

of the working class in a deindustrialized world intentionally wrought by neo-liberal globalization.

These material-structural underpinnings of our politics illuminate another task for public theology in addition to necessary debates about fear, scape-goating, and racism. We must also seek out and support technical policy proposals that can create a world where solidarity and the common good are not simply heroic moral commitments, but principles that are supported by and practicable in society.

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Public Theology as “Bridge Building”

Introduction

Guest: When is it going to end, Pete?

Pete: What do you mean?

Guest: When’s it all going to end? The poverty. The homelessness. I’m about out of hope.

Pete: I don’t know.

Guest: You all do what you can and you all are lifesavers. But it doesn’t look good from out here.

Pete: I know.²²

This exchange between ethicist Peter Gathje and one of the guests of Manna House of Hospitality (Memphis, Tennessee) points to the task of the public theologian. Gathje serves at Manna House, sharing meals and prayers with its guests. Through his blog *Radical Hospitality* he echoes and responds to the theology of the people he serves, and their deep questions about justice in our world. In this dialogical movement he enters the locations where he serves meals and prays with his “public,” who in turn ask for a justice that seems all too elusive from their vantage point. His “public,” the guests and others who pass through Manna House, are sources for theological

²² Peter Gathje, “Love and the Specter of Poverty and Death,” *Radical Hospitality—A Blog of Manna House of Hospitality*, June 15, 2016, <http://radical-hospitality.blogspot.com/>.

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imagination and critical questioning, shaping the way Gathje organizes his vision of the Christian story and the liberating truth it seeks to relate to the world.

The task of public theology is inherently dialogical, where human experience is considered as source so that it can enter the dialogical conversation with tradition and Scripture.²³ In a class titled “Public Theology in the Twentieth Century and Today: Reinhold Niebuhr, Dorothy Day, Jim Wallis, and Cornel West,” Philip Clayton defined the task of public theology as “bridge building.”²⁴ For Clayton, “the public theologian is today’s missionary, immersed in the task of translation and communication. ... Public theology is in reciprocal relationship with the other.”²⁵ As such, it builds on knowing the other’s space, leaving our comfort zones, engaging in a task that is not proclamation but rather, listening, without being constrained by the rules of orthodoxy of one’s tradition.²⁶

This essay focuses on four insights on bridge building that arose from my course “Public Theology in the 20th Century and Today,” which brought in ten contemporary public voices alongside those of Niebuhr, Day, West, and Wallis.²⁷ The resulting conversations contributed to defining four marks of public theology as bridge building: encounter, authenticity, spiritual grounding, and risk taking.

²³ Timoteo Gener, “With/Beyond Tracy: Re-Visioning Public Theology,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33, no. 2 (April 2009): 118–38, 124, and 129.

²⁴ Philip Clayton, “Public Theology in the Twentieth Century and Today: Reinhold Niebuhr, Dorothy Day, Jim Wallis, and Cornel West,” remarks as invited guest, “Public Theology in the 20th Century and Today,” course taught by Prof. MT Dávila, Andover Newton Theological School, spring 2016).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ In addition to reading works of the four figures listed, students in the course were exposed to a variety of expressions of public theological discourse including blogs, opinion pieces, videos, and sermons. Ten contemporary public figures were also invited to share their thoughts on their role as public theologians: Lisa Cahill (professor, Boston College); Philip Clayton (professor, Claremont School of Theology); Marcia Mount Shoop (pastor, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, North Carolina); Robyn Henderson-Espinosa (activist and theologian); Kate Ott (assistant professor, Drew Divinity School); Elías Ortega (assistant professor, Drew Divinity School); Tim Snyder (PhD candidate, Boston University); Elí Valentín (political consultant, pastor of Iglesia Evangélica Bautista); Alex Mikulich (assistant professor, Loyola University New Orleans); Karen Leslie Hernández (interfaith educator and activist, Berkeley, California). All of the guest speakers have granted permission for the content of their conversations in the course to be discussed and quoted in this essay. Where appropriate, I include citations of their work for further study.

Encounter

Lisa Cahill spoke about the task of revisiting the ethics of the just war tradition for new generations of Christian thinkers. She focused on the impact that the Catholic Peacebuilding Network has had on her thought on this issue. As a consultant for its work, she has been able to meet people who are doing peace building at the community level to increase understanding, negotiate in times of conflict, and engage in peace initiatives. These discussions opened her eyes to new ways of identifying needs, such as safety and education, for communities under the constant threat of violence. Cahill's encounters with community peace builders generated a more profound understanding of conflict, Christian commitment, and those to whom theology needs to be accountable to on a daily basis.²⁸

Pope Francis has emphasized *encounter* as central to Christian identity, essential to the human spirit, and therefore a task for the Christian life.²⁹ Our humanity unfolds in the encounter with the other, one that both challenges and completes us.³⁰ *Encounter* as a mark of bridge building speaks to location. For Mario Aguilar, the location of the theologian determines the content of the "public," which, in his case, is the peripheries of Latin American societies. Theologizing in the public of the peripheries is the utopian act of reflecting from Kingdom values on the injustices of a state that will not change. It is proclaiming a just, active, and present God in a place where misery is an everyday staple.³¹

Encounter suggests that solidarity is a concomitant practice of public theology. Alex Mikulich and Marcia Mount Shoop both engage public theology as white theologians working on white privilege and racism, grounding their work on the particular suffering of African American communities.³²

²⁸ Lisa Cahill, remarks as invited guest, "Public Theology in the 20th Century and Today," course taught by Prof. MT Dávila, Andover Newton Theological School, spring 2016.

²⁹ Thomas Eggleston, "What Pope Francis Means by a Culture of Encounter," *Houston Catholic Worker*—A Publication of Casa Juan Diego, July 1, 2015, <http://cjd.org/2015/07/01/what-pope-francis-means-by-a-culture-of-encounter/>.

³⁰ Pope Francis, "Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements," May 18, 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130518_veglia-pentecoste.html; cited in Eggleston, "What Pope Francis Means."

³¹ Mario Aguilar, "Public Theology from the Periphery: Victims and Theologians," *International Journal of Public Theology* 1 (2007): 331.

³² For more on their work, see Alex Mikulich, "Mapping 'Whiteness': The Complexity of Racial Formation and the Subversive Moral Imagination of the Motley Crowd," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2005): 99-122; Mikulich, *The Scandal of White Complicity in U.S. Hyperincarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Marcia Mount Shoop, *Touchdowns for Jesus and Other Signs of the Apocalypse: Lifting the Veil on Big*

Encounter with others opens the spaces and provides the language and questions through which the hope of the Christian message must first make sense.

Authenticity

Elías Ortega asked the class: “Are you willing to die for my kids?”³³ The question came as a response to white allies who wanted to take part in Black Lives Matter protests and activism. For Ortega, public theology on race is about real lives, positively transformed or negatively affected by theological and political positions.³⁴ Ortega wondered what his responsibility as a person of color is to white sensibilities and fear while he simultaneously communicates theology shaped by being tired of injustice toward black and brown bodies. He questioned his possible complicity with the forces of that very oppression as he recognized the real possibility that he might be killed tomorrow coming home after teaching an evening class.³⁵ *Authenticity* became a mark by which students in the class measured each of the presenters, flowing from their sincere desire to engage in ways that have them bearing some of the weight of those particular issues. Authenticity also involves the integrity to reject a potential public if this public is not able to enter the difficult task of encountering real human beings and their ultimate questions, as Kate Ott shared with the class.³⁶ Ott has had to reject invitations to speak and has had invitations rescinded because it is often difficult for parents and church staff to see eye to eye on the very thorny topic of the sexual education of children.³⁷ *Authenticity* leads Ott to ask: Who has access to speak on a particular issue? What is the network of support for those who can or cannot speak? How do we translate our speech into transformative pedagogies?³⁸

Time Sports (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014); Mount Shoop and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *A Body Broken/A Body Betrayed: Race, Memory, and Eucharist in White-Dominant Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

³³ Elías Ortega, remarks as invited guest, “Public Theology in the 20th Century and Today,” course taught by Prof. MT Dávila, Andover Newton Theological School, spring 2016.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ See, for example, Kate Ott, *Sex + Faith: Talking with Your Child from Birth to Adolescence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

³⁷ Kate Ott, remarks as invited guest, “Public Theology in the 20th Century and Today,” course taught by Prof. MT Dávila, Andover Newton Theological School, spring 2016.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Spiritual Grounding

Eli Valentín, who works with local politicians in New York City,³⁹ notes a strong need to be spiritually centered. Music, prayer, and family are his deepest sources of *spiritual grounding*, of nourishing the spirit which is often confronted by the cynicism of local politics. As someone often called to play a centering role in progressive Christian venues where extreme positions find themselves at odds and their adherents sometimes unable to cooperate, Robyn Henderson-Espinosa depends on meditation and communion for *spiritual grounding*.⁴⁰ Attending to the personal and the communal dimensions of the spirit is essential for sustaining a life that often calls for “sitting in the shards” of people hurt by multiple and intersecting oppressions.⁴¹ Those often asked to sit with and navigate difference resort to the stillness of their center as spiritual practice to prepare for the task of entering others’ stories of suffering and longing.

Few of the sources I have considered on public theology make reference to the theologian’s practices of *spiritual grounding*. This area of study is urgent and full of possibilities. Understanding the *spiritual grounding* of public theologians opens a window to notions of the self-communication of the Holy at the personal and corporate level as it relates to the call to engage difficult social questions and the publics for whom this matters. When one considers public theology as bridge building, *spiritual grounding* becomes that sacred home for the sojourning, migrant theologian.

Risk Taking

Public theology interrupts and disrupts the various ways in which theologians engage with power and the structures that support it. When one’s public lives on the margins of existence, like the guest at Manna House, one is pulled beyond the comfort zone of the academic handling and production of knowledge. For Marcella Althaus-Reed, “the first task, ... needs to be ... ‘the reconstruction of the social power of the popular classes’ ... a serious disruption and redistribution of power, and of strategic institutional thinking ... by providing a space for the people who are

³⁹ Elí Valentín, remarks as invited guest, “Public Theology in the 20th Century and Today,” course taught by Prof. MT Dávila, Andover Newton Theological School, spring 2016.

⁴⁰ It is important to note that Henderson-Espinosa uses the term “communion” inclusively, meaning sacramental communion, shared meals in community, and communal theologizing.

⁴¹ Robyn Henderson-Espinosa, remarks as invited guest, “Public Theology in the 20th Century and Today,” course taught by Prof. MT Dávila, Andover Newton Theological School, spring 2016.

integrities in dissent at the margins to engage in a network of thinking and sharing experiences."⁴² *Risk taking* indicates the ways in which the task of public theology can place the theologians on the margins of the places in which we hold power.

For Mount Shoop, adaptive skills and *risk taking* are especially needed in her antiracism and white privilege work within the church. There are situations with great power imbalances where cultivating trust is hard work: "Anti-racism work is soul work, and that is a very scary place to be" for a community.⁴³ Karen Leslie Hernández feels the risks of her work educating Christian communities on intimate partner abuse, nonviolence, and interfaith cooperation, specifically Muslim-Christian relations. Hernández has received threats and been attacked because she is perceived as too welcoming to Muslims.

Often the public theologian works in emerging areas not yet recognized as necessary or urgent by the academy, as was, and in some cases continues to be, the case of white privilege and interfaith cooperation. Institutional support may also waver when one's work is considered to be a threat to the financial stability of the institution. The labor of building bridges also requires building alliances, collaborations in which one's commitments to particular liberative theological visions can find safe and encouraging harbor. This space might not be within the academy, as Althaus-Reed and Aguilar suggest, but, rather, on the peripheries that call and challenge us to cross borders.

Conclusion

This brief exposition only touches on the four marks of public theology as bridge building that arose from dialogue with students and public theologians over one semester. Certainly these marks could be expanded significantly; we could consider, for example, the ways in which they influence each other. Identifying these four marks allows us to expand the conversation on the tasks of public theology beyond the classical expositions of Martin Marty, Jürgen Habermas, and David Tracy.

⁴² Marcella Althaus-Reed, "In the Center there Are No Fragments: Teologías Desencajadas," in *Public Theology for the 21st Century: Essays in Honor of Duncan B. Forrester*, edited by William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 381–382.

⁴³ Marcia Mount Shoop, remarks as invited guest, "Public Theology in the 20th Century and Today," course taught by Prof. MT Dávila, Andover Newton Theological School, spring 2016.

On a personal level, public theology as bridge building involves bridging two often-distant worlds: those of the academy and the poor. Mario Aguilar argues:

European public theology is aimed at engagement with the educated public and starts with the professional theologian, whereas a Latin American public theology arises out of the communitarian reflections of the ecclesial communities ... and ultimately discusses the bare minimum aspirations of the poor.⁴⁴

This essay assumes that public theology is first and foremost attentive to suffering and injustice as the call that moves one to cross to the other side of the road (Luke 10:25-37), and, therefore, it is inherently an act of solidarity. The integrity of public theology has to do with the theologian's willingness to become present in our own experiences of suffering or another's. Public theology demands to be shaped by questions borne out of anguish mingled with hope so that it listens to the various plights that beckon the intellect and spirit. As a result, we speak from a grounded position that seeks to build trust and relationships in the hope of transforming the world. Public theology, in the end, is essentially an incarnational task, inhabiting the migrant identity of a journeying Jesus who has no place to rest his or her head.⁴⁵

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⁴⁴ Aguilar, "Public Theology from the Periphery," 330.

⁴⁵ Clayton, remarks as invited guest.