

# Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age<sup>1</sup>

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Contemporary social and cultural trends in Western society suggest that, far from becoming marginal to society, religion is returning to public prominence as a significant factor in global politics and civil society. Whilst the predictions of classic secularization theory are cast into question, however, this should not be mistaken for a religious revival. Instead, we are witnessing an unprecedented co-existence of resurgence, decline, and mutation, which some are terming the “post-secular” condition.

This article considers the implications of the post-secular, and in particular for the way in which the churches might negotiate their role in public life. I answer this by calling for a renewal of the practice of apologetics: of offering a reasoned defence or rationale for one’s faith. Christians need to cultivate a public vocation that is more interested in the well-being of society than the survival of the Church, which is prepared to “speak truth to power”, and enables them to be advocates for the marginalized and powerless in society.

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## Introduction: Christian? Post-Christian? Post-Secular?

Is Britain a Christian country? This question emerged to the fore of public debate (not for the first time) in Easter 2014, following an article by David Cameron (in the *Church Times*) in which he praised the historic and enduring contribution of Christianity to our national life. Against those who would wish us to move towards a more openly secular society, the Prime Minister insisted that “we should be more confident about our status as a Christian country, more ambitious about expanding the role of faith-based organisations, and, frankly, *more evangelical*

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about a faith that compels us to get out there and make a difference to people's lives" (Cameron, 2014).

This provoked a storm of criticism from those who took exception to Cameron's stance. Britain may have a Christian heritage, they argued, but contemporary evidence shows that the vast majority of the population no longer have any real or first-hand engagement in or knowledge of organized religion. Increasing religious pluralism and cultural diversity renders any attempt to privilege a "Christian" identity for the nation offensive. And besides, given its propensity for homophobia, extremism, and bigotry, religion has no place in the public morality of a civilized society. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, when asked in an interview with *The Sunday Telegraph* whether he agreed with Cameron's description, offered a characteristically nuanced response by concluding that Britain was probably "post-Christian [but] that doesn't mean necessarily non-Christian" (Moreton, 2014).

This recent debate exemplifies a wider debate about religion in society and questions about its proper role. Is Britain any longer a "Christian" country? And what does that mean for our public life—our national identity, our shared values? I want to suggest that Britain may be "Christian" in some respects; that it is indeed increasingly "secular" and therefore "post-Christian"; but that a better term may actually be "post-secular"—a world that manifests signs of "simultaneous decline, mutation and resurgence" (Graham, 2013: 3).

On the one hand, this terminology reflects a wider set of social and cultural trends in the West which suggest that religion, far from becoming marginal to society (as was once predicted), is returning to public prominence as a significant factor in global politics and civil society. Nationally, this is particularly evident in areas of government policy here in the UK, which highlights the renewed currency of religious belief and practice, particularly around its potentially beneficial contribution to welfare reform, well-being, and community cohesion. At the same time as the Prime Minister was delivering his upbeat message on his version of Christian values, however, national religious leaders issued a statement challenging aspects of the Coalition's administration of welfare benefits (Wyatt, 2014). Part of the political potency of such interventions is that they are based on grass-roots experience: faith-based charities are at the very forefront of day-to-day provision, such as food banks and debt counselling, as well, of course, as being significantly engaged in education, housing, care of the elderly, child support, and so on.

But whilst this new visibility of religion casts doubt on many of the predictions of classic secularization theory—that religion is in inevitable decline—I don't subscribe to the view that we are experiencing anything like a religious revival. This is due to the enduring influence of a completely different social and cultural trajectory: of secularism and religious scepticism. Critics of religion, such as the likes of Richard Dawkins, Polly Toynbee, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens, argue that religion has no place in public life. Religious belief may inform a person's individual values and motivations, but according to the protocols of liberal democracy, there has to be a kind of "firewall" between personal faith and public policy. Partly as a legacy of the European religious wars of the sixteenth century and seventeenth century, partly due to the influence of the

Enlightenment, religion is regarded as an illegitimate and divisive basis on which to build a truly open and civilized society. We see this trajectory, too, of course, in this recent debate: that the establishment of the Church of England is no longer relevant to a pluralist society; to anxieties about the negative influence of faith schools on social cohesion, and so on.

Hence the title of the book on which this article is also based. We find ourselves between a “rock” of religious resurgence—or at least renewed visibility—and the “hard place” of secularism. And it’s the paradoxical, often uncomfortable, space in between these two contradictory trajectories that is of interest to me. How do we handle the unprecedented co-existence of these two discourses? And, in particular, how do people of faith give an account of their motivations and values in a world that is more sensitive than ever to religious belief and practice, yet often struggles to accommodate it into secular discourse.

So this article begins with sociological theories of secularization and the “post-secular”, and proceeds, via public theology, to Christian apologetics. I want to ask whether the resources of public theology can help the churches and ordinary Christians to address this unprecedented context. Can Christians articulate their core principles in terms that are accessible to pluralist, secular society whilst remaining authentic to the resources of Scripture and tradition? I intend to answer this by calling for a renewal of the practice of Christian *apologetics*: the task of offering a reasoned defence or rationale for one’s faith. The early Christian epistle, the first letter of Peter, summarizes this imperative as follows: *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have* (1 Peter 3.15, NIV).

In other words, the proponents of public theology—ranging from Church authorities, public intellectuals to local activists and campaigners—should contribute critically and constructively to public debate; but they must be more attentive than ever to the tasks of justifying and articulating the theological well-springs of these commitments in ways that are accessible and comprehensible to an ever more fragmented and sceptical body politic.

## Between a rock and a hard place

How are we to make sense of the fortunes of religion in today’s society? It is a complex and somewhat contradictory state of affairs. The conventional account of secularization sees religious decline—even extinction—as an inevitable consequence of modernization. Yet evidence suggests that this is not the case.

On the one hand, religion is strikingly visible in public life—whether we are thinking locally, nationally, or globally. In many of the most rapidly-developing economies, such as Brazil, China, or India, religion continues to grow and to be a significant part of public life. On the other hand, there is little reason, certainly for those of us in this particular part of northern Europe, to feel quite so sanguine about the resilience of religion or its future prospects. Levels of formal institutional affiliation and membership in mainstream Christian and Jewish denominations continue to diminish across the Western world. Religious observance is increasingly

disaffiliated and individualized; religious institutions are viewed with indifference at best, distrust at worst.

The paradoxical state of religion is clear when we look at recent statistical evidence. The decline of organized and institutional religion is well-documented in contemporary British society. According to the 2011 Census, 59 per cent of people (or just over 33 million) in England and Wales consider themselves as Christian, a decline of 12 per cent on the previous census. Those recording “no religion” grew from 15 per cent in 2001 to 25 per cent in 2011—that’s around 14 million people.

Whilst many people classify themselves as “Nones” (no religion), they are just as likely to insist that they are “spiritual”. According to Robert Fuller, as many as 33 per cent of people in the USA identify as “Spiritual but not Religious” (Fuller, 2001) (SBNR). Some statistical evidence suggests a high correlation between age and religiosity, with younger people less likely to identify themselves with an organized religion. A Pew Research Center survey in the USA in 2010 recorded 25 per cent of adults born after 1980 (so-called “Generation Y”, or under thirties) as unaffiliated, describing their religion as “atheist”, “agnostic”, or “nothing in particular”. This compares with less than one-fifth of people in their thirties (Generation X, at 19 per cent), 15 per cent of those in their forties, 14 per cent of those in their fifties, and 10 per cent or less among those 60 and older (Pew Forum, 2010). The differences appear to be a feature of this particular generation, rather than explained by people becoming more religious as they grow older: so the under-thirties were significantly more unaffiliated than members of Generation X were at a comparable point in their life cycle (20 per cent in the late 1990s) and twice as unaffiliated as Baby Boomers (born between 1945 and 1960) were as young adults (13 per cent in the late 1970s). Might we also designate Generation Y as “Generation SBNR” with all that this may mean for the public fortunes of organized religion in the future?

So, for all that formalized religious belief and institutionalized religious belonging has declined over recent decades, this is not a picture of universal secularization. Far from it: there is a strong, albeit highly eclectic, spiritual current running through the nation. For example, in a survey by ComRes last year on behalf of Theos, the religious think tank, over three-quarters of all adults (77 per cent) and nearly two-thirds (61 per cent) of non-religious people said they believed that “there are things in life that we simply cannot explain through science or any other means” (ComRes, 2013).

But even if the UK is not (yet) a nation of atheists, we might say that it is certainly one of sceptics. There probably always has been this deep vein of heterodoxy lurking below the formalities of creedal, institutional faith; but maybe what has changed is that people now have a more ready vocabulary of being “spiritual but not religious”; of saying that it is acceptable to have a personalized clutch of beliefs; that people are freer to sample and experiment between a range of religious paths (or are they products?). The disaffiliation has taken place at the level of engagement with institutionalized expressions of religious dogma rather than away from practices such as prayer, astrology, meditation, or a belief in the existence of “a higher spiritual being that can be called God” (ComRes, 2013: 7).

So at the level of personal belief and affiliation, we see an undeniable trend of numerical decline, but not matched by any outstanding growth of secularism within the population at large—or at least no clear patterns beyond increasing pluralism and diversity of beliefs and attitudes. And that similar combination of cultural persistence and institutional decline is also affecting the fortunes of religion within broader public life, such as social policy, economics, culture, and media.

The sociologist Linda Woodhead has done a great deal of work to excavate the many layers of this situation. This quotation from her, from work published in 2012, reflects the complexity of it all quite well:

Britain now finds itself in a situation in which old and new forms of commitment, power and organization co-exist and compete with one another ... why Britain can be religious and secular; ... why the majority of the population call themselves Christian but are hostile or indifferent to many aspects of religion; why governments embrace “faith” but are suspicious of “religion”; why public debate swings between “multi-culturalism” and “integration”; why religion is viewed as both radical and conservative; why we build multi-faith spaces ... but can no longer speak of God in public. (Woodhead, 2012: 26)

### Crossing the secular rubicon

It’s a perfect storm, in many respects, therefore. Religious institutions are fragile; sceptics and critics of religion continue to question its very legitimacy as a respectable intellectual option and a legitimate influence in society; and yet, religion continues to be a significant source of social capital, and comprises the strongest single stake-holder in the voluntary sector. It is a remarkably potent mobilizing force for volunteers; and globally, if not the “cause” of political and cultural change, cannot be disentangled from issues of identity, popular movements, nation-building, geo-political conflict, or humanitarian initiatives.

In many ways, then, the kind of religious faith that is emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and which dominates the public imagination, is very different from what went before. It represents much less of a religious revival and much more a quest for a new presence in the midst of public life that is more fragmented, more global, more disparate. It is a context in which the contribution of religion to the well-being of communities is welcomed by some, with new agendas and increasing enthusiasm; but at the same time, the very legitimacy of faith to speak or contribute at all is contested as vigorously as ever.

This takes us into uncharted territory, sociologically and theologically, and is generating a concept amongst a number of writers—across the fields of sociology, political theory, philosophy, and theology—known as the “post-secular” (Bretherton, 2010: 10–16; Gorski *et al.*, 2012; Habermas, 2008).

Now, this idea could probably generate several papers in its own right, so I want to indicate some of the contours of the debate before returning to the specific, rather agonistic, sense in which I am deploying the term.

It certainly starts with the deficiencies of the secularization thesis, and the unexpected “re-enchantment” of global politics—something we can probably date from the Iranian revolution in 1979, the rise of the Moral Majority in the USA in the 1980s, the emergence of Islamist movements in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia; clearly, the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 stands as an iconic and devastating moment in all this, as an explicitly religiously-motivated intervention in world affairs.

Alongside the political analysts, we also have cultural theorists and philosophers weighing up the impact of this “resacralization” of world affairs and public speech. The German social theorist Jürgen Habermas has been extremely influential here. In his earlier years, he would have allied himself with a broadly liberal position which required the separation of religion from the state and the creation of a non-confessional public space in order to ensure the most equitable conditions for the articulation of a rich and non-partisan discourse of citizenship and participatory democracy. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, he has been more prepared to consider the introduction of religious sources of reasoning into a renewed vocabulary of civic virtue. He has alluded to a kind of melancholy in late modernity, a sense of lack within secular reason—as he says, “an awareness of what is missing” (2010), namely any sort of metaphysical or transcendental grounding of its commitment to things such as justice, progress, and well-being. This is prompted in part by a response to the global financial crisis of 2007–08, which he felt exposed the lack of any values of public accountability on the part of the global economy; and concerns about the impact of advanced biotechnologies on our understandings of human integrity and dignity.

So religion may help to correct some of the pathologies of modernity (Dillon, 2010: 143–44). It offers a clear narrative of human dignity and value; whilst post-Enlightenment philosophers have tended to focus on the divisive and regressive influence of religion on society, Habermas is now more prepared to identify its potential as a powerfully cohesive and beneficial source of moral and political reasoning. In 2010, in the collection of essays entitled *An Awareness of What is Missing*, Reder and Schmidt concluded this:

Among the modern societies, only those that are able to introduce into the secular domain the essential contents of their religious traditions which point beyond the merely human realm will also be able to rescue the substance of the human. (2010: 5)

Also relevant is Charles Taylor’s comprehensive (running to over 800 pages) and nuanced account of secularization and its contemporary connotations, *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor argues that the secular sensibility is not one we can easily disinvent or transcend. As I’ve already said, according to conventional sociological definitions, secularization denotes the separation of religion and politics, the disenchantment of our intellectual and political life in the face of technological advancement, and the spread of rational-technical modes of reasoning. But even if religion is now returning to the public square as a mobilizing force for civil society, even if people continue to be attracted to a range of spiritual and supernatural phenomena, there is a way in which Western culture has already experienced an irretrievable loss of innocence. It is post-secular, because there has been an

irrevocable shift in what Taylor terms “the conditions of belief ... which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” (Taylor, 2007: 3). No kind of re-emergent faith will ever “unmake” modernity’s understandings of the “buffered self” who lives unfettered by the constraints of religious dogma, and science’s model of the cosmos as autonomous of divine agency. We might say that after modernity, we have crossed a secular Rubicon, and we cannot *not* view this surprising after-life of religion from any other vantage-point.

Taylor’s sense of the post-secular is as something unprecedented yet decisive, then: “different and unrecognizable to any earlier epoch ... marked by an unheard of pluralism of outlooks, religious and non- and anti-religious”. He continues:

Thus my own view of secularization ... is that there has certainly been a “decline” of religion ... But the interesting story is not simply one of decline, but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life. This new placement is now the occasion for recompositions of spiritual life in new forms, and for new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God. (Taylor, 2007: 437)

So this is the context into which bodies such as the Christian churches are speaking. We have the signs of decline, of slow but steady marginalization, and yet there are contrary trends which suggest that it is not simply about accommodating to the inevitabilities of secularization. If the churches are committed to any kind of significant public role, then the nature of public theological discourse must change. No longer is it speaking into a common frame of reference, in which their Biblical or moral allusions fall comfortably on waiting ears. Rather, in a context where people’s familiarity with any kind of organized religion is ever more tenuous, churches and theologians will need to find a new language by which they justify the legitimacy of religion within public life. Christians will need to renew their energies to do their theology *in public*, with a view to defending and justifying the role of religion across that post-secular divide.

## Challenges for public theology

Public theology takes place in a variety of contexts and has a range of practitioners. Broadly, it seeks to comment and critically reflect from a theological perspective, referring to the ways in which religion interacts with questions of economics, media, politics, law, globalization, social justice, and environment. Public theology sees itself as rooted in religious traditions, but strongly in conversation with secular discourse and public institutions.

In our short book on urban theology, Stephen Lowe and I identified three main genres: “the type of public theology that engages with issues of public policy from a faith-based perspective”, such as church reports or public statements; “the processes of guidance or formation that equip Christians ... to exercise faithful witness in relation to the secular world”: directed more, perhaps, to an internal audience of church members who wish to reflect theologically on matters of public issues; and the “study of how a faith-commitment might [in]form the public

conduct of politicians” and other public figures: in other words, how private conviction transforms into public policy (Graham and Lowe, 2009: 4–5).

Public theology concerns itself with three main streams of public life:

- the market: economics, globalization, finance;
- civil society, culture, media, ecology, science, public health, technology and the media, grass-roots organizing, education;
- State, government, political power, and regulation of public life.

Traditionally, public theology has drawn predominantly from mainstream Protestant and Reformed Christian theologies, reflecting its initial strengths in North America and the UK (Stackhouse, 2007; Storrar and Morton, 2004). Even here, however, the respective position of the Christian churches, reflecting a constitutional separation of Church and State in the USA and the established or state status of churches in England, Germany, Scotland, and Scandinavia, have given rise to a diversity of approaches in relation to the institutional and cultural role of mainstream Christianity in relation to public discourse and liberal democracy. Theologies of liberation have also featured strongly, especially from South Africa, where the prominent role of the churches in the anti-apartheid struggle engendered a wealth of theological reflection on the nature of justice, resistance, and reconciliation (de Gruchy, 2007).

Conventionally, the notion of “public” has encompassed two meanings for public theologians. First, a concern for the corporate, political, and societal meanings of faith, in contrast to forms of religious belief and practice that confine faith to private and pietist intentions (Hainsworth and Paeth, 2010); thus, public theology refers to the ways in which religion interacts with questions of economics, media, politics, law, globalization, social justice, and environment. Second, it reflects a commitment on the part of public theologians to conduct debates about the public trajectories of faith and practice in ways that are transparent and publicly accessible and defensible (Breitenberg, 2003).

Public theology may have interpretative, critical, and constructive dimensions. Some work examines actual examples of interventions into public debate or political procedures by churches or other faith-based organizations, often using empirical and sociological, as well as theological and hermeneutical tools. Other contributions undertake a critique of the ways in which theological language, concepts, and values are mediated into public debate, such as salvation, covenant, or Trinity. Occasionally, public theologians contribute to the normative and formative reconstruction of communities of faith as they seek to exercise a public ministry in relation to questions of ecology, global finance, poverty, or urban life and faith. Increasingly, a perspective of virtue ethics is informing the work of public theologians (thus linking with perspectives in pedagogy and practical theology) by which ordinary persons of faith may be equipped theologically to read “the signs of the times” and apprehend a larger set of meanings amidst economic, cultural, political, and global trends.

It is this commitment to engagement with non-theological sources and resources that has been one of the characteristic commitments of public theology, and gives rise to the suggestion it has an important “apologetic” dimension. Max

Stackhouse, formerly of Princeton Theological Seminary, offers one of the most profound explorations of this. He affirms a number of basic principles about the nature of public theology (Stackhouse, 2006).

First, religion is never simply a matter of personal or private devotion, but carries over into the believer's life in all aspects of the public domain, such as economics, civil society, the State, and culture.

Second, if "public" for Stackhouse is anathema to notions of a spiritualized, privatized faith for the individual, the corollary is an emphasis on the public significance of religion's impact:

theology, while related to intensely personal commitments and to a particular community of worship, is, at its most profound level, neither merely private nor a matter of distinctive communal identity. Rather, it is an argument regarding the way things are and ought to be, one decisive for public discourse and necessary to the guidance of individual souls, societies, and, indeed, the community of nations. (Stackhouse, 2006: 165)

Third, Stackhouse insists that theology must be a fully public, "bilingual" discourse, in terms of being prepared to defend its core principles *in public*:

if a theology is to be trusted to participate in public discourse it ought to be able to make a plausible case for what it advocates in terms that can be comprehended by those who are not believers ... It should be able to articulate its core convictions in comprehensible terms across many modes of discourse, explaining its symbolic and mythical terms ... in ways that expose their multiple levels of meaning. (Stackhouse, 2007: 112)

Such a commitment to a dialogical, transparent mode of theological reasoning does not go unchallenged, however. At the heart of this disagreement lies the question of the extent to which public theology can speak a public language and remain authentically or distinctively rooted in tradition. Post-liberal theology, associated with writers such as George Lindbeck, George Stroup, Hans Frei, and Stanley Hauerwas, and those associated with "Radical Orthodoxy"—John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, Daniel Bell, and Phillip Blond—are all dismissive of attempts to engage in constructive apologetics in a pluralist public realm. Such perspectives lament what they regard as the capitulation of contemporary theology (especially its liberal tendencies) to modernity, and seek to exercise alternative forms of Christian witness that will restore the cultural and theo-political primacy of Christendom. It seeks to defend the integrity and particularity of theology against a liberal apologetic strategy that seemed to privilege its credibility in the eyes of Christianity's "cultured despisers" over its obedience to traditional Christian orthodoxy. As George Stroup once observed, "Post-liberals are bound to be sceptical ... about apologetics" (1984: 129). Hence, the public speaking of a theologian is sanctioned by its faithfulness to a distinctive ecclesial ethic, rather than a quest for public coherence or relevance.

Yet public theologians would always deny that they ever consider themselves to be completely detached from a particular community of discourse, or from the received traditions of the Church. They would insist, however, that tradition is

always pluralist and contested, and its dynamic comes from being located not solely in the Church, but at the boundaries of world, Church, and Kingdom. Certainly, the risk of a dialogical approach is that it debates on territory and on terms of engagement not of the theologian's making. Any theology of public life must begin with the recognition that the interaction between Church and world, or Christ and culture, is always one of what John Reader has called "blurred encounters" (Reader, 2005). Certainly, without a thoroughgoing critique of the predominance of secular, instrumental rationality, religious voices will always struggle to find credence as a form of public reason. Nevertheless, proponents of public theology remain committed to engaging with non-theological voices in a creative and respectful dialogue (Heyer, 2004; Kamitsuka, 1999; Ziegler, 2002).

This is born of an understanding of the Church as formed by the activities of God in Christ who wills the flourishing of all creation, and seeks to embody the attainment of the common good. The Church never cedes ultimate authority to any temporal power, but is nevertheless called to exercise forms of critical solidarity with institutions that further the virtues of justice, solidarity, and human dignity. This, in turn, rests on particular doctrines of creation and incarnation, the nature of revelation and common grace, and of the possibility of a shared space by virtue of our common humanity in which rational communication about the ends, aims, and substance of public life can be conducted. As Max Stackhouse has put it:

From very early on one of the meanings of apologetics was that you enter into another person's vocabulary and worldview as best you can, and the very fact that we can do that in some measure suggests that there is some deep contact between humans. Some profound creational theology is behind that: we are all children of God, whether everyone acknowledges it or not, and we can enter into one another's vocabulary and begin to articulate the most profound things that we think are really true. (Chase, 2001)

So, public theology likes to speak of itself as being "bilingual" (Breitenberg, 2010): mediating between the discourse of faith and that of wider society. Public theology necessarily stands at the threshold of church and world, of sacred and secular, and in Heinrich Bedford-Strohm's words,

does not separate itself from the world into a self-sufficient counter-community with its own religious language, but knows how to speak the language of the world and how to be in dialogue with the world; a public theology that ... is grounded in Christ and therefore challenges the world to make God's way for the world visible, a prophetic theology that leads the world beyond its worldly ways. (Bedford-Strohm, 2007: 36)

As well as commentary on public affairs from a religious standpoint, then, we might also conceive as a further task of public theology as one of apologetics, insofar as (especially in a religiously pluralist, global context) it is expedient to articulate (and be prepared to defend) the values that inform Christian statements about, and interventions in, the public realm. It reflects a commitment on the part of public theologians to conduct debates about the public trajectories of faith and practice in ways that are transparent and publicly accessible and defensible (Breitenberg, 2003). It means also that public theology is less concerned with

defending the interests of specific faith-communities than generating informed understandings of the moral and religious dimensions of public issues and developing analysis and critique in language that is accessible across disciplines and faith-traditions.

My concern, then, is to consider whether the discipline of public theology can articulate new norms for Christians who are concerned to engage constructively with public debate and political policy, but are aware of the growing gulf between the discourse of faith (after all, that Enlightenment convention dictates “we don’t do God” in public) yet who still want to communicate the basis of their faith and the roots of their concern for the common good convincingly and reasonably to the world at large. The voices of public theology are still relevant to public debate on specific issues or policies, but they have to cultivate a clearer rationale for their very right to speak at all. Public theologians face the challenge not only of articulating theologically-grounded interventions in the public square, but of justifying and defending the very relevance of the Christian faith in a culture that no longer grants automatic access or credence. But is there historical precedent for this? I believe there is.

## **Apologetics and Christian origins**

As Christian communities became established and dispersed around the Graeco-Roman world, so the challenges of interpreting and commending the faith to Jewish and pagan cultures became more pressing. Acts of the Apostles records how, on the day of Pentecost, Peter’s sermon is addressed predominantly to a Jewish audience, and proclaims the significance of Jesus as Messiah, prophet of Israel, and fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 2.14–36). Acts 17 relates Paul’s journey to Thessalonica, where he preached in a synagogue, reasoning from the Jewish Scriptures and prophets. Despite not encountering any prior hostility, this is sufficient nevertheless to provoke a backlash (Acts 17.1–9). Later, in Athens, Paul visits the synagogue, but concentrates on debating with pagan philosophers at the Areopagus, where he preaches the Gospel as the fulfilment of extant hidden wisdom (Acts 17.16–34). Similarly, in Acts 24.10–21, whilst in Caesarea, Paul has to defend himself against the charges brought against him by the orator Tertullus (Acts 24.1–8), who accuses him of causing breaches of the peace through his preaching. Paul’s response follows the patterns of Roman legal convention, appealing not only to Jewish tradition and the Scriptures but to Roman rules of evidence.

In his *History of Apologetics* first published in 1971, Avery Dulles groups Christian apologetics into three main genres, depending on the context and intended audience. “*Religious apologies*” argued for the superiority of the gospel over other religious or philosophical systems; “*internal apologies*” were concerned to correct error or heresy within the Christian community itself; but a third group, which Dulles terms “*political apologies*” developed their arguments in order to secure civil toleration of Christianity in the face of state persecution (Dulles, 1999: 28).

James Beilby also describes apologetics as “the attempt to defend a particular belief or system of beliefs against objections” (Beilby, 2011: 11). Philosophical, propositional, perhaps, but an *apologia* was also the summary speech for the defence in a court of law. In the New Testament, it denotes an answer or defence given in response to an accusation, such as Paul addressing a hostile crowd in Jerusalem (Acts 22.1).

Writing about the emergent Christian literature of the second and third centuries, commonly known as “the Apologies”, Helen Ree notes that such writings comprised the “self-definition and self-representation” of early Christianity, in response both to the external pressures of pagan hostility and the internal challenges of heterodoxy and disunity (Ree, 2005: 1). The actual term “apology” appears to have originated with the early fourth-century writer Eusebius of Caesarea, to denote works addressed to the Roman Emperor, and were not only speaking to fellow Christians (such as 1 Peter) or simply to peers, such as philosophers or pagan believers, but were directed at the public authorities. These were justifications for the Christian faith that reached beyond the Church itself to the wider society—indeed, to the highest Imperial powers of all. From the very beginning, then, the task of apologetics has been one of defending and commending its claims against a variety of non-believers, detractors, and persecutors: Jews, pagans, sceptics, and Emperors.

The opening paragraph of Justin Martyr’s (c. 100–167 CE) first Apology illustrates this well. The imperial leadership are addressed as men of learning, certainly; but in appealing to them in concert with other civil powers, and in introducing his own patrimony and citizenship as a representative of all the “nations” who suffer persecution, Justin cements together the political and philosophical dimensions of his defence:

To the Emperor Titus Aelius Adrianus Antoninus Pius Augustus Caesar, and to his son Verissimus the philosopher, and to Lucius the philosopher, the natural son of Caesar, and the adopted son of Pius, a lover of learning, and to the sacred senate, with the whole people of the Romans, I, Justin, son of Priscus and grandson of Bacchius, natives of Flavia Neopolis in Palestine, present this address and petition in [sic] behalf of those of all nations who are unjustly hated and wantonly abused, myself being one of them. (Martyr, 1983: 5)

Similarly, the apology of Athenagorus the Athenian (second century) reminds the Emperor of the highest principles of freedom of religion, enquiring why Christians appear to be excluded from this honourable treatment. He defends his faith on philosophical and intellectual grounds; but his chief motivation is to counter the slander and misrepresentation of Christianity. All he asks, says Athenagorus, is to be treated just like any other Imperial subject:

To the Emperors Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and Lucius Aurelius Commodus, conquerors of Armenia and Sarmatia, and more than all, philosophers ... In your empire, greatest of sovereigns, different nations have different customs and laws; and no one is hindered by law or fear of punishment from following his ancestral usages, however ridiculous these may be ...

But for us who are called Christians you have not in like manner cared; but although we commit no wrong—nay, as will appear in the sequel to this discourse, are of all men most piously and righteously disposed towards the Deity and towards your government—you allow us to be harassed, plundered, and persecuted, the multitude making war upon us for our name alone ...

If, indeed, anyone can convict us of a crime, be it small or great, we do not ask to be excused from punishment, but are prepared to undergo the sharpest and most merciless inflictions. But if the accusation relates merely to our name ... it will devolve on you, illustrious and benevolent and most-learned sovereigns, to remove by law this most spiteful treatment, so that, as throughout the world both individuals and citizens partake of your beneficence, we also may feel grateful to you, exulting that we are no longer the victims of false accusation ... (Athenagoras, 1983: 35–37)

The apologists of this era may be said to be stating a number of important principles, therefore. First, they uphold the credibility of Christian faith by means of appeals to non-Christian sources. Second, they turn to ideals of natural justice in their petitions regarding the way in which Imperial power is exercised (Skarsaune, 2010: 125–29). Third, whilst these apologists are certainly concerned to defend the intellectual coherence and Scriptural provenance of such witness, their arguments are also directed towards offering a theologically-reasoned rationale for the legitimacy of faith to “speak truth to power” and pursue a public vocation of active citizenship. Such apologies were effectively a “petition” to the Emperor (Skarsaune, 2010: 123).

What is more, they affirm the dialogical and “bilingual” nature of apologetics, in terms of the need to adopt the thought-forms and vernacular of one’s interlocutors. This helps us elaborate this conjunction of public theology and apologetics, since this is about justifying the moral and civic probity of communities of Christians to imperial and intellectual publics alike.

## A new apologetics

Since the eighteenth century, however, Christian apologetics has moved in a more philosophical direction. It is strongly associated today with evangelical parts of the Church which would insist on apologetics as entailing persuasion, a call to faith, and personal evangelism. Avery Dulles goes so far as to describe the apologist as one who “is regarded as an aggressive, opportunistic person who tries, by fair means or foul, to argue people into joining the church” (Dulles, 1971: xix). Whilst many contemporary apologists would concede that Christian faith comprises more than intellectual assent to theological propositions (Beilby, 2011: 168–69), the emphasis on the rational plausibility of Christian doctrine has led to an emphasis on rationalist, scientific, and propositional proof-arguments, at the expense of more incarnational, sacramental understandings of truth.

In recent years, however, there has been a further shift towards a more contextual apologetics that aims to engage with non-theological, cultural forms in order to find spaces of shared meaning—with motifs such as narrative, imagination, and performativity taking the place of rationalist, propositional methods. Such an understanding of apologetics roots it firmly in its context and in

the immediacy of experience and narrative. A recent collection of essays, entitled *Imaginative Apologetics* (Davison, 2011), argues, similarly, that it is through the media of culture, literature, art, and science that Christians should be defending and justifying their faith. This also opens up the possibility of apologetics as mediated through performative and aesthetic means. Apologetics is presented as a kind of contextual theology, entailing a reading of the signs of the times as revealed through popular culture, the arts and humanities:

It is not possible to discover how the Christian faith, and the Church, can speak meaningfully into a secular world unless efforts have first been made to understand the shape of this world itself: its values, assumptions, prejudices, cravings; especially as these reveal where the veil is thinnest between secular and religious concerns, and where, in fact, the Spirit may be going before those who already belong to faith, made manifest in places beyond the confines of the institutional Church. (Lazenby, 2011: 46)

This, of course, is quite consistent with the sensibilities of the earliest evangelists for the Gospel, who knew well the importance of addressing their audiences on their own terms, using concepts and arguments that would connect directly with their concerns, in terms familiar to their indigenous world-view. According to this model, then, apologetics is not interested in propositional truth (although any representation of faith will need to be intellectually robust) so much as something that excites our imagination. By the same token, an engagement with public life, literature, the arts, and material cultures constitutes a significant arena for apologetics, since these are the places where questions of truth, beauty, and goodness are encountered; they are ““diagnostic spaces”: places where the relationship between religion and the wider world is being clearly played out” (Lazenby, 2011: 47).

### An “apologetics of presence”

The problem is that none of the essays in *Imaginative Apologetics* contains a reference to anything resembling public theology, defined as Christian engagement in and commentary upon matters such as economics, civil society, media, or politics. Yet, if we were to transpose its core thesis into public theology, it might entail a demonstration of the difference faith makes to citizenship and public values, or offering an explanation to other citizens of the reasoning behind a particular public stance. So the invitation is not to “believe” but to enter or embrace a world-view which “unless it is also shown in action it is not adequately shown at all” (Davison, 2011: 26). These form the basis of the “reckoning” (2011: 14) offered to the rest of the world, in terms of *the difference it makes* to inhabit such a world-view.

Such an “apologetics of presence” (Murphy-O’Connor, 2009) embodies a number of motifs. After Duncan Forrester, I locate public theology as concerned primarily with “the welfare of the city” (Jer. 29.7), responding to the agenda of the world and contributing critically and constructively (in word and action) to a flourishing public square (Forrester, 2004). This is consistent with the bilingual and dialogical nature of public theology, in that it should seek to be accountable to

a broader reality which transcends any single institutional self-interest. Indeed, one of the ways in which public theology might promote the welfare of the city is to help to build a civil, inclusive space of public debate and action in which everyone is encouraged to cultivate the skills of active citizenship, whatever their background.

Second, post-secular public theology must maintain its vocation to “speak truth to power”, in continuity with the first Christian apologists who addressed political rulers in their defences of faith. Yet such an apologetic does not simply uphold the privileges of the Church, but challenges and prescribes in the interests of our common humanity. The historic understanding of early Christian apologists as petitioners to the Imperial powers, calling for justice and civil freedoms, should remain an important memory in this respect. But to speak “truth to power” in our day also invites consideration of the prophetic dimensions of public theology, and I will suggest that this requires the adoption of a stance of advocacy with the poor and marginalized, what Gustavo Gutiérrez (1983) terms the “non-persons” of history. He contrasts this with the Church’s mission to the “non-believer”, which resonates with my insistence on reclaiming apologetics as more than a merely cognitive or propositional activity. Christian apologetics is in part a demonstration of “God’s preferential option for the poor”: of providing the theological justification for the practices of solidarity with those who find themselves on the underside of history.

But there is a challenge for the Church itself. Arguably, public theology is most decisively enacted and made convincing through the grass-roots witness of local communities, as bearers of transformative social capital, and as “Ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor. 5.20). But are ordinary, lay Christians really given the resources to relate the teachings of Scripture and tradition to the dilemmas of everyday life, let alone to be equipped as effective “apologists” I wonder? It is possible that traditions of public theology that have concentrated on the statements of church leaders need to be augmented by a more sustained approach to fostering the role of the laity, and nurturing grass-roots practices of discipleship that spill over into active citizenship. This impinges on aspects of Christian formation and catechesis as well, since it also makes a priority of the cultivation of the skills of theological literacy amongst the laity, not least in order to maintain the reservoir of theological reflection on which effective apologetics depends.

## Conclusion

I have been arguing that some of the most significant and foundational events and texts of early Christianity were apologetic in nature. But they were often also quintessentially pieces of public theology: not only were they conducted in public assemblies, religious or civic, subjecting themselves to universal scrutiny, but they were also often petitions directed at the political authorities, and concerned the relationship of Christians to imperial and secular authority as well as matters of belief. It is my belief that it now falls to public theology to take on a similar apologetic role, of rendering Christian faith comprehensible in a world in which religion is both simultaneously increasingly at odds with cultural trends and yet at

the same time newly and vividly relevant. Max Stackhouse's advocacy of the necessity of public theology marks the beginning of an apologetic justification that equips Church leaders and lay people alike to articulate the values that underpin a thriving global civil society (Hainsworth and Paeth, 2010: xii–xiv; Stackhouse, 2014). Public theology “must show that it can form, inform and sustain the moral and spiritual architecture of a civil society so that truth, justice and mercy are more nearly approximated in the souls of persons and in the institutions of the common life” (Stackhouse, 2007: 107).

Public theology is not only concerned to do theology *about* public issues, but called to do its theology *in* public, by demonstrating a transparency and accountability towards a thriving, plural public realm that transcends special pleading or sectional interest in the name of the common good. The challenge is to demonstrate how and why the Gospel demands of love, justice, forgiveness, and hope are compelling imperatives to be realized “on earth as it is in heaven”.

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