No Longer ‘Speaking Truth to Power’.

It has been a common assumption, at least since the time of William Temple and middle axioms, that the main purpose of public theology is to be prophetic, by which is meant some sort of ‘speaking truth to power’. This is the case despite the fact that for a number of years now we have been aware that we do not agree on what is ‘true’ and we cannot simply locate ‘power’ in some central and authoritative person, group or institution. As a result of these postmodern problems public theologians have constructed ever more complex methodological means of continuing to attempt ‘to speak truth to power’ when in fact the truth looks like no more than ‘my truth’ and the ‘power’ spoken to tends to be anyone who will listen. If you like the fruits of our work, the methodological branches, are getting ever more tangled. In this article I want to present an alternative agenda for public theology inspired by the pragmatist American philosopher Richard Rorty. I shall argue that public theologians should view their task as what Rorty calls ‘edification’ and that this should entail primarily engaging in the process of redescription. What public theologians need is an alternative way forward, and by defining ‘edification’ and then by relating this to Rorty’s idea of ethics I believe we have a good possibility. In the first part of the article I will seek to examine what two important public theologians have meant by ‘speaking truth to power’; an examination of public theology’s roots. Then I shall explain what Rorty means by edification, before briefly outlining how this relates to Rorty’s ideas about the nature of truth, about how political change occurs, how criticisms are made, and finally, in this alternate methodology, discuss what is the theological identity of the newly proposed public theology. My aim is to list the areas, all too briefly, which are important if we no longer think the main task of public theology is some form of ‘speaking truth to power’. In terms of the conference metaphor it is a survey of the delicate buds which may bloom should the old growth be cleared away. The central idea is to think of the public theologians as cultural, social or political commentators who generate empathy for those who suffer injustice and inequality in society.

Public Theologians ‘Speaking Truth to Power’

One of the unquestioned assumptions of public theology is that it should be prophetic and that this means some sort of ‘speaking truth to power’. The nature of the critique might differ in tone, sometimes being very radical, sometimes more reformist, but the principle remains; that in some way the public theologian will speak to important people about the exercise of their power so that they remember the needs of the poor and oppressed. There are numerous examples of public theologians adopting this approach, too many to consider in detail in this paper, and so I intend to focus on two especially important illustrations. The first is William Temple. His book, *Christianity and Social Order*, has become paradigmatic for how the churches address political questions in the twentieth century. Temple straddles the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century it was assumed that the public statesman was Christian and speaking and acting from Christian motives. By the early twentieth century Temple is having to deal with the realities of secularism, recognizing that he needs to make the case for Christian involvement in politics. Temple was, in part, responding to the quip from Stanley Baldwin that the participation of the Bishops in the coal miners strike was no more appropriate than him referring the revision of the Athanasian Creed to the Iron and Steel Federation. Temple also had to deal with the question of how public theologians might make contributions to a public sphere in which it could not be presumed that a commitment to the Christian faith would be universally accepted. It was his description of the solution to this dilemma, commonly known as middle axioms, which came to dominate church and academic theological thinking about social and political issues, up until the emergence of theologies of liberation.

The second major public theologian I shall consider is Elaine Graham. Graham is the most important British public theologian writing today. She combines being an author of key texts, in particular *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* and *Apologetics without Apology*, with being a popular and influential teacher, a regular speaker at Church events, a consultant for the churches, as well as serving as a leading light nationally and internationally in practical theology academic communities. Graham has been influenced by both theologies of liberation and by the post-liberal turn in philosophy and theology. She illustrates how public theologians seek to speak prophetically in a post middle axioms world. My intention in what follows is to describe their respective positions before offering a critique which suggests they suffer from a similar dilemma. This is that the content of what is ‘truthful’ in their ‘speaking truth to power’ is particular; it is a political perspective as opposed to a universally accepted ‘Truth’. Further neither of them, for different reasons, address the question of how the powerful are to be addressed. What this means is that it is time to think again about public theology methodology and my argument is then that Richard Rorty is a valuable tool for this new thinking.

Temple and Middle Axioms

William Temple’s approach to public theology depended upon a sharp distinction between general principles, and specific policy advice and practice. Temple recognized that the most important public theologians were lay people who served as theological agents in their employment and in their exercise of democratic political choices. As such Temple side-stepped the question of how the powerful were addressed; his words were aimed at people with some power, as befits citizens in a democracy, but not the power associated with political or economic leadership. At best it might be said that he had a conception of power as diffuse within democratic society however this is not stated anywhere by Temple and is perhaps a generous assessment. The role of the Church was to guide lay members of the churches so that they knew how to act. So, in answer to the question “‘How should the Church interfere?’” Temple’s answer was threefold.

(1) its members must fulfill their moral responsibilities and functions in a Christian spirit; (2) its members must exercise their purely civil rights in a Christian spirit; (3) it must itself supply them with a systematic statement to aid them in doing these two things, and this must carry with it a denunciation of customs or institutions in contemporary life and practice which offend against those principles.

But the statement of principles must not stray into the field of policy advice. Temple states that in ‘this enterprise we shall be censured for departure from our own contention that the Church is concerned with principles and not with policy’. This is not because policy advice is unimportant, but because it belongs to the realm of specialists, and so beyond the remit of theologians *qua* theologians. He writes that for ‘the framing of policy, knowledge of contemporary facts, and that power to estimate tendencies which comes only from specialist study, are indispensable’. Temple then goes on to demark three types of Christian political comment. The first are ‘primary’ Christian principles and concern the nature of God and creation, and then theological anthropology. The second are ‘derivative’ Christian principles and include freedom, social fellowship and service. The third type is the one that interests us. It is contained in the appendix under the title of ‘A Suggested Programme’ and Temple’s recommendations here are often cited as his list of middle axioms. Temple is clear that although his first two sets of recommendations are incumbent on all Christians, he believes that what he is suggesting in this third section, relegated to the appendix, is more controversial and may not gain the assent of all good Christians. This is remarkable given what he then goes on to suggest.

His first, supposedly controversial, proposal is that ‘Every child should find itself a member of a family housed with decency and dignity so that it may grow up as a member of that basic community in a happy fellowship unspoilt by underfeeding or overcrowding, by dirty and drab surroundings, or by mechanical monotony of environment.’ What is difficult to imagine is who might disagree with this sentiment, except perhaps to argue that it does not go far enough. The urban conditions of the 1930s were such that it is virtually impossible to believe that anyone would say, at least seriously in public, that poor people, let alone poor children, should be housed in slums. This is not academic naivety; the suggestion that some right-wing people do want poor people in slums is a caricature for which there is little actual evidence. Temple’s other suggestions include a five day working week, education until the ‘age of maturity’, and freedoms of worship, speech, assembly and association. They all seem equally uncontroversial. Worker representation in the conduct of business, proposal 4, might struggle to achieve uniform assent, although the right of trade unions to exist is not that controversial, albeit some would fear they could become too powerful. In hindsight Temple’s other proposal on income is the most controversial, although this was not the case when he made the suggestion in 1942. He states that, ‘Every citizen should be secure in possession of such income as will enable him to maintain a home and bring up children in such conditions as are described in paragraph 1 above.’ Paragraph 1 refers to the point cited above about decent housing. Temple then proposes that politicians should seek an economy which has as a norm full employment; he states in his first explanatory sentence that the ‘present threat of unemployment to the maintenance of home and family must be ended’; although the axiom could be read as an argument in favour of state welfare payments the tone is one which is proposing full employment. The point is that it would be difficult to find a politician in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century who would disagree with these political aspirations. As such what Temple was proposing, even in his supposedly controversial appendix, was something so generally agreed with, and approved of, as to be essentially indisputable. The political dilemma was not the aims, but the means to achieve those ends. The problem was not that some politicians were suggesting people should be poor, uneducated and live in slums; even those who might suggest that poor people deserved to live in slums, or the alternate, that rich people deserved better housing, are not arguing that it is good that there are poor people in slums and this should be encouraged. Rather they say people who do not work hard enough deserve such poverty, but it is preferable that they worked harder. In other words, the political dilemma was how might these generally accepted desirable ends be achieved. When the post-war welfare consensus, which Temple’s ideas captured so well, was eventually challenged then what was disputed was again not the ends, but the ways to achieve those ends. Thatcher’s argument was that unemployment was a necessary, if unfortunate, consequence of the monetarist policies needed to recover the economy so that full employment might return on more stable foundations, by which she meant permanent low inflation. The churches, and famously the Church of England in the *Faith in the City* report, wanted to oppose Thatcher’s politics. They did this, in part, by describing the social effects on poor communities of monetarist polices. They also proposed a return to a form of Keynesian economics, as a more just alternative to monetarism. The problem the churches had was that Thatcher, her supporters, and a large section of the electorate, disagreed with them. In effect there were at least two economic truths in circulation, each with advocates, and neither with an ability to appeal to neutral criteria to demonstrate convincingly their rational ‘Truth’ status. In other words Temple’s axioms were too general at the time he proposed them to have any impact on political debates; then, at the point at which one of them became controversial, there was no means of deciding whether it was in fact true or not; that is, no shared criteria existed by which to decide between it and the alternate being proposed to achieve similar ends. In terms of ‘speaking truth to power’ the ‘truth’ was either so general as to be politically unimportant or, at the point of political relevance, no longer able to be described as truthful. It might be argued that Temple recognized this possibility and that is why he included the proposal in his appendix; but if this was the case, and its seems unlikely, then it merely reinforces the notion that there is no political truth recognized by all. Speaking truth to power can mean no more than speaking my truth, in opposition to your truth.

Elaine Graham and Public Theology as Christian Apologetics

Elaine Graham writes almost a century after William Temple and belongs to a very different social, political and philosophical context. Graham describes this different context superbly in the main parts of her book, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*. In the final chapter she begins to explore what a public theology for this post-secular and postmodern context might look like, drawing on the work of Max Stackhouse and developing the idea of public theology as Christian Apologetics. The chapter has two sections which are relevant to our discussion about public theology as ‘speaking truth to power’. The first is less important but seems more relevant because the section is entitled ‘“Truth to Power”: Public Theology as Prophetic Advocacy’. In the section Graham argues that public theology has a role proclaiming ‘Christ’s Lordship’ and that this can find expression ‘in prophetic witness against injustice or constructive guidance to policy makers’. The example Graham then gives is of the role Bishop James Jones played in achieving justice for the 96 victims of the Hillsborough stadium disaster and their families. Jones chaired the Hillsborough Independent Panel which found that ‘South Yorkshire Police had conspired with other public officials and sections of the media to distort the official account of what had happened.’ Graham presents this as an illustration of what ‘speaking truth to power’ might look like, with the Church, in the form of Bishop Jones, playing a key role in both exposing the corruption in public officials and caring pastorally for the families of the victims. In this instance the truth is that the 96 victims of the disaster were wrongly and unfairly accused of contributing to their own deaths. The powerful, who were challenged, were the police officers and public officials who sought, falsely, to blame the Liverpool supporters. It cannot be doubted that both the inquiry represented an important overturning of a major injustice and that Jones played an important pastoral role supporting the families. The difficult question is in what sense is this theological, or public theology. What was exposed was corruption amongst the police and officials, however this is essentially a legal matter, as the subsequent court cases demonstrate. Theological thinking played no part in revealing the injustice and, beyond Jones’ personal involvement, there seems little that is theological about the righting of the wrongs except the, albeit fundamental, fact that an injustice has been overturned. But theologians as theologians contributed little if anything to the reversal of the injustice or the exposure of corruption; this was the work of the families and their supporters. The theology in the example seems to be the standing alongside those who have suffered a major injustice, the victims and their families. But one doesn’t need to be a theologian or a Christian to do that, rather merely a decent human being.

To understand how Graham sees this ‘standing alongside’ as theological it is necessary to examine the second section, which precedes the discussion of Hillsborough. Prior to Graham’s presentation of the Hillsborough Inquiry as an illustration of ‘speaking truth to power’ she offers a preamble which explains the relevance of the Inquiry. In these sections she makes a number of important points. First, she is clear that Christian faith is not about propositional truth, stating that, with reference to George Lindbeck, the ‘test of faith is not its correspondence with propositional truth (or, indeed, with putatively universal, religious experience), but its facilitation of the practices of discipleship’. So in this sense Graham agrees that ‘speaking truth’ is no longer an essential, or only, aspect of public theology. This means that the ‘primary expression of public theology, then, will be in practical demonstrations that authentic faith leads to transformation, as a matter not just of interpreting the world but changing it’. She then argues that such a perspective leads to liberation theology, with its emphasis on orthopraxy over orthodoxy. In the next section Graham commits herself to a liberation theology approach as core to her understanding of public theology as Christian Apologetics. She argues that, ‘The Church is called to be in solidarity with the poor in that search for God’s justice. The measure of its theology rests in the facilitation of transformative praxis.’ What this means is that an ‘apologetics of liberation involves enacting the Good News to the poor in a praxis of solidarity, and in speaking truth to power – a public theology validated through the exercise of solidarity, advocacy and prophecy.’ This perspective explains how Graham understands Bishop Jones standing alongside the victims of legal injustice as theological, it is a praxis of solidarity with those who are oppressed. And it includes a ‘speaking truth’ albeit this is part of a more complex methodology. But it is not without problems.

First, Graham is far less specific than Temple about who constitutes the audience for her theology. In one sense it is a theology and so it is directed at church members, arguing, like Temple, that they have a political duty, which Graham believes should be informed by a strong bias to the poor. But then, if the Church, including Graham, are speaking truth to power and this truth is a form of a ‘bias to the poor’, who are the people who are the custodians of ‘power’, and so to be spoken to? It could be said they are political leaders. If they are then their response may well be that they, on their own, lack the power, to make the fundamental changes to society that would ultimately benefit the poorest. A brief survey of Prime Ministerial memoirs reveals that political leaders frequently argue that they lack the power to enact the change they would like to see because they need either parliamentary or electoral support. The problems endured by Theresa May during the Brexit debates illustrate the limited nature of the power of a Prime Minister. This leads to a bigger question about the relationship between political leaders and electorates, and whether those with the necessary power are the voters – a question which is too big to explore here and which Graham does not discuss. But the problem of identifying those who are the ‘power’ is clear. If the answer is that, as in the Hillsborough example, the specific abusers of power can be identified then this seems to be an investigative matter, potentially legal, and not obviously something theologians as theologians would do. In the chapter Graham goes on to discuss the contrast between her understanding of public theology and that offered by others, such as Sam Wells, which reinforces the idea that she is thinking of church members as her primary audience. In this sense those with power are the electorate, who if convinced, would elect politicians who would enact the political changes needed to bring about greater economic justice. But it is difficult to conceive of the electorate as the power to be addressed.

The second problem concerns the question of truth. Graham states that she is not concerned with propositional truth but rather a performative orthopaxis. But orthopraxis has a truthful quality; it is ‘ortho’. Graham recognizes this point, namely, that there are plurality of theological and political perspectives of which hers is but one. But she does not present transformative action on behalf of the poorest as one theological option amongst many, but, in fact, the programme that she believes should be adopted by the churches. And as her discussion of alternate public theologies illustrates, this view is contested in the churches, and, because otherwise it would not be necessary to argue the point, contested politically. In other words it is Graham’s (and others) view as opposed to anything universally regarded as the truth. There are those who believe Graham is mistaken theologically and politically. And so more accurately what is going on is a speaking of ‘my truth’, rather than ‘the truth’, to either a power that does not think it is powerful or an electorate that is plural and diffuse. It is perhaps worth stating here that on the whole I agree with Graham. She captures superbly the dilemmas faced by public theologians in a post-secular, post-foundational, pluralist society. But, as the above has illustrated, to couch the response within the notion of ‘speaking truth to power’ acts to confuse the situation. Truthfulness (in the form of orthopraxis) and powerfulness no longer function as useful theological categories for seeking to discern how political change might be effected. Instead we would be better off no longer thinking about truth at all. And power should be thought of, as Foucualt argued, as something that is diffuse and which interacts in complex manners with institutions, social and cultural norms, as well as political commitments; in other words it cannot be simply spoken at. The question is then, if this is correct and we should try to think of public theology as no longer ‘speaking truth to power’, what might an alternate public theology look like. For this we turn to Richard Rorty.

Richard Rorty and Public Theology

In the second part of this article I want to explore how Richard Rorty is a useful dialogue partner for public theologians. Rorty is perhaps an unusual choice as he is most famous for saying that he believed religion was a ‘conversation stopper’. He is also frequently portrayed as the embodiment of elitist, postmodern relativism which has politically sold out to a failed liberal capitalist project. However such caricatures are unfair and in what follows I hope to show that there is much public theologians can take from Rorty to help construct a public theology that no longer relies on the messy notions of truth and power. The overview is brief because of pressures of space but will, I hope, provide a flavour of what Rorty can offer and encourage the reader to explore more. The first, and most important, of Rorty’s ideas is his notion of ‘edification’.

Rorty explains what he means by ‘edification’ in the final chapter of his first major book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. He says,

Since “education” sounds a bit too flat, and *Bildung* a bit too foreign, I shall use “edification’ to stand for this project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking.

The attempt to edify (ourselves or others) may consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary. But it may instead consist in the “poetic” activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by, so to speak, the inverse of hermeneutics: the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions. In either case, the activity is (despite the etymological relation between the two words) edifying without being constructive – at least if “constructive” means the sort of cooperation in the accomplishment of research programs which take place in normal discourse. For edifying discourse is *supposed* to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings.

There are a number of important points to note from this quotation. First, to understand the radical nature of Rorty’s proposal you can think that he has substituted the idea of something ‘new’ or ‘novel’ in the place previously occupied by the idea of something true. In other words the philosopher’s purpose is to be original, not to be truthful. You might ask, can’t philosophers be both truthful and original; and Rorty would say ‘no’. This is because he wants us to stop talking about ‘truth’; he wants us to cease using it as a category of anything. Talk of things being true belongs to an historical period whose time has passed. There is precedent for this strategy of no longer talking about things that once seemed vitally important. For example we don’t talk about alchemy anymore, not seriously at least, and it is seen as something of an anomaly that someone as scientifically important as Sir Isaac Newton devoted so much time to its study. We don’t talk about the ‘soul’ in the way our medieval ancestors once did; and if people do speak about the plight of the soul after death then they know they are being controversially counter-cultural. Likewise Rorty argues that the time for talking about truth is over – we can move on. Of course the implications of this for public theology are immense: we don’t need to worry so much about the science bit of social sciences anymore, we don’t need to worry so much about methodological integrity or accuracy; we don’t need to worry about reflexivity; these are all truth producing mechanisms whose time has passed. What we need now is to learn how to be imaginative, creative, novel, original. Public theologians face a different methodological challenge, namely how to cultivate novelty rather than undisputed accuracy.

One question that emerges here is what to do about the idea of being critical. Anthony Thiselton argues that Rorty’s philosophy tends to ‘privilege its own liberal cultural values’. This means, ‘Its status quo philosophy of the present moment can only allow the oppressed to remain oppressed, for it offers no basis on which to challenge the status quo’. Thiselton describes Rorty as a sceptic whose position, whilst it might seem generously open, especially to ‘minorities and the weak’, in fact ‘can offer argument for constraints upon those who oppress them’. Thisleton’s presumption is that criticism can only occur if there is some form of truthfulness. For Rorty however critical comment does not require truthfulness. Rorty would like to see political change, probably in much the same direction as Thiselton. But Rorty believes that the more valuable tool for achieving political change, and the key element of edification, is what he calls ‘redescription’. Redescription is what we do when we speak or write about the familiar in ways that are new or original. The value of a piece of redescription is judged by whether it then turns out to be ‘useful’ for other people, and the more people it is useful for then the better it will be regarded. If we go back to Newton, lots of people found his redescription of moving objects using his notion of laws of gravity very useful and so the laws have a valuable and important place in science. But for Rorty they are not true, they are useful; and obviously Newton did not invent gravity, he described motion in a new manner. To develop this understanding of what Rorty means we can ask, ‘What does redescription look like in practice?’

Redescription takes the form of analysis of, or, more likely, comment upon analysis of, new and important social, political or cultural phenomenon. In the former case, the redescribing philosopher, better described now as a commentator, says here is a social, political or cultural phenomenon which I can now (re)describe in a way that previously has not been considered. Rorty does something like this in his book *Achieving our Country* when he (re)describes the political crisis in the USA as the separation of the working class and intellectual, university based, Left; the equivalent in the UK of the separation of the trade unions and the Fabians. Rorty argued, long before Trump, that a potential consequence of the separation was the rise of a right-wing popular leader who would undermine the progress of minority rights.

In the latter sense redescription is, and this is its most common and significant academic form, the demonstration of how the work of others has discussed in novel, unique, and fruitful ways a cultural, political or social phenomenon. It is the philosopher, or theologian, as literary and cultural commentator, if we think of the texts they speak about in the very broadest sense. This type of redescription is Rorty’s favourite, and the one I am commending. Rorty creates the new by appreciating the original and redescriptive activities of his favourite authors, especially novelists. George Orwell stands out. Rorty discusses Orwell in his second book, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. In Rorty’s words Orwell’s achievement was to sensitize his readers ‘to a set of excuses for cruelty which had been put into circulation by a particular group (intellectual communists and some socialists) – [that is] the use of the rhetoric of “human equality” by intellectuals who had allied themselves with a spectacularly successful criminal gang’ (Stalinism). It was *Animal Farm* and then *1984* which did the ‘job of sensitizing us to these excuses, of redescribing the post-World War II political situation by redescribing the Soviet Union’, thereby shocking intellectuals out of their self-made complexity, so that the totalitarian could be seen anew. Rorty wrote that, ‘Orwell’s tricky way, in *Animal Farm*, was to throw the incredibly complex and sophisticated character of leftist political discussion into high and absurd relief by retelling the political history of this century in terms suitable for children’. The power of Orwell’s work was its provision of an ‘alternative description’, earning from Rorty the highest praise, namely that it worked; it changed Western liberal intellectual opinion about Stalinist Russia.

The notion of redescription leads to a point about the place and operations of ‘power’. Orwell was valuable because he changed political thinking on the British Left. Isaac Newton was useful because he changed scientific thinking; both produced what Thomas Kuhn has called a paradigm shift in scientific thinking. This shift did not occur because Newton went to the King of science, presented his arguments, was convincing, and so it was decreed throughout the land that science had now changed; in other words there as no speaking truth to power. Nor in fact did Newton write a book which all good scientists read and thought, ‘ah right’, that’s how it works, time to stop doing what I was doing and change my ideas. Instead Newton did write a book, he had his supporters and detractors, those who adopted his ideas, those who rejected them, those who adopted them eventually, and presumably those who just did not understand them or who didn’t think they were especially relevant to their work. There were those who had thought along similar lines to Newton, and might have been ‘Newton’ but for their capacity to write quickly or get published. Most of Newton’s ideas were applied and worked well but there were some fields of study where they weren’t really applicable, and there would have been some scientists who for a long time wanted to prove Newton wrong. Rorty’s point is that it is in this sort of haphazard way that ideas and norms change, not only in science but also, and perhaps even more so, in culture, society and politics. No one person can decree that a new orthodoxy is in place, no one book change ideas quickly and conclusively, but intellectuals and books are important as part of wider social and cultural forces, in response to events and as shapers of movements; as are also journalists, film makers, TV producers and poets. Scholars, artists, politicians, can ride popular movements, they can benefit from and provoke shifts in thinking, manipulate and be manipulated by social, cultural and political norms. Power is diffuse, fluid, and, like ignorance, easier to identify in others than in oneself. The attempt to redescribe recognizes that events are important, culture and society has its own agendas, and that audiences are varied, multi-dimensional, and riddled with fragments of powerfulness. In this context being original, in a useful manner, is more effective than claiming any sort of truthfulness.

So the most likely form of the edifying public theologian is the theologian as commentator, identifying redescribing texts, understood in the broadest sense, for discussion. The question then arises, and it is a repetitive methodological question asked by public theologians, namely, ‘how is this theological?’. I think the best answer to this is to say that we don’t need to worry too much about that in any sort of formal (and methodological) sense. Public theology is theological because it is written by someone who wants to call it public theology, and who then gives reasons for their description. The best reasons would be quotations, including insightful comments, from theologians. It should, ideally, lead others to think I would like to be like that person and, to achieve that end, I had better read some theology. So the place of theology should be made clear. But the theologian is a person, shaped in a community, speaking, acting, writing, primarily as themselves, who have read some theology and found it useful. The theology of such a public theologian is less science and more a poetic type activity and identity. What we should avoid is the temptation to think of the theology in public theology as something, even something a bit scientific, which in someway legitimizes the contribution. We should abandon some form of the notion that this is what all properly theological public theologians say about a matter because they take theology seriously. In other words there is no need for a methodology which somehow links theology to the findings of the social sciences. Rather an individual comments and their comments have worth, or not, because of what they say and whether others find them useful.

In this short article I have tried to give an overview of what it would be like if public theology no longer attempted to speak truth to power. I have employed Richard Rorty’s idea of edification as a model for public theology. This attempts to find new and original things to say about social, cultural and political phenomena and / or commentate on other attempts to do the same. It is not concerned with being true. It views political change as a complex, multi-dimensional phenomena. And it leaves behind the methodological dilemmas of seeking to be theological.