

THEOLOGICAL ROUNDTABLE

Theology in the Public Sphere in the Twenty-First Century

Several decades ago David Tracy wrote that theologians speak to three publics: the academy, the church, and society. Since then many theologians have exhibited, in Tracy's words, "that drive to publicness which constitutes all good theological discourse[,] ... a drive from and to those three publics."¹ Our four roundtable authors discuss how and why theologians engage the public sphere in the twenty-first century. In arguing for the necessity of such engagement, they also draw attention to the promise and perils of doing public theology today.

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Doing Public Theology

In June 2006, then US Senator Barack Obama delivered a major address on the role of religion in our political life. He observed, "Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King—indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history—were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause."² This statement spurs my thinking about what "doing public theology" might mean, especially for Catholic theologians working in the context of US society.

I am not so much interested in defining "public theology" as a theological discipline or specialization. I am more concerned with how and why a

¹ David Tracy, "Defending the Public Character of Theology," *The Christian Century*, April 1, 1981.

² For the transcript of this speech, see "Obama's 2006 Speech on Faith and Politics," *New York Times*, June 21, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/28/us/politics/2006obamaspeech.html?_r=0.

Bryan Massingale, STD, is Professor of Ethics in the Theology Department of Fordham University. Previously, he was at Marquette University. He has served as president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and earned his doctorate from the Academia Alphonsum in Rome.

Catholic theologian might conduct him/herself in addressing the audience that David Tracy called “the public.” That is, I am more interested in the “doing” of public theology than in delineating its conceptual contours or boundaries. I offer, then, an operational understanding distilled upon reflecting on my own experiences with engaging the public square. By “doing public theology,” I mean (1) addressing issues of public concern, urgency, and import (2) to a religiously pluralistic and diverse audience of fellow members of a civic community (3) in a way that is accessible to people of any or no faith tradition or commitment 4) while rooted in and inspired by one’s own faith perspective, commitments, and beliefs.

Addressing issues of public concern, urgency, and import. Here I specify the subject matter of “doing public theology.” It entails treating issues that pertain to what Catholic social teaching calls “the common good.” That is, when doing public theology, Catholic theologians are speaking to issues that affect our common life, as opposed to issues of confessional concern (e.g., the inclusion of women in ordained ministry or the sacramental recognition of same-sex civil marriages). To put this another way, the issues at stake in doing public theology are what *Gaudium et Spes* calls “the signs of the time,” that is, issues of such collective import that they demand a response or consideration in light of the gospel.

I realize that issues within Catholicism may be of public interest. The church’s merger of urban parishes, or practices concerning the sexual abuse of minors, would be examples of intrachurch matters that impact communal well-being. But a theologian’s dealing with such issues in more public fora, such as newspapers and/or blogs, would not be an exercise of public theology. Doing public theology is more than a more popularized presentation of intraecclesial debates or theological perspectives. Such activities are a valuable service; yet I do not believe that these do public theology—chiefly because of the remaining criteria.

To a religiously pluralistic and diverse audience of fellow members of a civic community. This specifies the audience that the theologian is addressing when doing public theology. The theologian is speaking as a member of the public arena to others who also occupy or reside within it. That is, the theologian is speaking not from a distant perch about matters of public moment or urgency, but as one who is also impacted by the issue at hand—someone who also has “skin in the game,” so to speak. For example, when doing public theology about immigration or climate change, the theologian speaks as one who has a stake in the public discussion or resolution of these realities. In short, the theologian is a member of the community being addressed. Moreover, when doing public theology, the theologian is very much aware that the audience includes those who do not share his or her faith commitments. This leads to the third consideration:

In a way that is accessible to people of any or no faith tradition or commitment. Here we encounter the “how” of doing public theology. I believe that this may be the constitutive mark of this theological endeavor. “Doing public theology” is not simply speaking or writing in a way that is accessible to those lacking theological expertise; it is not just a popularization of Catholic theological concepts or beliefs. Rather, what is at issue are the warrants, rationale, and argumentation offered for one’s appeal or perspective.

The religious diversity of the US population, and especially the growing number of those who are religiously unaffiliated (a.k.a., the “nones”), means that one cannot ground one’s position by appealing to truths that are self-evident within one’s religious tradition. Indeed, in the US context, doing public theology is a fraught enterprise in large measure because of the lack of credibility—if not hostility—that many have toward the institutional carriers of one’s faith tradition. To be specific, many Americans reject any appeal founded on Catholic faith tenets because of an erosion of its leaders’ moral authority as a result of their failure to forthrightly address the sexual abuse of minors by church leaders, the church’s exclusion of women from ordained ministry, and/or the church’s opposition to measures that would signal the legal equality of LGBT persons (including, but not limited to, same-sex civil marriage). If one doubts this, simply peruse the online comments following any article dealing with Catholicism in a daily newspaper.

Even without such hostility and suspicion, the religious diversity of one’s audience precludes appeals founded upon a shared religious perspective. So, how can one proceed? I think David Tracy’s concept of “the classic” provides helpful insight. Recall that he described classics as those “expressions of the human spirit [which] so disclose a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status”—in other words, “what we mean in naming certain texts, events, images, rituals, symbols and persons ‘classics’ is that here we recognize nothing less than the disclosure of a reality we cannot but name truth.”³ Thus classics are texts, events, or persons that are rooted in a particular culture, yet also have the power to speak beyond their originating culture to something universal in the human experience. They have a transcultural significance, resonance, and even authority. Thus they are accessible to and instructive, even normative, for those who do not belong to a specific cultural heritage.

Religious texts, symbols, and persons can be such transcultural classics. This allows them to “enter into the public realm and [become] available to

³ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 108.

all” regardless of their particular religious commitment or lack thereof.⁴ Thus in doing public theology, one is not simply appealing to the least common denominator or the thinnest common values present in US society. Public theology is not just a vague or superficial injunction to be civil to one another and treat each other with respect. As the figures invoked by Obama demonstrate, doing public theology authoritatively summons the members of a community to engage with and realize their highest ideals and best aspirations in their common life as these are conveyed by the community’s classics.

For Catholic theologians, one does public theology by appealing to those Catholic persons, texts, and symbols that possess a classic character. I suggest that among these would be people like Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton (the latter two effectively invoked by Pope Francis in his address to Congress in the fall of 2015); the gospel parables of the Good Samaritan, the Last Judgment, and the Rich Man and Lazarus; and the image of the Kingdom (Reign) of God. These are among the persons, texts, and symbols whose transcultural resonance could ground normative discourse on matters of public concern to those who do not share Catholic faith convictions.

While rooted in and inspired by one’s own faith perspective, commitments, and beliefs. As I hope is apparent by now, doing public theology by addressing a religiously diverse audience does not require that one bracket or surrender one’s own faith commitments. The theologian offers to his/her neighbors and fellows the fruits of his/her intellectual expertise and spiritual reflection. Indeed, it is because of one’s faith commitments and theological expertise that one can feel obligated to speak. That is, the theologian can become compelled to speak to issues of public urgency out of the conviction that failing to do so would betray one’s obligation to love one’s neighbor. To say this more simply and directly, in doing public theology, the Catholic theologian speaks to the public as who he/she is—an intellectual, a believer, a member of the American community, and, in the words of Martin Luther King, “a citizen of the world.”

So much for what “doing public theology” entails. But to what end? What does such activity offer to our understanding of or pursuit of social justice? I think Obama is instructive when in his speech he notes, “The problems of poverty and racism, the uninsured and the unemployed, are not simply technical problems in search of the perfect ten-point plan. They are rooted in both societal indifference and individual callousness—in the imperfections of man.

⁴ T. Howland Sanks, “David Tracy’s Theological Project: An Overview and Some Implications,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 714.

Solving these problems will require changes in government policy, but it will also require changes in hearts and a change in minds.” I believe that doing public theology offers to those who share our social world the motivation, inspiration, and challenge to address pressing social issues by accessing the nonrational sources—the fears, anxieties, aspirations, and imagination—that fuel social callousness and social transformation.

I will illustrate this through a personal example of an attempt to do public theology. The occasion was an acceptance speech I delivered when honored by the YWCA in 2015 with its “Eliminating Racism” award. Specifically, I was asked to speak about why I do what I do to a civic gathering of people of diverse—and perhaps no—religious convictions. I spoke in the aftermath of the killings of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and so many other unarmed African Americans, and in the midst of public agitation over the Black Lives Matter movement:

Something catastrophic is happening in our country. And I don’t mean only the morbid, wrenching, almost incessant killings of Black young men and boys. These deaths reveal a deep malady at the core of America. A coldness. A callousness. A soul-warping disease. For racism is a soul-sickness.

The deepest reason I have chosen to be a Catholic ethicist who focuses on racial issues stems from my understanding of racism. There are many ways to understand racism, namely, as a political issue, as a sociological phenomenon, as a cultural divide. But for me, at its deepest level, racism is a soul-sickness. It is a profound warping of the human spirit, one that enables human beings to create communities of cold, callous indifference to their darker sisters and brothers. Stripped to its core, racism is that disturbing interior disease that enables people to not care for those who don’t look like them. To quote a fellow scholar, “The real meaning of race comes down largely to this: *Is this someone I should care about?*”⁵

Race in America has become a spiritual cataract that limits our vision and determines whom we do and do not notice, that is, who is beyond the reach of our concern or interest. Racism today is revealed not only in verbal taunts and slurs; not only in continuing inadequate representation in positions of power and overrepresentation in our prisons; not only in the scourge of the killings of unarmed Black men, the militarized policing of communities of color, and the scandal of the under-education of our Black and Brown youth. Racism today is revealed in a lack of empathy and *profound indifference*, that is, the pervasive lack of concern and the social callousness of the majority of society to the horrors and scandals that are unfolding in our midst.

⁵ Paul L. Wachtel, *Race in the Mind of America: Breaking the Vicious Circle between Blacks and Whites* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

America has become like the Rich Man in the biblical parable of Lazarus: blind to and uncaring about the plight of its citizens of darker hue. A blindness rooted in a soul-sickness that allows it to rest easy, complacent and even hardened to the rampant suffering among us, ... a suffering that is conveniently hidden from sight and largely absent from public discourse.

I am convinced that as necessary as changed social practices such as better police training and body cameras may be, and as important as a vigorous enforcement of civil rights laws is, these will be limited and even ineffective without a deeper conversion, without a healing of the soul, without a profound revolution of values, that is, without attending to the deeper recesses of the human spirit that are the realm of religious faith and spirituality. That is why I became and remain a faith activist for racial justice.

I offer this as one illustration of both the contribution and the necessity of “doing public theology,” that is, of addressing issues of public concern, urgency, and import to a religiously pluralistic and diverse audience of fellow members of a civic community in a way that is accessible to people of any or no faith tradition or commitment while rooted in and inspired by one’s own faith perspective, commitments, and beliefs.

BRYAN N. MASSINGALE
Fordham University

Doing Theology in the Public Sphere

There is nothing more wonderful, or more satisfying, than writing about God and the things of God, and sharing that writing in a public space. Public theological writing—whether it be for a journal of opinion, a catechetical resource, or a blog—responds to the gospel call to “proclaim on the housetops” what you hear whispered (Matt 10:27), and in its own way participates in the Christian calling to “set on a lampstand” that light that gives glory to God (Matt 5:15). There can also be great satisfaction in shaping religious publications and designing and speaking at live events during which people interact around theological subjects. All this is very good.

Rita Ferrone is an independent scholar and author of several books about liturgy, including Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium (New York: Paulist Press, 2007). She serves as general editor of The Yale ISM Review, and is a contributing editor and columnist for Commonweal magazine. She blogs at dotCommonweal and the Pray Tell Blog.