteem and self-respect are set alongside the selves we construct online, our tribal selves and how we aspire after the ‘perfectible self’. Sin and redemption fail to make the index—and, yet, some years ago Alasdair McFadyen observed how the Christian faith is *Bound to Sin*. If this language can never be used and is forever to be supplanted by middle axioms, then what has theology to say to the issues that haunt the contemporary world? McFadyen concentrated on torture and abuse. The focus on redemption allows Ossewaarde-Lowtoo to place alongside sin the possibility of divine love. That she should make this move is consistent with the way in which love is becoming increasingly employed besides—and, sometimes, in place of—justice in discussions around ethics and the climate emergency. There is indeed ‘no justice without love’. The former prevents love from subsiding into an emotion and disposition unable to withstand the brutalisms of a rough and robust politics and public opinion.

Very different from the articles which precede it is **Samuel Lee’s** case study on the Blue Jean Church in Selma and the Arsenal Place Accelerator. Lee is writing out a more Pentecostal and Holiness background and represents the emerging voice of an empirical, statistically-based public ecclesiology.

The debt here is to Mark Cartledge. Lee's argument comes under cover of a desire to meld a distinctive liturgy and spirituality with a theological reading of neighbourly love and the Trinity. The language of the common good, a civil society, and the flourishing of all which marks much public theology does not feature. Its place is taken by talk of the Kingdom (of God) and social transformation. For the public theologian Selma, with its history of civil rights protest, is full of interest—and yet, as Lee notes, requires great sensitivity in order for the public church to be inclusive of the voices it seeks to be aligned with.

Clive Pearson

Editor-in-Chief