Editorial: ‘Real Places’

One of the abiding considerations of a public theology is how should theology be situated with regards the academy. The opening sequence of contributions to this edition flow from an address given by Judith Wolfe on this topic within the particular space that is St. Andrew’s University, Scotland. The importance of this level of specificity is emphasized in the introduction to this lecture and subsequent responses by Jason Sexton. In a rather intriguing manner he seeks to lift Wolfe and her responsive colleagues – Christoph Schwöbel, Oliver Crisp and Stephen Holmes – out of their St. Andrews’ context and situate them inside the rapidly developing field of a worldwide public theology. Sexton refers to public theologies in ‘real places’ beyond the Anglophone world. There is here a tacit recognition that the issues that focus attention in one part of the world are not necessarily the same as another – in addition to which there is the implied observation that not all sites for a public theology have access to the same levels of academic infrastructure.

Wolfe’s lead address to the symposium expressed the importance of the intersection of the academy and theology. For those whose ‘real places’ might involve them in a series of demanding situations where praxis is required, the arguments proposed by Wolfe and her colleagues rehearse vital foundations. That is not something that should be taken for granted. Crisp writes on ‘the shared task’ theology has with the broader university – but does so very mindful of the sharp divisions among theologians themselves about their task, method, and purpose. It can be a factor in giving of the impression that theology is ‘on the backfoot’ in the contemporary university.

One of the key words permeating Wolfe’s lecture is relevance. It is a word that can sometime be held in suspicion by theology inasmuch as it can suggest an accommodating to the spirit of the age at the expense of doctrinal claims and stability. Holmes is certainly aware of how a (public) theology can too easily become captive to cultural demands and expectations. In a way that may surprise its critics Wolfe argues that theology plays its part in enabling open-ended conversations with other disciplines, stretching frameworks. Schwöbel is very aware of how important this capacity has become in a highly pluralist world of theology wishes to contribute to the common good of society – and not just the church. Through the attention Wolfe gives to the practice of imagination and judgement students of theology can acquire the skills to interpret
the data furnished by cultures and – one might add – the compounding complexity of the ‘real places’ that provoke a praxis-based public theology.

Sexton’s mindfulness of life beyond the Anglophone world is mediated through several works in this edition of the journal. Writing out of Jakarta **Simeon Theojaya** is one of a number of philosophers and theologians whose local context is Indonesia. The common practice for such from this part of the world has been to engage with exploring what might be the role of a Christian public theology in a Muslim-majority land and the provisions of the Pancasila democracy. Theojaya breaks with that pattern in his concern for the well-being of essential workers during the COVID 19 pandemic. They are ‘overworked and underpaid’: rather than regard these works in a highly romanticized or commodified way Theojaya argues the essential workers represent responsibility for the other in their vulnerability and solidarity. It is an act of anthropodicy that lends itself to a religious rendering along the lines of who is at risk, what can we do to help and whom shall we send.

**Elia Maggang** is likewise from Indonesia. The ‘real place’ that sets the agenda for his foray into a public theology is the sea, ‘the cornerstone of life on earth’, sea creatures and those who depend on the sea. Maggang is seeking to balanced a ‘green’ land-based concern for the planet’s ecology with one that makes room for the ‘blue’ seas. To this end he offers an alternative to the relative disregard of the sea in Christian ecological discourse and calls for a blue discipleship. The exegetical foundations for this possibility are set in the fishing communities around the Sea of Galilee from where Jesus called his first disciples. The underlying assumption of this article lies in how this theological understanding of a blue discipleship should lead to a Christian praxis towards the seas and the life that depends upon such. Maggang writes mainly from a perspective that lies in the Northern Hemisphere: it is an approach that could – and should – be set alongside that of the concerns of indigenous communities in highly vulnerable, low-lying coral islands and reef atolls in the *moana loa* (the open ocean) in the South. The call to a blue discipleship would then be matched by the answering refrain based on the parable of the good Samaritan – ‘am I not your *tuakoi* (neighbour)?’.

The current nature of these two ‘real places’ almost inevitably means that there should be some reference to the tragedy of the war in Ukraine. **Joshua Searle** (who has overseen a previous edition of this journal on public theologies in post-Soviet societies) is well-positioned for this task. It is hardly likely that at the present there will be a Ukrainian (or Russian) theologian writing on this conflict. Searle’s familiarity with the Russian language, its history and the church in Ukraine enable him to address an aspect of the narrative that is informing the ‘special military operation’ – that is, the myth of Holy Russia
over and against the decadent West. Searle writes with passion as he draws the contrast between these two positions. In so doing he provides a window into how the witness of the church can be compromised by the state and Christian values misleadingly applied.

In the background of Darren Cronshaw’s enquiry into the purpose of a military chaplaincy lies the long-fought war in Afghanistan. The pride that Australia had taken it the ethical conduct of its soldiers has been tarnished by the recent exposure of what are potential war crimes alongside the accounts of veterans taking their own lives and families wondering where was the needed support. Cronshaw does not step directly into the ‘real time’ action of these conflicts; rather, he examines the work of chaplains and how they can assist in preparing would-be combatants for life and death decision-making. The emphasis Cronshaw places upon a virtue ethics signifies a change in military formation and reflects the increasing complexity of modern warfare.

The moment Sexton referred to ‘real places’ in his introduction to ‘the relevance’ of theology in the university immediately invited insights from places other than St. Andrews and contexts other than the academy. That is not to dismiss the place and role of theology in the university. Quite the contrary. It is designed to place these ‘real’ complex situations alongside the reality of theology’s relevance in the tertiary field of knowledge.

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