A Popular Public Theology. Issues of Pluralism, Identity, and Justice.

Abstract:

The article begins by exploring what is meant by a popular public theology drawing on the work of the missiologist Werner Ustorf. A popular public theology refers to the informal and unofficial theological speech of society, distinct from the more formal theology of the Church and academy. Such popular public theology is found in contemporary culture, albeit often in diffuse and incoherent form. It is then argued that a popular public theology has an inbuilt relevance to the concerns of society, avoids problems associated with public theologians needing to be fluent in more than one academic discourse and is not in danger of being reliant on the social sciences. Finally it is suggested that by discussing the implications of cultural theological statements public theologians are able to contribute critically to social and political debates.

Key words:

Public theology; Popular theology; Ordinary theology; popular culture; post-secular;

A popular public theology begins with the idea that Western culture speaks theologically. It assumes a distinction is to be made between the theological thinking undertaken by the Church, by the academy and by society, but rather than understanding these as audiences, in David Tracy’s sense, it regards them as agents capable of theological speech.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is of course no surprise to describe the Church and the academy as theological agents. Theological speech produced by the Church and the academy, and then discussed by communities and individuals within those bodies, follows well-established patterns, being produced, on the whole, following norms of structure, form and content. Public theologians within the Church and academy struggle with the question of how what they say can be related to their social and political context, which is perceived to be predominantly theologically silent and illiterate. Public theologians frequently discuss the methodological dilemma of how to connect and relate their political aspirations and doctrinal beliefs. They seek to make real, in the interaction between divergent discourses, the unity of faith and social and political criticism which is their personal experience. By contrast, a popular public theology is produced by those who are not schooled in the ways of formal ecclesial and academic theological reflection and so it can easily appear superficial, fragmented and incapable of detailed critical analysis. The boundaries of what constitutes a popular public theology can seem diffuse, porous and indistinct. A major step in the critical task is to identify what comprises a popular public theology, assuming, as we do, that not everything can be theological for the label to have meaning. Further a popular public theology can appear to reinforce the social and political norms of Western liberal, capitalist society which public theologians usually want to resist and reform, thereby meaning it fails in public theology’s core task of political critique. In this paper we shall begin by exploring in more detail what is meant by a popular public theology and how it relates to more established notions of public theology. We shall then examine the question of whether a popular public theology can perform a critical political function within its Western context. The argument is that identifying and critiquing a popular public theology is a means by which public theology can be both relevant to Western society, in which theology has a poor public standing, and also critical of that society’s social and political norms.

A popular public theology begins with the proposition that theology is public when it is generated in the first place by the public, rather than when it is produced by the Church or academy and then communicated to local culture and society. Werner Ustorf offers some illustrations of how this might be achieved in a chapter in the collection of essays entitled *Dare We Speak of God in Public*. The then University of Birmingham Professor of Mission, wrote about ‘folk’ or ‘popular’ religion, something he differentiated from official religion, the religion that comes from priests and academics; ‘“Popular” or “folk” religion is usually distinguished from “official’ or “elitist” religion along institutional, socio-cultural and intellectual lines’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Making reference to a statement by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians issued in 1976, Ustorf asks whether there is a ‘particular Western Christian image of God and a particular Western way of doing theology’ that is somehow ‘totalitarian’ in its ambition to control reality or is a ‘patriarchal colonial project’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Ustorf does not answer his question directly, but in the long quotation which follows his direction of travel is clear.

If one takes official religion to be “Those prescribed beliefs and norms of an institution promulgated and monitored by a group of religious specialists, then popular religion becomes those patterns of behavior and belief that somehow escape the control of institutional specialists”. Often it is understood or misunderstood in terms of a belief system, whereas it is more a way of life. Popular religion disturbs the intellectuals’ need for a harmonized or controllable world-view. It is very likely therefore that popular religion does not fit into the categories which the dominant or intellectual class has prepared for it. The religions of so-called ordinary people consist usually of simple expectations in relation to life: that one has to eat, that the crop is good or employment continues, that the child regains health, that debt will not become intolerable and war does not threaten, that one has people to talk to, that one stays alive and will die peacefully, having a decent burial. The people’s religious discourse is often very careful not to go beyond one’s own authority: they do not try to “explain” or to “know” or even to define God.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the remaining sections of the chapter Ustorf explores the nature of this popular theology by examining examples of people’s religious experience, experiences which have a marginal status, ‘usually neglected, and sometimes silenced’, ‘in the “backyard” of contemporary Western culture and history’.[[5]](#footnote-5) The experiences he includes are Augustine and his mother Monica’s epiphany at Ostia, Jacob’s famous ‘wrestling with an enigmatic being at the Jabbok river’, and the insight of the Japanese ecologist Masanobu Fukuoka.[[6]](#footnote-6) However perhaps the paradigmatic example is of Simon Kimbangu who established the ‘biggest independent church in black Africa’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Kimbangu felt called to a preaching and healing ministry however his vocation was rejected by the missionaries because they regarded Kimbangu as ‘stupid and uneducated’.[[8]](#footnote-8) This Ustorf argues is because ‘the missionaries refused to provide an African mystical experience of the merciful God with a legitimate place within the mission church’.[[9]](#footnote-9) It is of course easy to attribute such racist attitudes to the 1920s, and to think our own times more enlightened. But Ustorf’s point is that we all too quickly seek to establish a formal identity, to have an official religion, controlled by those in authority. As he notes in relation to the Kimbanguist Church, somewhat ironically, ‘in 1957, a proper “church” was established, followed in 1977 by a theological seminary, and today we have Kimbanguist theologians who define how the prophet understood himself in 1921’.[[10]](#footnote-10) His concluding lesson is a warning to theologians, one he makes simultaneously self-critically. It is that,

theology still has difficulties in regarding people’s experiences as an important starting-point for doing theology. The danger is that by neglecting what people across history have experienced or not experienced “we”, the theologians, cease to speak of God, or that we behave just like the missionaries did in the Congo in 1921. Then theology could become a sort of Humpty Dumpty, and the people might look somewhere else for the bread of life; and then it is the theologians who may be in the backyard of history.[[11]](#footnote-11)

One response to Ustorf might be to suggest that if the official theology of the Church and academy (the Chacademy?) is exclusive and oppressive then this theology needs to be changed, and this is the purpose and function of public theology. However this would be to miss the severity of Ustorf’s critique of traditional theology; his argument is that the location of the theological producer will shape the content of the theological ideas being produced. It is the point made by liberation theology; social and political context, including ecclesial context, shape the discourse, its norms, form, structure and ideas. Ustorf argues that the desire to control a discourse, to restrict who might participate in the debates, is a Western, colonial trait; something then adopted by the Kimbanguist Church as it sought to become like the mission Church its founder had rejected. At this point we need to be clear about which of Ustorf’s insights are applicable to the discussion here. It is not necessary to agree fully with Ustorf to recognize the importance of the distinction between official and popular theology. Further it can remain an open question as to whether there is a public place for ecclesial and academic theology; even someone as opposed to formal, official theology as John Caputo believes his notion of a ‘religion without religion’ would still benefit from being ‘parasitic’ on the Church, whilst simultaneously rejecting its claim to exclusivity.[[12]](#footnote-12) It can be hoped that ecclesial, academic and popular theologies might fruitfully interact, whilst of course none should be privileged. The point here is that popular theology has been largely ignored by public theologians, which may be related to the colonial nature of Western society or not, but which we are seeking to redress.

There is one further point of clarification about what we mean by popular theology before we move to a discussion of its strengths and weaknesses. At first sight it might seem a very similar proposition to the ‘ordinary theology’ project of Jeff Astley or the Ecclesiology and Ethnography work associated with Pete Ward.[[13]](#footnote-13) There are some similarities, especially the desire to distinguish between official Church or academy led theological thought and unofficial local theologies. However Astley and Ward’s approaches still have a tendency to start in the churches, albeit with the ‘unofficial’ people sitting in the pews. Those who produce an ‘ordinary theology’ might not employ the language of official theology, however what is being investigated is how much of the Church and academy generated theology they have absorbed and remembered. Further there is a suspicion that these two projects rely heavily on the social sciences, that is, recording the views of people as they understand them themselves. This is important, but it carries within it the danger that what is investigated and discovered is what people think they should be thinking when asked questions by those seen to be a representative of the Church or academy. It can easily be the case that the product of such research looks like a pale imitation of Church or academic theology, which is the ultimate expression of proper and orthodox belief in the minds of those being questioned. It should be reiterated that this is not to denigrate what these important projects investigate but instead to ask whether there are alternate methodologies for discerning what it is a society might be thinking theologically. The idea being explored here is that a society can speak theologically through its culture. That is, we find theological thinking in culture produced by those not formally trained in the discipline but still articulating ideas which fit within the categories of traditional theological thinking. The role of the public theologian is then to identify and critique this popular public theology. A comparison can be made with the social sciences. There is a distinction to be made between economics as an academic discourse and popular economic activity, such as buying an item in a shop. The individual might make a good purchase without needing to understand or explore the details of supply and demand whilst those trained in the academic discourse might analyze the same event employing economic categories and theories. Likewise people might construct theology without knowing and debating the merits of Barth or Tillich. This is not to say that everything is theological, in the way that some economists might find an economic element to every phenomena or in the way Ustorf seems to imply might be the case in the first, long quotation cited above. Rather the assumption here is that theology has its traditional discourse boundaries; it discusses how we might talk about God, about humanity, about salvation, about Church and holy communities, about prayer, about ethics, that is living well personally and organising our society so it functions well, about Christology and about the last days for the earth and the cosmos. Public theologians can find these topics discussed in popular culture as an expression of the theological thinking of society. One quick example; the film Bruce Almighty has God as a character, who offers comment on the ethics of film’s protagonist. The film discusses prayer as well as how we should live well as individuals in Western society. Chris Deacy is correct to argue that we should not stretch the boundaries of what constitutes theology too far; that a film has a hero who saves the day employing effective violence is not obviously christological in any Christian sense.[[14]](#footnote-14) The point here is that such tenuous connections are not necessary; in film, music, TV, art, literature and video society employs culture to speak about traditional theological topics; not all the time but enough to gain a sense of what constitutes a popular public theology.

A popular public theology such as is being conceived here has at least three advantages. It is a public theology which is relevant within Western society, it does not require the public theologian to be fluent in any discourse except theology, and it avoids the danger of being reliant on social theory and so losing its theological identity. Each of these strengths will be discussed before we ask the critical question of its ability to form social and political judgements.

A public theology which begins with what society is already saying theologically overcomes the problem of the relevance of theology to Western society. Ustorf argues that if theologians ignore popular theology then they are in danger of being relegated to the ‘backyard of history’. A similar warning comes from Stephen Pattison. Pattison argues that despite ‘much rhetoric and a few admirable attempts to breach the walls of the ghetto to which theology seems to be confined in a secularized society, this discipline is now on the edges of making any kind of positive, appreciated, intelligible contribution to mainstream public issues and practices’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Pattison attributes the decline in the public significance of theology in part to social and cultural conditions outside of public theologians’ control and in part to the way in which theologians select and conduct their conversations. Pattison’s polemical target is academic theologians, and his recommendations to address the problem focus on the content of their work. His vision for theology is encapsulated in his criticism of its failure: ‘Its (Christian theology) supreme achievement has been to make even the idea of God seem boring. It has no power to transform or inform lives or thinking in a vivifying, hopeful way, much less to contribute credible analysis and principles to public debates and policies’. The consequence of this demise, if not checked, is, according to Pattison, that Christian theology ‘will continue to decline and eventually die except as a narrowly confessional discipline that relates to the faithful alone.’[[16]](#footnote-16) Some might argue that an ecclesially produced theology is desirable, such as those who welcome the contribution of either Stanley Hauerwas or the radical orthodox, but, as we shall discuss below, there are problems with these types of public theology. It might be argued that a desire for social relevance should not be the goal for theological thinking, that its aims are more spiritual or political. However a focus on relevance is not being suggested here, rather relevance is a by-product of addressing the already existing theological discourse which occurs at a cultural level and will remain without critique unless theological experts begin to assess it in more depth. It might also be suggested that public theologians already achieve social relevance by contributing to public debates, and that they can do this without needing to identify and critique popular theology. Instead by understanding the nature and issues of social, political or cultural theory public theologians can find ways of ensuring these discourses and theology interact. This takes us to the second strength of a popular public theology.

As it is usually conceived public theology requires the theologian to be fluent in more than one academic discourse. Traditionally public theology has been constructed through methodologies such as correlation, critical correlation, the pastoral cycle, (critical) conversation, translation and bilingualism. Elaine Graham’s most recent book, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, illustrates the last of these methodologies and thereby the attempt to maintain theological identity whilst contributing to public debates.[[17]](#footnote-17) Graham argues that the way in which public theology achieves its social and political impact is through its bilingualism, a point at which she is clearly influenced by the work of Max Stackhouse. Graham suggests that public theology must be able to speak the language of theology, located in the Church and academy, as well as the languages of non-theological disciplines, primarily various forms of social theory. In the second part of her book Graham examines the condition of public theology, offering a detailed and insightful survey of a variety of public theologians. What underpins their work is the tension to be negotiated between public discussion of political matters, which is predominately conducted in a non-theological language, despite the advent of post-secularity, and Christian theology. Graham states that most ‘commentators agree, (though), that public theology is faced with a difficult balance between adopting the language of wider society and potentially risking a loss of any distinctively theological grounding, and insisting on specifically Christian terminology, which fails to connect’.[[18]](#footnote-18) In other words the dilemma is one of a Theology / World dualism; how to effect communication between Christian theology when it is separated from the World, which is not theological? The radical orthodox resolve the tension caused by this dualism by abolishing the World, that is by seeking to invalidate the intellectual coherence of the non-theological. Graham is unconvinced by such an approach and so the dualism remains and public theology has the task of bridging the gap. The key metaphor she employs of ‘bilingualism’ is more appropriate than ‘translation’ as it suggests the task of the public theologian is to inhabit and be fluent in at least two discourses. This is in part a practical challenge, depending on the training, dedication, and energy of the public theologian. It is also a question of discursive integrity; can the concepts and ideas precisely delineated in one discourse be accurately expressed in another? As Graham notes, public theology’s solution to this dilemma has been found in the idea of correlation, depending as it does on the notion of shared questions. David Tracy is an exemplar of this approach, talking about ‘theology emerging from a dialogue or correlation between religious classics, which address persistent and fundamental questions of human concern, the nature of God, and so on, and “common human experience and language”’.[[19]](#footnote-19) In other words the same questions are asked in both languages / discourses, and whilst answers may be formed in different speech forms, translation is possible with little being lost. This is the point challenged by the radical orthodox who argue that the claimed overlap is in fact liberal humanist dominance. The main advantage of what is being proposed here is that theologians who seek to identify and critique popular public theology need only be experts in one discourse, namely theology. They might wish to avoid basic errors in social analysis, political science or cultural theory but they do this as people who are informed by these theories rather than as people who employ them as central to their own academic methodology, that is as experts. It will be the case that theological statements have social or political implications, but these implications can be communicated through social or political discourses in which any citizen might participate as a citizen. The key point is that there is no need for any type of interaction, a correlation or conversation, between two discourses in order to produce the public theology, it has already been produced. The task is to identify and critique popular public theology, not generate it; a task which is by no means straightforward.

The questions arise of what criteria do we employ to identify popular theology and then how can we assess whether the theology we have identified is in any way orthodox. The second question is easier to address. As is argued below, popular public theology will be evaluated against social and political criteria and these form its markers of orthodoxy or in fact orthopraxis. The answer to the first question is more complex. In one sense it is difficult and possibly futile to seek to define once and for all what constitutes ‘theology’ in a popular public theology. In another sense theologians can usually easily distinguish between what might be taught on an introduction to theology course and what is taught on an introduction to economics course. Somewhere between the two lies the fluid definition of what is the ‘theology’ in popular public theology. There are a number of topics which are discussed frequently by theologians which are also part of society’s own discourses. We do not need to develop water-tight definitions in order to be able to identify the theological issues and questions being discussed and explored in culture.

In some ways what is being proposed here is similar to the ideas of John Milbank. He too is keen that theology stands on its own feet critically, that it is not reliant on social theory to perform the main critical task. However Milbank is determined that theology must be produced from within the Church, and as such runs the risk of producing the colonizing theology Ustorf identified. Milbank argues that the problem for theology is that theologians have sought to start their work with social theory; that is, they have begun with non-theological discourses’ analysis of society. In the ‘Introduction’ to his major book one senses the frustration Milbank feels at the neglect of theology as a critical tool.[[20]](#footnote-20) He writes about the ‘pathos of modern theology’, how it has conceded the ground to secular reasoning and so abandoned its position as a metadiscourse.[[21]](#footnote-21) His frustration is directed at what he calls ‘political theologians’ by which he means public or liberation theologians; groups which employ social theory in a manner which excludes theology as a foundational social and political hermeneutic. The heresy of the theologians is something like the pastoral cycle because through it the work of social theory is privileged whilst theology is relegated to a post-analytical veneer, the especially thin icing on a cake of liberal, humanist analysis.

Contemporary “political theologians” tend to fasten upon a particular social theory, or else put together their own eclectic theoretical mix, and then work out what residual place is left for Christianity and theology within the reality that is supposed to be authoritatively described by such a theory. Curiously enough, theologians appear specifically eager to affirm both the “scientific” and the “humanist” discourses of modernity, although one can, perhaps, suggest reasons for this. First, the faith of humanism has become a substitute for a transcendent faith now only half-subscribed to. Second, there is a perceived need to discover precisely how to fulfill Christian precepts about charity and freedom in contemporary society in an uncontroversial manner, involving cooperation with the majority of non-Christian fellow citizens.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Milbank’s speculation about the motives of ‘political theologians’ is harsh. To achieve participation in the public square, political theologians underplay the significance of their theological identity, something which to a certain degree accords with their personal preferences. By way of contrast Milbank wants to reject the idea that ‘there is a significant sociological “reading” of religion and Christianity, which theology must “take account of”, and the idea that theology must borrow its diagnoses of social ills and recommendations of social solutions entirely from Marxist (or usually sub-Marxist) analysis, with some sociological admixture’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Instead, as is well-known, Milbank takes advantage of the post-Nietzschean critique of social and political theory, especially that associated with MacIntyre, to propose a Christian apologetic which both supersedes the postmodern critique and which permits Christian theology to outnarrate its theoretical rivals. In particular, and most importantly, it is Christian theology which performs the critical task, enforcing the sense that the identity of the public theologian as Christian is essential to political engagement. It is in later works that Milbank has provided substance to his theological critique of liberal, capitalist society, and thereby his rejection of an easy identification of theology with purely doctrinal matters.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Whether Milbank’s project succeeds in its analytical and philosophical tasks is highly contested. It is perhaps not surprising that Milbank’s post-liberal theology appeals to those who welcome a revived significance for the Church; theologians who similarly welcome Hauerwas’ work. They argue that Milbank has achieved a renewed place for Christian theology in public debates; his dialogue with Zizek and the work of Phillip Blond being evidence of this point. However in their dialogues Zizek often appears to treat Milbank’s theology as a traditional, conservative Christian ‘straw man’ which he critiques as the springboard for his own less orthodox theological ideas which don’t appear to have been shaped by Milbank’s theology. The danger then is that Milbank’s theology is not so much a serious dialogue partner as an intellectual ‘punch bag’ against which Zizek proposes his own alternative theology.[[25]](#footnote-25) There are also problems with Blond’s employment of theological ideas. Elaine Graham offers a brief critique of radical orthodoxy, including a discussion of Phillip Blond and the Red Tory project.[[26]](#footnote-26) Her main criticism is that Blond, the most public example of a radical orthodox participation in policy debates, exhibits a certain ‘“coyness”’ towards his theological background’ which has the effect of ‘baffling and alienating many of his critics, who are fully aware of the theological connections but suspect some kind of “sleight of hand” at work’.[[27]](#footnote-27) As Graham notes, this means that Blond fails to demonstrate the ‘ontological unity of faith and reason’, which is supposedly at the heart of radical orthodoxy. This said, Milbank’s substantial point that public theology needs to be recognisably theological if it is not to be amateur social science is fundamentally important, a point Graham would support. The analysis of popular public theology is a theological analysis. The implications of the theological analysis then tell us about society and polity, things not revealed by social and political analysis. The difference between what is being proposed here and Milbank’s defence of theology is that the theological analysis of popular public theology can perform its function alongside social and political theory. That is, public theologians who employ theology as a critical tool do not do so as an alternative to social and political theory, they do it standing alongside these discourses which address different questions and issues employing different categories and theories.

The final question to be addressed is the extent to which there can be a political critique of Western society developed through the analysis of popular public theology. For public theologians one foundational requirement of theological reflection is that it leads to political change. The key distinction to be explored here is between a public theology that is political because it is constructed by public theologians to make political comment and a popular public theology which is political as a result of analyzing and evaluating the implications of the identified public theology in culture. An important example of the former is Elaine Graham who works with the presupposition that public theology is to be constructed as political. First, and fundamentally, Graham’s conception of theology is shaped by theologies of liberation: referring to Gutiérrez, she states that he ‘reminds us that an apologetic public theology is concerned less with words than actions, and that a defence of faith is to be found in its power to liberate and transform situations of injustice and human suffering’.[[28]](#footnote-28) There are two key elements to this. First public theology is about practical action, it earns its legitimacy in public debates through the resulting action of Christian disciples. In this sense reason has given way to pragmatism, not that Graham would suggest Christian theology should be philosophically incoherent or contradictory. Secondly, and related to the practical priority, there is an emphasis on the political. What Graham is proposing as the theological content of public theology is deeply political, and controversially political in that some sort of fundamental social and economic revolution is its aim. If the poor and marginalized are to achieve the sort of humanity or personhood that comes from just, peaceful and equitable participation in society then Western liberal capitalist society as we know it will need to be radically changed. Graham is aware of the danger of this not seeming to be theological and so she states her ongoing allegiance to key theological ideas; ‘public theology is right not to lose its nerve in continuing to insist on the primacy of creation, incarnation and common grace, and look for signs of the Kingdom in an era after Christendom’.[[29]](#footnote-29) Talk of searching for ‘signs of the Kingdom’ is reminiscent of Niebuhr and the Christian Realist tradition in which Stackhouse was formed. Graham reiterates the point stating, ‘To look for God’s becoming amidst the human and material is quintessentially an affirmation of the incarnational and sacramental nature of reality’.[[30]](#footnote-30) This entails collaborative action, dialogue, a search for moral consensus with a variety of groups, all ‘without compromising the integrity of their (Christians) core convictions’.[[31]](#footnote-31) In other words Graham takes the warning of the post-liberals, that collaboration might lead to theological anonymity, whilst believing the pragmatic requirements of public theology’s political project requires working beyond the Church reduced by secularity, despite emerging post-secularity.

The political priority at the heart of Graham’s project is reinforced by the second element of Graham’s conception of the substance of public theology. This is the concept of speaking ‘truth to power’; ‘the historical commitment of public theologians to serve as advocates and speak prophetically into structures and institutions in the name of justice’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Graham offers the example of the campaign to expose ‘police misconduct’ and ‘corruption in high places’ following the tragedy at the Hillsborough football stadium when 96 Liverpool fans were killed.[[33]](#footnote-33) She argues that the Independent Panel, chaired by the Bishop of Liverpool, exemplified a paradigmatic ‘piece of public theology in action which willed “the welfare of the city”.[[34]](#footnote-34) Graham then gives more attention to the third of her recommendations for public theology, namely ‘building up the secular vocation of the laity’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Returning to a theme mentioned by William Temple in *Christianity and Social Order*, Graham argues that an informed laity is essential to the public theology project.[[36]](#footnote-36) Such an informed laity will be aware of the ‘practices of citizenship’ as well as ‘theologically literate’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Graham stresses the priority of a sense of shared journey, that effective public theologians are not adversarial, but rather engaged on a ‘collaborative journey of shared enquiry’. Essential to this is a valuing of narrative, both because it allows for the partnership and collaboration Graham wishes to stress whilst also ensuring theological identity can be preserved. Referring to Mary Doak’s discussion of narrative she writes, ‘It allows the rhetorical power of theological tradition to be introduced into the public domain “with their religious roots clearly intact”, while being sufficiently porous to create space for communicative exchange with the narratives and vantage-points of others’.[[38]](#footnote-38) Here Graham is adapting traditional notions of dialogue, the ideas that Stackhouse might well have had in mind, to a context which is more plural, albeit the sort of pluralism important here is social and political rather than religious. She concludes that public theology’s imperative to ‘“give an account of the hope which is within you”’ must ‘continue to underpin the vocation of the public Church as it is called to speak truth to power and seek the welfare of the city, and as its people venture into the contested spaces of public deliberation as articulate and faithful ambassadors for Christ’.[[39]](#footnote-39) She moves beyond what can sometimes seem like public theology’s obsession with methodology, and consequent weak theological identity and over reliance on the social sciences. Graham’s public theology entails a social and political challenge to society.

The analysis and evaluation of a popular public theology will share many of Graham’s aims. A good evaluation of popular public theology will ask about the extent to which it contributes to human flourishing, generates are more just, peaceful or equitable society, or banishes the evils which bedevil community. It will also be prepared to challenge powerful vested interests. But its political message will be developed as it critiques popular theological contributions. In this it fundamentally differs from the attempt first to construct a public theology and then seek ways of communicating that are hopefully attractive to society. The evaluation of popular public theology requires criteria; these will be the humanity of the oppressed and marginalized, the challenge to powerful political organisations, the undermining of sinful dominant social narratives, and the empowerment of people. It is to be hoped that ideologies are revolutionized. But such results are to be achieved through the critical evaluation of the public theology that already exists in society, not through the construction of new ecclesial or academic theologies. Popular theology producers will be encouraged to reconsider the nature of the theology they are constructing in light of our discussion of its implications. This is not to say that the Church or academic theologians should not also speak out, it need not be an either / or; but rather that the analysis and evaluation of a popular public theology has been neglected.

In this article we have sought to define a popular public theology; that it is unofficial and therefore inevitably diffuse, perhaps superficial and unsystematic. We have then identified the advantages of focusing on such a popular public theology, namely that it has a built in relevance to Western society, that it avoids the need for public theologians to be experts in more than one discourse and it maintains a strong theological identity. Finally we have argued that by analyzing the implications of any identified popular public theology we can contribute to social and political debates. Ultimately the evidence of the effectiveness of any such critique of popular public theology will depend on the products of its analysis, which must be the subject of a further paper.

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4. Ustorf, ‘“Not through the sound of thunder”. The Quest for God in the backyard of history’, p102/3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ustorf, ‘“Not through the sound of thunder”. The Quest for God in the backyard of history’, p103. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ustorf, ‘“Not through the sound of thunder”. The Quest for God in the backyard of history’ p103/4, p105, & p106. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ustorf, ‘“Not through the sound of thunder”. The Quest for God in the backyard of history’, p110. Ustorf writes in detail about the Kimbanguists in this book, For an appreciative overview of Ustorf’s work see Löffler, R., ‘Introduction. Robin Crusoe tries again or: Werner Ustorf’s way of developing missiology into a research concept of global and pluralistic Christianity’, in Löffler, R., (ed.), *Robinson Crusoe Goes Again: Missiology and European Constructions of Self and Other in a Global World 1789-2010,* Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co KG, 2010, pp7-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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