Practical Theology Special Issue

The Futures of Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age

Editorial

For this special issue leading scholars and practitioners, and all the contributors are both of these, were asked to speculate on the future of public theology in a secular or post-secular age. Their articles demonstrate two things. First there is a real consensus that, despite decline in church attendance, secularism is by no means the established fact that the secularization hypothesis once led us to believe. In fact, as Martyn Percy notes, to focus exclusively on church numbers is to miss most of the richness and diversity of religious, and especially Christian, life in the UK today. The articles included here demonstrate that society is post-secular in three main ways: (i) the churches are engaged in a variety of community projects which sustain lives, especially those of the poorest people, including generating open and hospitable places of dialogue; (ii) politicians are employing the Bible and religious ideas when they advocate their political agendas; and (iii) theologians are able to reveal the multiple ways in which our enchanted world is celebrated. In other words what is argued here is not that society is post-secular in the sense of returning to a pre-secular or pre-Modern state, but that Christianity continues to transform lives in diverse ways. This is not to say that the churches should give up on worrying about attendance, but rather that attendance is only one part, the institutional part, of a much more complex picture. Second, given this complex picture it is perhaps not surprising that what constitutes public theology is equally varied and diverse. In the articles that follow public theology is construed as a form of apologetics, the celebration of transcendence, the projects and schemes of one especially active diocese in the Church of England, the speeches of contemporary politicians, and as a serious dialogue partner with major contemporary political figures about how we conceive of our life together in society. So if there is consensus here, that society is post-secular rather than secular, there is also diversity about what that post-secularity might mean and then what public theology looks like in such a pluralist context. That such diversity exists is not of course necessarily a problem, in fact it might well be the opposite, a sign that public theology is an exciting, stimulating and creative force whose full potential is only just beginning to be recognized.

The first article in this issue is an excellent starting point for understanding the complexity of post-secularity briefly described above. Based on her extensive knowledge and understanding Elaine Graham demonstrates that it is no longer possible simply to describe UK society as secular. There are, of course, statistics of decline but these must be set alongside the vital role Christianity plays in local communities and in shaping people’s identities. Graham then proceeds to explore her proposal for a public theology shaped and informed by the Early Church’s notion of apologetics. This is not to be understood in the more contemporary, and Modernist, way as a form of triumphant argumentation, whereby, following the Enlightenment notion of rationality, one side is able to ‘win’ some sort of debate, but rather as an ‘invitation to dialogue’. Graham argues that the churches are being apologetic, that is, witnessing to their faith, when they create open, plural, and hospitable spaces where people can talk about how they live their lives. Apologetics is much more sophisticated, and difficult, than winning arguments with atheist scientists, it is about living well in a religiously and politically pluralist society. Heather Walton explores this notion of living well as a worshipping public theologian. She begins with a challenge; can we live with joy, as rejoicing people, rather than those who can only condemn and critique. This idea she then develops and explores more extensively through her fascinating discussion of Charles Taylor’s *magnus opus*, ‘A Secular Age’, and what is missing in a world that struggles to perceive the enchanting, that has lost the capacity to perceive the resonance of the transcendent. The loss is grievous, it results in a flatness, an emptiness, a meaninglessness, it is always Good Friday never Easter. Public theology can resist this hollowness by celebrating an enchanted world, identifying and piecing together the proliferation of transcendencies, picturing a world more colourful, more playful, more humane. If this does not always look very theological, especially when theology wants to be clearly identifiable, and even pure, then perhaps the rumours are true, and public theologians have never really been theologians. Rosemarie Mallett and Theo Shaw also explore the question of what is the role of the public theologian, in their important and insightful article, but in their case it is within the context of discussing how one diocese, the diocese of Southwark, responds to the social needs of its poorest and most vulnerable inhabitants. Mallett and Shaw describe and reflect upon the diverse work that the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) department is doing to support parishes and the diocese in their attempts to meet economic and social need. They seek to tackle an enormous range of challenges, including ‘poverty, inequality, housing, welfare reforms, the refugee crisis and immigration (including asylum seekers) and citizenship issues, disability issues, modern day slavery and human trafficking, environmental degradation and much more’. For them the work of JPIC is to make the Gospel teachings of Jesus of Nazareth real in society. This is diverse and ever changing work, as they analyse, with one key issue today being their work around the issue of immigration, and supporting refugees and asylum seekers. It is at this point that the churches provide the open and hospitable spaces which Graham indicates are at the heart of apologetics. Related to this work is the horror of modern day slavery and the need for the churches to renew their campaign against the slave trade. Mallett and Shaw are concerned with political change and it can sometimes be the case, although not in their work, that the political establishment is conceived as a secular other, driven by neo-liberal economic norms which seem at best to forget the plight of the poorest and at worst to be callously indifferent. In his excellent article James Crossley demonstrates how the picture is far more nuanced than this, and that politicians, rather than being secular utilitarians, are in fact inclined to dabble in a bit of public theology. Crossley shows how politicians, starting notably with Margaret Thatcher, were prepared and able to employ biblical texts to support their political projects. Tony Blair followed suit and in different ways so have David Cameron and Jeremy Corbyn. Corbyn follows his mentor Teny Benn in delving into the Bible to enhance his rhetorical deployment of ideas from the British radical socialist tradition. In a series of case studies Crossley contrasts Corbyn’s use of the Bible with that of the nationalist Right-wing who advocated Brexit and then in a very different way with the problems encountered by Tim Fallon, as leader of the Liberal Democrats, when he was challenged on his views on same sex relationships. Fallon was presented with biblical texts and asked for his interpretation. What Crossley so convincingly demonstrates is that public theologians are not only found in the churches and the academy; they are also in public life, albeit we may not agree with all they say or think it as nuanced or as detailed as the trained theologian. The final article in the collection brings together many of the issues and points that have been made in the previous four contributions. Martyn Percy provides a fascinating and challenging overview of the problems confronting the churches when the prevailing norms are ‘post-society’, ‘post-truth’ and ‘post-religious’. Percy argues that the danger for the churches is that they are tempted to face inwards, perhaps not surprisingly given the nature and extent of the problems they face. Percy advocates a more proactive analysis and engagement with the strange world of the twenty-first century, a world of Trump and positive thinking, where saying something makes it real and true. This combined with the ambiguity of the ‘nones’ who clearly do not want to belong to institutions, tend not to think of themselves as religious, but are willing to pray, be spiritual, and sometimes even believe in a God, albeit an idiosyncratic god of their own making, makes for an overall confusing picture. The churches cannot straighten out this confusion, even if they wanted to, but, Percy suggests, in a manner similar to Graham, they can be a ‘proper form of social polity’.

I do not imagine every reader of these articles will experience a natural affinity with all of the points and analyses offered. As I said at the beginning what we can see is that the future of public theology is going to be diverse and complex, not least because our cultural, religious and social context is so diverse and complex. There are many different public theology pathways, of which a few are illustrated here, and many as yet undiscovered. What I hope has been achieved is that we have shown that public theology is alive and well, exploring with sophistication and insight the nature of our society and responding to its challenges with practical vigour and intellectual skill. The quality of these articles, as much as their range and distinctiveness, shows that public theology is an exciting discourse with much to offer both the churches and public life. Those who study its ways benefit enormously from its insights, just as I hope you will benefit from, and enjoy, the insights offered in what follows.

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