Editorial: Stretching Definitions

The definition of what constitutes a public theology is not static. The potential for rival definitions that do different jobs was plainly revealed some time ago in the oft-cited essay by E. Harold Breitenberg: ‘Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?’. In a way which was not foreseen at that time further drivers of change have surfaced. It was anticipated that this should be the case the moment this emerging discipline began to take leave of its North Atlantic roots and become a global flow. The public space, issues and hopes around the globe are not the same: nor is there a blind uniformity of expectation within the ranks of those who whose work originated in the countries where a public theology first appeared. Now there is a greater recognition of insights arising out of a world Christianity that is aligning itself with a public theology. The present is also a period in which points on the theological spectrum that were long regarded as not being particularly interested in the public sphere are finding voice.

The work of *Antipas Harris* signifies this broadening in a couple of ways. His writing emerges out of the Black American experience which is mediated through a Pentecostal expression of faith. Harris himself is only too well aware that such renderings of a public theology seldom, if ever, inform western scholarship. His purpose is not agonistic but descriptive in this respect. He notes the omissions. Harris then sets about the task of identifying a Pentecostal hermeneutic which draws upon Scripture, black experience, and preaching. Harris creates a four-fold typology. This exercise is in some respects retrospective but history here is being done for the sake of disclosing a particular kind of public engagement. The Pentecostal preachers Harris has selected have all made stands against racism and worked for social justice. Harris had also furnished an example of how personal narrative can be a mode of expressing a public theology.

The practice of preaching is seldom emphasized in discussions on the method and purpose of a public theology. It is inclined to be seen as primarily a mode of performative discourse that is confined to the internal routine of the church. In a rather intriguing turn *Aaron Edwards* makes the case for the public role of street preaching. That seems like an odd assertion as Edwards well knows. The awkward and frequently embarrassing act of street preaching can instil a fear of ‘guilt by association’ and lead to the desire to ‘look away’ and

walk on the other side of the street. Edwards makes the case for a 'radical street performance' that is in an 'Agora-like dialogue' with the public. The kerygmatic expression of the Christian faith must be re-imagined and reconstructed in a way that is 'intentionally absurd'. Edwards is writing in a context marked by secular apathy, a benign indifference where there are 'no ears to hear' a strange and foolish Gospel. This public is apathetic to religious belonging and established modes of ecclesiastical practice and ritual. Edwards argues the need for a Radical Inculturated Programme (R.I.P) that disrupts the malaise.

It might appear as if Edwards is writing out of an overriding interest in homiletics or missiology. That is not the case. His argument opens up the question of how is a public theology to be performed in the midst of indifference to religious claims. How is a public theology to be true to its emanating out of a Gospel that can cause offence and, indeed, seem absurd? Edwards is effectively turning attention onto the how and what of that which a public theology seeks to communicate. This task is also addressed by *Graeme Smith*—but in a rather different manner.

Edward's street preaching is far removed from Smith's call for an edifying public theology. For this purpose Smith is indebted to the philosophical work of Richard Rorty and his turn away from epistemology and the quest for Truth. Rorty is discussed extensively in the light of critical conversations that surround his writings. Smith's purpose is not a further contribution to the field of Rorty studies, however. Smith is asking the timely question of what has a public theologian to offer in those western liberal democracies where their work is in dialogue with—and seeks to build upon—the findings of social scientists and other disciplines. The very nature of a public theology is to be persuasive and not fall back on some revelatory or dogmatic override which can serve as the Truth in any given circumstance. Smith argues that there are benefits to be found in being edifying: it allows for a pragmatic, ironic way of speaking out. It can indeed redescribe afresh that which is familiar and add a unique slant or perspective.

Tim Harvie examines the necessity and the capacity of a public theology to read its setting and adapt in yet another way. The accent here is not on communication (whether through preaching or being edifying) *per se*. Harvie argues the case for revisiting the list of publics frequently invoked and placing them alongside an additional one that is 'nonanthropological'. It is time for a 'reconstruction of these publics within a broader ecological landscape'. It could be argued, of course, that public theologians have already engaged with the current crisis of climate and demonstrated an ecological sensitivity. The problem lies in how this concern may effectively be one issue among many that just happens to present itself. Where Harvie digs deeper is in his disciplined call to

place these existing models of a public theology within an 'emerging ontology of the Earth as a shared, political and public reality'. The Earth itself is a commons. It is a shared good. Its existence is presupposed in all other models of the public that have been conceived. Harvie binds this assertion to a diffractive method which respects the differences in biological life. The consequences are significant for a public theology, especially as Harvie then draws upon the biblical motif of 'the flesh' to move beyond a human-centred theology. There is a very real sense in which the climate emergency and the place of humans within the Earth system would support this case for the Earth as the home of 'embodied flesh' being viewed as an ontological foundation for all those other carefully constructed models.

Harvie's thesis does not preclude the ongoing necessity of addressing issues as they arise. They still 'happen' but now happen within a planetary public. *Jayme Reaves* and *David Tombs* have researched the rise of the #MeToo movement and posed the seemingly never asked question as to whether Jesus himself was sexually abused. The detail with which the history of the #MeToo movement has been described is important in its own right. It tells a painful story while mapping the terrain and making that cumulative narrative accessible. What is then intriguing is how this trauma feeds back into Christian self-understanding and poses a fresh theological question. Reaves and Tombs reply is by way of a close reading of the passion narratives—most especially the treatment of Jesus at the hands of the soldiers and the act of crucifixion itself. What has what has been recorded of acts of abuse in the Roman practice of crucifixion leads to an enquiry into the substance of one of the core events in the belief structure of the Christian faith.

Do we have here the potential for an example of an edifying public theology? Reaves and Tombs do not pose their question concerning whether or not Jesus was a victim of abuse out of a detached curiosity. They are seeking to address the shame and silence that often accompanies abuse. Is it possible that presenting Jesus as a victim might put an end to the moralism and self-righteous judgmentalism of others and help ease the way of breaking the silence? Could it be that showing the humiliated Jesus in this light provides a unique and novel insight into the issue of abuse?

This discipline of public theology has come into being in a formal, self-referential way in the wake of other theological movements that continue to exercise power. It is not a discipline that can separate itself off from those other types, even if it wished to do so. There is an ongoing internal conversation within theology itself about how faith should be understood, expressed and acted out. In this edition of the journal *Travis McMaken* revisits a theological debate between Eberhard Jüngel and Helmut Gollwitzer replete with punch

and counter-punch. There is here a semblance of Smith's interest in Rorty. Is it theology's task to aspire after truth (Jüngel) or should it be more bound to praxis (Gollwitzer)? McMaken's negotiation of his way through the polemic of this theological contretemps raises the stakes inherent in such disputes: what are the consequences for praxis? Following Gollwitzer what ought to happen if solidarity with the marginalized is espoused? Is it enough to side with Jüngel and insist on the pursuit of truth for its own sake?

McMaken concludes that the holding of theology and praxis close together is likely to generate a revolutionary theology. It could be argued that this possibility is one aspect of a public theology and perhaps distinguishes it in some way from a theology of public life. And yet ... at the same time, the summons to aspire after a civil society, the public good, also presupposes the value and virtue of nurturing a civil and collaborative discourse—a virtue so much needed in a time of so many fractures in so many current democracies.

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