

Confessional Theology in Public Places

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Abstract

This article considers the nature of public theology by assessing essential features of western public space and precisely how Christian confession takes shape in those contexts. In doing so the article argues that instead of understanding theology as something done primarily from the church to the world, perhaps it is best acknowledged that theology is done within the setting of common societal structures, in particular locations and in situations where believers are enabled to confess the hope within them. An understanding of this dynamic nature of Christian confession and the variegated expositions of theological reflection corresponds to the dynamic expressions of faith, in word and deed, which correspond to the Christian missionary impulse.

Keywords

Confession – public theology – Christian witness

The presence of the ongoing and increasingly lively debate about the secularization of western society highlights both the fluidity and limitations of our present problematic context. Whatever consequences may be attributed to the Reformation, and whatever the American contribution to western culture,¹ it seems that the definitive statement is yet to be made about whether the West

1 Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Christian Smith, *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and see the agenda-setting essay for an American public theology: Linell E. Cady, 'Public Theology and the Postsecular Turn,' *International Journal of Public Theology*, 8:3 (2014), 292–312.

is largely secular or religious, and also, regardless of what situation we find ourselves in, what might be decisively said about the relative goodness of either structure and situation.²

The West, of course, especially from the twentieth century, has boasted little significance apart from its many forms of capital (esp. financial), which have been increasingly reduced to supposed scientifically-derived equations crunched by mathematically-savvy economists found throughout the wider globalized society. The problem with this, as Thomas Piketty notes, is that ‘there is often very little analysis of the relation between observed economic changes and the political and social history of the period under study. Instead one gets a meticulous description of the sources and raw data, information that is more naturally presented nowadays in spreadsheets and online databases.’³ A further question might be raised about whether or not this dominant form of economic governance—capitalism—is best for sustainability and flourishing, or even (and especially!) whether it is compatible with Christianity, the latter question being raised in a recent *New York Times* debate column.⁴

Most of the globalized world, not just the West, is run by capital, which both intimidates and distances the wider public from commencing any genuine public debate and thus abandons the interpretive discourse to the ‘experts.’ But regardless of who’s counting and interpreting the data, the identity of people is impacted by such configurations, whether they possess significant capital or not, is *both* secular and religious, with the latter boasting significantly higher numbers.⁵

2 Cf. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), and then on the other hand, most recently Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); see also Jonathan Rauch, ‘The Great Secession,’ *The Atlantic*, 25 June 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/07/the-great-secession/372288/> [accessed 1 January 2015].

3 Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 576–77.

4 ‘Has Capitalism Become Incompatible with Christianity?’ *New York Times*, 25 June 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/06/25/has-capitalism-become-incompatible-with-christianity> [accessed 1 January, 2015].

5 ‘Worldwide, more than eight-in-ten people identify with a religious group. A comprehensive demographic study of more than 230 countries and territories conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life estimates that there are 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe, representing 84% of the 2010 world population of 6.9 billion,’ <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>, 8 December 2012 [accessed 1 January 2015].

From a Christian perspective, these numbers are seen in religious mega-church attendance, even as the smaller churches (which make up the majority) ebb and flow in both size and existence. But the religious adherents are comprised of a large number of the non-affluent '99%,⁶ whose existence as such we saw with the occupy movement. And yet, these also consist of the majority of the largely impoverished but savvy and well-networked first and second generation immigrant communities. It seems like the variegated dynamic culture that we are in—or better, constantly entering into—looks less like any monolithic notion of Christendom, and much more like the pluralistic melting pot of, say, California, with its radically contradictory forms of hospitality and ostracism, or world-changing innovation and potential for unprecedented forms of irresponsibility, abuse, exploitation, and failure. Indeed, perhaps it will be more like the global city of Los Angeles, which searches in vain for a center which can never be found. It is the quintessential city without a center. In similar fashion the future of Christianity will also have no center other than the sprawled communities of the faithful following Jesus in their dynamic particularities. This does not require an utterly displaced church, such as that advocated with various expressions of apocalyptic theology,⁶ finding no embedded expression in the culture. And thus any pursuit of common ground is difficult; although some is found in untimely deaths, exuberant successes and both ordinary and extraordinary acts of kindness. Since culture is constantly flowing both outward and inward and the only thing sure is the fixed beauty instilled by the Creator's design in the peoples (*ta ethnē*).

Locating a helpful public theology then needs to acknowledge less than fruitful conversations whilst grappling with the driving features of entire Western and indeed globalized civilization—capital and how it works, along with the social histories of the particular cultures we find ourselves in. Piketty invites participants with their own cultural histories to contribute to the discourse of the development and usage of capital and as such invites citizens of various kinds to not merely become passive recipients of their own markets but to actively interpret data and its implications, which in significant ways the communitarian Christian vision of the kingdom and of the reality of our common life together in the present situation offers much for the wider societal

6 See Jonathan R. Wilson, 'Aesthetics of the Kingdom: Apocalypsis, Eschatos, and Vision for Christian Mission,' in Derek J. Tidball, Brian S. Harris, and Jason S. Sexton, eds, *Revisioning, Renewing, and Rediscovering the Triune Center: Essays in Honor of Stanley J. Grenz* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), pp. 157–74.

common good—for the poor, for workers, and for shareholders.⁷ Which leads to the need for investigating the very nature of how Christians confess their hope in an ever-changing world. And thus instead of saying that theology is done from the church to the world, perhaps it is best acknowledged that theology is done within the setting of common societal structures, in particular locations and situations where believers confess the hope within them.

The Nature of Confession

With the correlationist methodologies of leading twentieth century theologians like Gordon Kaufman, Paul Tillich, and David Tracy, theology was understood as operating in such a way that cultural questions are given equal weight to biblical theological descriptions.⁸ A similar approach, under different rationale, was advocated by Pannenberg who viewed theological claims as contestable on the same grounds as all other claims may be made, on the grounds of history, and thereby subjecting the claims of theology to other scientific disciplines.⁹ While seeming to provide an easily-displayed commitment to a correspondence theory of truth, such an approach proceeds as the church's fundamental message maintains an internal (and external) coherence that stands in conflict with the present world order and gives way to proclamation power in any context, highlighting its external coherence with the real world.

As such, the only way that Christian theology may be properly *confessed* is in light of missionary activity—primarily of the triune God, and instrumentally through the missionary activity of the regenerated and redeemed community having been called, gathered, and sent as the new humanity. On an Augustinian account, this testifies of both the reality of the present situation as one where sin and evil exist and where conflict, cruelty, and suffering abound. And yet, all is not lost on such problems. As Richard Mouw has tersely

7 See James K. A. Smith, 'Steadfast Principles in a Changing World,' *New York Times*, 25 June 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/06/25/has-capitalism-become-incompatible-with-christianity/christian-principles-hold-steady-as-the-system-worsens> [accessed 1 January 2015].

8 For a critique of the methodology see Fred Sanders, 'California, Localized Theology, and Theological Localism,' in Fred Sanders and Jason S. Sexton, eds, *Theology and California: Theological Refractions on California's Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 20–22; and also Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), pp. 65–69.

9 See the massive effort of Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–1998).

reckoned, against Yoder: while culture is indeed fallen, it is still *created*.¹⁰ This point highlights that the present human history is really part of a much bigger story—God’s—which highlights that God encompasses all. Avoiding then any notion of what Civil Rights leader John Perkins calls cheap evangelism and cheap social action, the Christian confession displays an ongoing commitment to problems that are in between,¹¹ which find their healing through the cross and resurrection.

Initiating Confession: Conversion

It is here where confession begins, as a matter of public conversion, which is the shape Christianity has always taken, contra the early Graeco-Roman duality where religious devotion was a voluntary, personal matter that affected the individual, the family, and small units but with no attempts to address society and its broader concerns. On the contrary, however, Christianity’s emergence ‘spurned this dualism by laying claim to the heart without abandoning the public realm.’¹²

Throughout scripture we see this public nature of conversion on display, for none of these conversions are ever private. Reflecting on the wounds Jesus showed his disciples after the resurrection, Jean Vanier observes that these wounds speak about Jesus’ love for his followers; but they also tell that through the wounds of Jesus’ followers God will give his strength, calling his followers not to live in a cocoon but to live forward as instruments of peace in a world of war, being instruments of love amidst hate and indifference.¹³ Vanier goes on to describe the resultant holiness as ‘not hiding ourself and saying prayers. Holiness is becoming like Jesus and taking our place in the world to reveal that God is mercy; God is love, God has come to bring us together and wants us to be a people filled with hope, and also with joy.’¹⁴ This is where Christianity shows itself as distinct, in friendship with others and even with other religions and cultures, showing it for what it truly is and does. Indeed, the leper and another who couldn’t speak or hear, who Jesus healed and then commanded *not* to tell anyone about his miracles were those who simply could not remain

10 Richard J. Mouw, ‘The Enigma of California: Reflections on a Theological Subject,’ in Fred Sanders and Jason S. Sexton, eds, *Theology and California: Theological Refractions on California’s Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 12.

11 John Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution: The Christian Response to Human Need... A Strategy for Today* (Waco, TX: Word, 1976), pp. 99–102.

12 Duncan B. Forrester, *Theology and Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 27–29.

13 Jean Vanier, *Encountering ‘the Other’* (New York, Paulist Press, 2005), p. 45.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

in a sort of repressed isolation, in spite of Jesus' humble posture and desire for self-effacement, or for whatever other grounds he forbade them to speak (Mk 7:36–7; Lk. 5:14–15). Converted followers of Christ possessed a kind of power that was individual and corporate (Acts 1:8), and public (Rom. 8:9).

Lesslie Newbigin observed that the earliest form of the trinitarian confession developed *in the midst of* missionary activity. It was 'right in the midst of the struggle between the Church and the pagan world' that the great ecumenical doctrines were articulated, esp. the relations between the Father and the Son as the church was sent out and engaged the intellectual struggle 'to state the Gospel in terms of Graeco-Roman culture without thereby compromising its central affirmation.'¹⁵ Still functioning in this way, the gospel continually subverts what Oliver O'Donovan calls 'Western place-denial,'¹⁶ with its various cultural concepts at play that Christianity still makes use of in its task of actively confessing the trinitarian hope in our present world, offering particular forms of salvific and sustaining grace for the life of the church, its members, and for the rest of the world.

As such the 'faithful presence' articulated by James Davison Hunter amidst his modest and anemic vision of what he calls his new city commons offers little more than the parasitic life it has found in contradistinction to the US religious right.¹⁷ Indeed, Hunter's thesis only works if such a thing as the religious right exists. Were he to define his proposal against advocates of the social gospel, his project doesn't possess the requisite ecclesiology needed to sustain itself, never mind its missing eschatological or Christological visions. This proposal of new city commons, or anonymous Christianity, knows little of the transformation narrative the gospel invokes nor the power it endues. Over and against the missionary enterprise, it forsakes the self-conscious explication of the gospel message in plain view, which witness remains true insofar as genuine transformation wrought by the divine saving action and the way this changes everything for the believer (2 Cor. 5:17) is a crucial part of the witness. And this transformation happens in public, yielding generosity, and the

15 Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), p. 34; first published as *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (London: Edinburgh House, 1963).

16 Oliver O'Donovan, 'The Loss of a Sense of Place,' in Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 296–320.

17 See Damon Linker, 'The Hobby Lobby decision is one more sign of the religious right's decline,' *The Week* 2 July 2014, http://theweek.com/article/index/264102/the-hobby-lobby-decision-is-one-more-sign-of-the-religious-right-sdecline?utm_source=links&utm_medium=website&utm_campaign=twitter [accessed 1 January 2015].

verbal acknowledgment that ‘we will have lost power,’¹⁸ or in the words of John the Baptist: he must increase, we must decrease. This new reality then sends believers into the world, ‘prepared to enter into places of conflict . . . aware that we are vulnerable and can be hurt.’¹⁹ Having been birthed as a form of healing, it then enters further into society’s problems helps others be truly and fully themselves, and appreciating the differences so that in particular ways Christians can enter into the long journey of a relationship, with forgiveness and growth in community, toward holiness and wholeness, by virtue of the *energeia* and *dunamis* resultant from faith in God.²⁰

In order to approach the reality of brokenness, points of pain and tension in the world (the situation of everything in this present reality), propositions of all kinds function as demonstrations that may be acknowledged by the widest group of people when all things have come to light as the ontological priority of the eschaton comes into view, yielding ultimate public acknowledgment.²¹ This confessed reality highlights something like what the microscope reveals, showing that the same world we interact with every day is of far greater significance—a far different world—than we had realized. And while oriented toward the future in every way, it is also oriented to revelation—a reality confessed amidst a world which it is variously at odds with.

The nature of particular culturally-embedded structures resistant to the Christian confession detail the difficulty of the conflict. Take public education, for example, which itself can hardly sustain any meaningful form of neutrality. Yet none of the situations there are ever static, since all cultures, especially those more significantly affected by globalization, are being negotiated so that the endless exploration of their features, moods, objects, and values remains a requirement, even as things (like languages) change over time. But while such study could be justified as time well-spent, especially for the missionary task, a commitment to genuine plurality is hard to come by.

The mission of the church in the present world embodied by its core confession of Jesus as ‘Lord’ often means coming against opposing forces, in the most unlikely forms, and yet bears the task of displaying not merely braced but open and vulnerable displays of charity throughout its own various forms of difficulty, being sent out into particular cultures by the very one who is, by nature, love.

18 Vanier, *Encountering ‘the Other,’* p. 13.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

20 E.g., see Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 12:11; 2 Cor. 4:12; Eph. 1:15–23; 3:6–7; 4:15–16; Phil. 2: 12–13; 3:21; Col. 1:29; 2:12–15; 1 Thess. 2:13.

21 See Wolfhart Pannenberg’s methodology in *Faith and Reality* (London: Search Press, 1977).

Cultural as Located and on the Move

Culture, of course, while located ‘in a specific time and place’ is also on the move. One may talk of ‘inter-cultural’ in order to preserve ‘the sense that cultures are integral wholes.’²² And yet analogous to genome, culture is transmissible from one generation to another yet subject to a selection process, which for culture is negotiated in intercultural dialogue with particular places. And as with genetic material, sometimes things go dreadfully wrong. To affirm these possibilities is to further assume that there is such a thing as ‘theology,’ and also that there are particular ways the exposition of the gospel will take shape in various cultural contexts, which lend and speak to the healing through Christ of all things broken.

It assumes that there is also such a thing as ‘public’ space; which is more than just where theology is done (although it is that), but it is also a place where theology [the true kind] may be found present and at work, shedding light on cultural realities in light of the personal action of the triune God. Here is where negotiability, durability, and contingency of culture is freely seen—there is no culture that has been ‘once and for all delivered to the saints.’ And yet cultures exude powerful forces inseparable from their particular moods and objects. Bearers of the transcendent gospel are susceptible to cultural wooings, especially when building institutions that mimic the structures of society (usually about ten years after society has done it).²³ And it seems that Jesus’ indictment, ‘Woah! when people speak well of you’ (Lk. 6:26–27), carries significant implications for institutions, especially religious and so-called ‘confessional’ ones.

Jesus, and the gospel message itself, is at times critical of established religion and confessional institutions which attempt to establish the kingdom city, even as his high priestly prayer finds him praying for the disciples who are in the world. Taken as a petition to keep them in the world (Jn 17:15), it seems that this is precisely the remedy to their proneness to want to leave the world which they’re drawn to for various reasons that are counterintuitive to

22 Kirsteen Kim, ‘Doing Theology for the Church’s Mission: The Appropriation of Culture,’ in Jason S. Sexton and Paul Weston, eds, *The End of Theology: Shaping Theology for the Sake of Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming).

23 One recent example, however, of a secular co-opting of so-called ‘Christian’ cultural creation is with Katy Perry’s alleged infringement of copyright law by taking Grammy-winner Lecrae’s beat for her popular song ‘Dark Horse.’ See Carey Lodge, “Katy Perry stole my song” say Christian rappers about Dark Horse, *Christian Today*, 3 July 2014, <<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/katy.perry.stole.my.song.say.christian.rappers.about.dark.horse/38593.htm>> [accessed 1 January 2015].

coherent gospel exposition, by which I mean the consistency of belief and living. And yet they must remain as those who are not of the world while being those who have the word (Jn 17:14).

Here is where vocation plays a part in public theology, which can never be inseparably linked to one's employment/occupation, but is inseparably tied to what one chooses to do with a particular occupation, tied to the manner in which believers confess the gospel. Such a confessional approach to vocation simultaneously embraces and throws off cultural structures, reading them for what they are in a similar way where the apostle Paul is provoked by idols one moment (Acts 17:16), and at another regards them as nothing (1 Cor. 8:4). He carried on with his public missionary work sometimes casting out demons and other times ignoring them (Acts 16:16–18). He participated in bringing healing through prayer (Acts 28:8); elsewhere he prescribed it through drinking wine (1 Tim. 5:23).

All of this moves in consistent flow with the indicative nature of Christian witness (cf. Acts 1.8), which takes worship and prayer as its form of politics, and the act of being the church as the way witness is lived out in the world, as the body of Christ broken for the sake of the world. Such an ecclesiology may provide a way forward for contemporary reformed evangelical disputes over the kingdom and church,²⁴ when the church as a whole and Christians in particular give themselves to the centrifugal witness the gospel propels them on, which must not—indeed cannot—be confined to the internal and bounded life of the ecclesial community, which in some cases, as James K. A. Smith has shown, blurs the distinction between Augustine's earthly city and the finite, temporal city, and risks replacing the eschatological-orientation of the present penultimate world with the eschaton itself, which God alone will bring about.

I find it quite unfortunate that particular ways of confessing the gospel in different contexts end up emerging as epistemologies of theology that do all the work that the Spirit is shown in scripture to do—illuminating realities, converting souls, structuring ecclesial and common life, etc. Most of these had at points been missional movements [of the Spirit] but evolved into self-governing systems that branded themselves as all-encompassing and became driving systems for complicated movements and institutions that themselves need more careful assessment of their confession and a bit more sober reflection and social-located acknowledgment of 'place acceptance,' to borrow O'Donovan's term. That is, it needs more localized self-awareness if the church is to confess

24 See the excellent essay responding to two-kingdoms advocates: James K. A. Smith, 'Reforming Public Theology: Two Kingdoms, or Two Cities?' *Calvin Theological Journal*, 47 (2012), 122–37.

a theology that is properly suited for the public sphere where it lives out its life, and where it may prayerfully and in faithfulness to Christ live a quiet and peaceable life (1 Tim. 2:2).

Public Theology

While California is often perceived as the land of the fruits, nuts and flakes—the US's left (or the party) coast—much of the history of the place has been the ordinary experience of the working class.²⁵ And yet, sought thrills not obtained and repressed are just as easily carried off (like California's convicts)²⁶ to the desert—Las Vegas to be precise, where what happens there, *stays there*, so it is sold. Yet, as the British tabloids and Prince Harry found out in August 2012, what happens in Vegas doesn't always stay there. It sometimes goes very public indeed.

The Nature of Public Space

What is 'public'? This is not the question of 'what *is* public?' or 'what exists in the public realm?' For Christian theology no doubt acknowledges that all things are public, insofar as action (with motive) is observed by non-corporeal beings; insofar as the consequences of every action are indeterminate and unknown but nonetheless sure, having been enacted in a process carrying sure consequences;²⁷ and insofar as all things now will one day be disclosed and are currently done before the eye of the Maker and Judge of all.

Is democracy the best 'public' or polis-state in the realm of possibility? Whatever answer we give to this question must not betray our own eschatological orientation and aim to live with integrity in whatever 'present age' and series of governance structures we find ourselves situated in, knowing that these too are being constantly negotiated and cannot remain fixed. And whatever the gospel might say about these structures, it cannot diverge from its

25 See Hector Tobar's comment in the panel, 'Exile and Place: Who Gets to Speak for L.A.?' Tales from Two Cities: Writing from California—LA, Los Angeles Public Library, 21 February 2014, http://library.fora.tv/2014/02/21/exile_and_place_who_gets_to_speak_for_la [accessed 1 January 2015].

26 In the case of criminal removal from society to no longer punishing the body but instead punishing the mind of carceral individuals, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. 101.

27 For this account of human action see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 230–47.

own eschatological orientation and hope for the reality of the coming kingdom of God.

Does this mean then that Christianity ought to pursue—or else provides the basis for—religious or cultural pluralism or multiculturalism?²⁸ The problem of a truly pluralist public education, again, is one issue that raises challenges for how best such structures may be engaged.²⁹ And yet here is where T. F. Torrance's notion of evangelizing the foundations of culture seems to show itself to be entirely wrongheaded. To link such a notion to the need of transformation of mind is one thing, but to assume this can be done for 'the mind of human society and culture in which human beings exist' is another thing altogether, which Torrance seems to think is necessary if the church is to put down roots in a particular society and remain genuinely Christian.³⁰ Much could be said here as the early church existing in the darkness as light and operating in a distressed situation (1 Cor. 7:26). And yet Torrance may simply be working with the notion of an established church over against a non-established setting, on my reading one being more realistic (Augustinian, and affirming the freedom of humans to choose their religion) whilst the other exudes an unfortunate triumphalism in which even the established church could hope that the Spirit would circumvent to work within. As such, it doesn't seem at all plausible to say there is, or ever has been, a Christian society; there are only Christians. And they belong to society, to one another, and to the Lord, insofar as they participate in the lives of each.

Accordingly, then, there are no foundations of culture per se. There are only *people* who make culture, who are shaped by the culture that others have made, and who either contribute to the advance and health of particular cultures, or else to their decay. Cultures are negotiable at every point, and all exist within a constant negotiability of epistemological structures that are present

28 Miroslav Volf argues for pluralism as a Christian political project in *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), pp. 126–27; for a critical theological approach to multiculturalism (in the UK), and a constructive proposal toward what he calls 'multicultural justice,' see Jonathan Chaplin, *Multiculturalism: A Christian Retrieval* (London: Theos, 2011).

29 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986), pp. 38–39.

30 Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, Robert T. Walker, ed (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 444. Although rejecting Federal theology, as Paul D. Molnar shows in *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 181–82, Torrance does not quite dislodge his own theology from what federal theology has bequeathed in the two-kingdoms understanding the nature of the kingdom today in the world and the role of the church in society. For a critique of this, especially in David M. VanDrunen, see Smith, 'Reforming Public Theology,' pp. 122–37.

in any given culture.³¹ What's not negotiable is ultimate reality and everything good, beautiful, and true, based on and blessed by this ultimate reality of the triune God whose 'kingdom' reality is found in the descriptions of the 'blessed': the poor in spirit; those who mourn; the meek; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; the merciful; the pure in heart; the peacemakers, those persecuted for righteousness; the insulted, persecuted, and those falsely accused of all kinds of evil for Jesus' sake; and yet who rejoice and are glad.

Torrance assumes a situation which Martyn Percy finds equally shared between Newbigin and Radical Orthodoxy—in proper nineteenth century colonialist style—each resembling a stance in Christian mission that insists on 'the reality and primacy of Christendom.'³² Torrance, Newbigin, John Milbank, and others may very well insist on this (whatever Christendom is...), but cannot assert such as having any privilege, much less than secularists or the religious can assume privilege.³³ Even with these acknowledgements, the clear demarcations enable various structures to exist in a multi- or inter-cultural setting. Such a setting, notwithstanding extreme polarizations, allows for the freedom of changing one's mind, as in the well-known case of Peter Berger, himself coming around to agree that the West, with its capitalism and consumerism, is indeed religious. But if it is religious, there is no religious adherence (i.e., theology) that is ever expressed in static adherence, even though some from various strands of the Christian tradition hold their confessions with nothing short of canonical status, as in the case with Reformed groups and the Westminster Confession of Faith, or the ways that Protestants hold a reformed Scripture principle at points, or the way Catholics hold to the authority of the magisterium. I reckon such a situation is both in keeping with a plausibility structure conducive to Christian conversion as well as reformed Christianity. Much of internal developmental doctrinal discourse takes place both in ongoing dialogue among believers and churches as well as while confessing theology in public as part of the church's missionary task.³⁴

31 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox), pp. 32–41.

32 See Martyn Percy, *Engaging with Contemporary Culture: Christianity, Theology, and the Concrete Church* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), p. 68.

33 In some cases, this is a recipe for anarchy which has riddled otherwise meaningful protests led by a number of Christian activists in the US in response to the 2014 killings and non-indictments of African-Americans Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, and Eric Garner in New York.

34 See Jason S. Sexton, 'A Confessing Trinitarian Theology for Today's Mission,' in Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders, eds *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Essays in Constructive Dogmatics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), pp. 171–89.

Theology in Public

Whatever public is, it is there that God has called his people to witness to the reality of the gospel. And it is in this space that a definition of theology and of the gospel's thick description might be given that others in the public might understand. Sebastian Kim notes that 'Public theology does not require the privileging of Christianity in public life and its theologians do not necessarily see their work as superseding the other two theologies [i.e., liberation and political]. Public theology takes its place in the different contexts of plural and secular societies as a complementary approach alongside many other theologies and philosophies.'³⁵ As such, it also moves in parallel motion with the other religions, and at critical points offers its own propositions which will give way to a genuine tension and to various forms of public conflict.

This conflict is not to be asserted or insisted upon by Christian theologians—rather, the conflict arises from the self-authentication of the biblical message. Contrary to the notion of Christendom, then, public theology is on the move, transiently existent in various places, existing in its followers who are carried along by the Spirit, offering healing, and themselves often at odds with impulses towards Christendom manifest in the lives of our institutions. They neither seek to avoid the world out of fear nor isolate in hopes of remaining pure. Indeed, as James 1:27 makes clear, Christian witness is to be present in the broken places. Conversely, those who by their own ingenuity try to be clean from the world end up stained.

Public Christianity is public then not as it propagates a better hegemony, but insofar as it 'touches' or carries potentiality to 'touch' others in every sphere of society and in any culture with the reality of its hope, shaped then by particular cultural expressions but also anchored in a revealed reality and translated by the Spirit. And here it makes way for being both a stumbling block and foolishness to others, and yet being the very power of God unto salvation for all who believe, entailing something that only the Holy Spirit truly enables.

Now if wanting to really understand the nature of what it means for Christian missionary theology to be done in public, a definition of 'public' is needed. While various models have been descriptive of the literature, it's clear that many of these are very particularist and therefore less descriptive for the wider practice of 'doing theology.' Eneida Jacobsen sketches a number of models for possible appropriation in her own Brazilian context and finds the kind of needful theology she seeks as being 'anchored in the lifeworld,' 'mobilized

35 Sebastian C. H. Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as Catalyst for Open Debate* (London: SCM, 2011), p. 21.

by the suffering of people,' and seeking 'to contribute to the expansion of the communicative efforts of a society.'³⁶ Yet if it is the language of the people, it includes media such as poetry, prose, letters, digital media, and other forms of regional expressions of life, which Fred Sanders has argued should be made use of for a doing of theology in the California context.³⁷ It is a language descript of reality known to the common person's experience of the world.

In similar ways, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'public' as 'Open to general observation, view, or knowledge; existing, performed, or carried out without concealment, so that all may see or hear.'³⁸ Applying this definition to the action of the church's theology highlights this as a Christianity that is universally verifiable, revealed and experienced. It's Yahweh's movement to create and work through Israel's story; it's the incarnation and Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection; it's the Spirit's public action in the life the church; it's conversion narratives of the apostle Paul and those living with burned-out post-colonial guilt, for immigrant communities, and children in hospital beds who know somehow that Jesus loves them even more than the nurses and doctors who keep them alive.

This argument is sympathetic with Pannenberg's disdain for the privatization of religion that emerged again in the post-reformation era.³⁹ Rejecting religion's totalizing impulse, religious expression became a matter of private practice, which has especially been amplified in the US at different points, and became cut off from other cultural issues affecting the church and society, only to roar back at different moments in the forms of different reactionary movements that often coopted faith for different ends. However, the truth at the heart of Christianity still holds power of transforming lives, of witnessing to the coming kingdom, of proclaiming judgment,⁴⁰ of laboring to love inexplicably.

36 Eneida Jacobsen, 'Models of Public Theology,' *International Journal of Public Theology* 6 (2012), p. 22.

37 Sanders, 'California, Localized Theology, and Theological Localism,' pp. 19–33.

38 'public, adj. and n.' *OED Online*. December 2014 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), [http://www.oed.com.libproxy.usc.edu/view/Entry/154052?result=1&rskey=VUMIOq&\[accessed 3 January 2015\]](http://www.oed.com.libproxy.usc.edu/view/Entry/154052?result=1&rskey=VUMIOq&[accessed 3 January 2015].).

39 Pannenberg, *Faith and Reality*, p. 137.

40 Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 148–49.

Conclusion: Doing Theology That Matters

To reiterate a statement earlier, there is no 'from the church to the world' but there is the church, and its members, functioning in the world as the body of Christ, broken for the world, both shattered and scattered throughout various soils. In the presence of the worshipping members of its community, the church in these particular soils 'celebrates the resurrection of Jesus as the ground of assurance that the present and the future are not under the control of blind forces but are open to unlimited possibilities of new life. This is because the living God who was present in the crucified Jesus is now and always the sovereign Lord of history and therefore makes possible a continuing struggle against all that ignores or negates his purpose.'⁴¹ This struggle denotes a privileged situation that believers participate in, with frail and fleeting lives as they hold out and hold open with their lives the confession they have been brought into, making manifest the hope of their confession that God will one day reconcile all broken things through Christ.

41 Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, p. 63.