PUBLIC THEOLOGY: SOME MEASURES AND AUSTRALIAN REFLECTIONS

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* The paper reflects on the last three years convening an Economics and Theology Dialogue Group involving UNSW, ANU and St Marks National Theological Centre in Canberra. It has been further stimulated by observations and discussions during my 2006-7 sabbatical leave as a visiting scholar at Princeton Theological Seminary and Princeton University. I thank those who have been willing to discuss the issues, without wishing to associate any with the views expressed here.

Abstract

Will public theology be a successful renewal movement that reconnects theology to other academic disciplines and the wider world or yet another self absorbed speciality within theology? Interdisciplinary engagement is the key to public theology’s role as a renewal movement, and this paper compares public theology to renewal movements in other academic disciplines, suggests measures of the depth of interdisciplinary engagement, and explores whether public theology has the option to bypass academic disciplines. The final section discusses the prospects for public theology in an Australian context marked by utilitarianism, a suspicion of religious institutions, particular constitutional provisions, and a history of separation between theological education and our universities. The prospects for renewal in Australia are good, and would enrich both Australian theology and our national life.
1) INTRODUCTION

If the recent institutional consolidation of public theology is, as Will Storrar has suggested, a “‘kairos’ moment of opportunity for theologians and other scholars working in the emerging field of interdisciplinary theological inquiry into contemporary public issues”¹ then participants have a responsibility to make the most of this opportunity². Will public theology be a successful renewal movement that reconnects theology to other academic disciplines and the wider world, or will it become another self absorbed speciality within theology?

The key features of public theology identified by Storrar are its interdisciplinary character and its engagement with contemporary issues. These are features of most theology of lasting value – what we call systematic theology was after all the product of the engagement of Christianity with Greek philosophy. In the same way contemporary theology has gained much from the encounter with modern science³. Public theology rejects theology’s false understanding of itself as a pure autonomous discipline and seeks to draw it into new productive engagements⁴. Perhaps public theology is best interpreted as banner under which theologians can rally to reclaim something that has been lost in the contemporary discipline. On this interpretation public theologians should be working towards their field becoming redundant – the more successful they are the sooner this will happen.

This paper is a contribution to the discussion of the future of public theology. To assess its prospects for success I examine other renewal movements within academic disciplines, and consider some concrete measures of which might indicate public theology’s success or

² Stackhouse, M. God and Globalization: Globalization and Grace Volume 4 Harrisburg, Trinity Press 2007 reviews the history of public theology, concentrating on the liberal protestant tradition in the US. Much mainstream theology beginning with Augustine’s City of God could be classified as public theology although the label is of recent origin. Not all who engage theologically with public issues, perhaps not even the majority, label their work as public theology. Charles Mathews A Theology of Public Life Cambridge, CUP 2007 for instance vigorously resists the label.
⁴ This description of public theology as engagement refers to the back and forth process between the authoritative sources of theology and the world. Such a process is perfectly compatible with a high view of the authority of scripture.
otherwise as a renewal movement. Building on this, the final section discusses in practical terms how the cause of public theology might be best promoted in an Australian context. The paper is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of public theology.

2) OTHER RENEWAL MOVEMENTS

If public theology is to operate as a renewal movement within theology, then it can perhaps learn from comparisons with similar movements in other fields.

In my own primary research field of economics, development economics is a striking example of a successful renewal movement which operated from about 1950, through the peak of its influence in the 1970s, before being absorbed back into mainstream economics. Development economics began as a loose collection of scholars who felt that mainstream economic theory was inadequate for dealing with the particular problems of developing countries. Many of these scholars had backgrounds in other disciplines such as anthropology or sociology, or had worked closely with scholars in other disciplines. New theories took shape (e.g. growth models, theories of risk sharing in agriculture), were usefully applied, and increasingly incorporated into mainstream economics. The field itself followed and it now difficult to disentangle development economics from contemporary mainstream economics to which it has made so many contributions.

Another example is behavioural economics and finance. It began with a number of scholars finding psychology could help explain some of the departures of observed behaviour from mainstream economic and financial models. After a period in the 1990s as a boom sub-field within economics (including Daniel Kahneman’s Nobel Prize) behavioural economics is now being integrated into the mainstream economics. Undergraduate economics textbooks

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5 I am cautious about explaining the formation and progress of new sub-disciplines entirely in terms of the self-interest of participants. For example, opportunities a new sub-discipline offers to participating scholars to position themselves as authorities and gate-keepers, capturing the esteem and other career rewards that follow.


have even begun discussing it. In its early years the field cited psychologists, then other behavioural economists in the emerging field, then beginning to cite and be cited by mainstream economists. One of the pioneers Richard Thaler has written of “The End of Behavioural Finance” as a mark of its success.

Hambrick and Chen have considered the dynamics of new academic fields in more general terms, drawing on the rise of the sub-field of Strategic Management. They characterise many aspiring academic fields as admittance-seeking social movements, which need three major elements for success: differentiation (showing that certain problems are not and cannot be addressed by existing fields), mobilization (building societies, journals, institutional niches), and legitimacy-building. Strategic management had each of these elements as it progressed from a small community of scholars to a large and prestigious sub-field within management. Some other aspiring academic fields are oppositional movements which aim replace the mainstream field, and sometimes survive as a stable alternative community outside the mainstream. Examples in management include gender studies and social issues in management.

Development economics, behavioural economics and strategic management are all success stories. A relatively new field in theology which in my view has not been so successful is theological ethics. Although valuable work has been done under the banner of theological ethics, as a discipline it has evolved into a speciality within theology, mostly citing itself, not interacting much with systematic theology, nor seriously engaging or being cited much by scholars in the disciplines (such as medicine, environmental science, economics) related to the issues with which it deals.

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9 Donald Hambrick and Ming-Jer Chen “New Academic Fields as Admittance-Seeking Social Movements: The Case of Strategic Management” Academy of Management Review 2007
10 Critics of the shape and content of contemporary theological ethics include Stanley Hauerwas (e.g. The Peaceable Kingdom University of Notre Dame Press 1983, Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics (with Samuel Wells) 2006), John Milbank (e.g Theology and Social Theory Blackwell 1991 and “Can Morality be Christian” in The Word Made Strange Blackwell 1997) and Oliver O’Donovan (e.g. Resurrection and Moral Order Eerdmans 1986).
11 An honourable exception among theological ethicists writing on economics is Max Stackhouse who shows evidence of reading in the subject in his God and Globalization volumes. There are others.
3) MEASURES

How can we tell whether public theology is heading down the transformative path or towards being a self absorbed sub-discipline? In this section I will suggest some quantitative indicators of the interdisciplinary engagement which is necessary component for a transformative public theology.

An obvious first measure of the interdisciplinary character is the mix of scholars engaged in public theology. If positions in public theology are exclusively held by scholars with backgrounds in theology alone this is a worrying sign, and even more so if visitors to public theology centres and conference have similar backgrounds. Interdisciplinary engagement is irreducibly personal, as it is not just the exchange of information, requiring also a sense of disciplinary cultures, constant checking of understanding, and testing of arguments against the standards of evidence and reasoning in other disciplines. Without involving scholars from other disciplines there can be no deep interdisciplinary engagement.

Another measure of the degree of interdisciplinary engagement is citation patterns. To what extent do works of public theology cite other works of public theology vs works in other disciplines? I would expect a healthy public theology to be sometimes citing other works of public theology (some disciplinary self reflection is needed and the occasional survey is needed), but the normal pattern to be moving back and forth between the sources of theology and works in disciplines such as politics, economics, and environmental science, with citations marking the way.

An issue for any such citation analysis is identifying works of public theology. The literature consists of books, and journals and web pages. Public theology might be defined as works with public theology in their title, or published in journals with public theology in its title. However if we take Storrar’s definition of public theology seriously then the best works of public theology may not identify themselves as such nor be published in public theology journals. The appropriate sample space would also need to be identified, and something like the ATLA database is possible, although this would miss theological analyses published in books and journals of other disciplines, where theological analysis of a topic may have more impact.
I have carried out a preliminary citation analysis which takes advantage of the recent launch of the *International Journal of Public Theology*. The five issues that have come out so far gives a sample of papers that are non-controversially public theology – the authors have signalled this by submitting to such a journal. I divided citations into (i) works of public theology (defined as having public theology in their title, or published in journal with public theology in its title) (ii) other works on religion and social issues (iii) other theology (iv) church reports and internal documents (v) works from other disciplines (vi) general information and press articles. There was a great deal of variability in citation patterns across articles published in the journal, but there did seem to be a worrying self referential tendency. This would be even more so if I had counted as public theology citations works by the author himself or herself, and works by authors publishing in these issues of the journal. Citing works in other fields may not represent a very deep engagement with those fields, and this seemed to be an issue in some articles. To be fair, the first issues of the *International Journal of Public Theology* appropriately contained several articles considering the nature of public theology and what its future might be, so my preliminary analysis may not be representative of citation patterns over the long run.

Another type of citation analysis would consider the degree to which outsiders cite works of public theology. There are many commercially available citation measures, but a simple and publicly available one is Google scholar. A check of citations of articles published in the *International Journal of Public Theology* was not very encouraging, but the newness of the journal in relation to typical citation time lags in the humanities means makes me cautious about reading too much into this. It would be worrying if these articles are not attracting citations in several years time. Publication and citation in the core journals of theology and other disciplines such as economics would be a sign of the health of public theology.
3) WHICH PUBLIC?

It might be argued that the measures in the previous section are all about academic impact, to the neglect of other audiences and types of engagement\(^\text{12}\). An influential discussion of the meaning of public in public theology has been David Tracy’s *Analogical Imagination*\(^\text{13}\) which distinguishes the academy, the Church and the body politic. Let us consider the non-academic publics in turn.

If public theology is not having much impact on the academy, but is being listened to in the church what might this mean? One possibility is the secular academy is unable to listen to the truth. An alternative is that public theology is actually for internal consumption, reassuring the church of its relevance. The salaries of many public theologians are paid by churches, and networks and careers tied to churches, so the alternative seems plausible when we look at it from the point of view of public theologians’ material and esteem interests. From the churches point of view reassurance of relevance may be more cheaply obtained by the appearance of engagement with the wider world that some public theology represents rather than the difficult reality of engagement.

A defence of public theology that it needs to bypass academia to impact Tracey’s body politic (or on the general public) warrants consideration. In relation to my own primary field, most church commentary on economic issues in fact bypasses the academic discipline of economics. Often there is considerable antagonism towards economics and a tendency to blame economists for many of the problems of world\(^\text{14}\). I would certainly acknowledge that economics as a discipline has its limitations and vanities, and should like all academic disciplines be open to theological scrutiny. However mainstream economics offers rich empirical and theoretical resources, developed and criticised over the last two centuries, that

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\(^{12}\) For instance the involvement (described in Storrar “A Kairos Moment for Public Theology” *International Journal of Public Theology* 2007 1:1 p5-25) of those affected by policies under debate in the University of Edinburgh Centre for Theology and Public Issues under Duncan Forrester.

\(^{13}\) David Tracy *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* New York Crossroad 1981.


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it would be unwise for public theologians to ignore. The same sort of empirical and theoretical resources offered by medical science or climatology are usually taken seriously by theologians. Bypassing the science of economics is particularly problematic because unintended and/or unseen consequences of actions tend to be important to economic debates. In any debate involving the capacities of markets these unintended or unseen consequences are crucial. Another way of putting it is that much economics is about the behaviour of systems that are not necessarily an obvious summation of the observable actions of individuals. It takes considerable effort to come to grips with economic theory and empirical findings, an effort which theologians tend not to have the professional incentive to undertake. Ignorance and economist bashing are often easier, and play well in most theological circles.

Thus public theology which attempts to bypass the academic disciplines relevant to the issues they are commenting on should be viewed with suspicion.

4) INTERDISCIPLINARY THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT IN AN AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

In the light of these considerations how do we proceed with public theology in an Australian context? As emphasised by many contributors to contemporary public theology, context matters, and public theology will be conducted differently in Australia, the US, Scotland and South Africa. Some features of our Australian situation that matter for public theology are:

(1) Our utilitarian heritage. As John Gascoigne’s superb book has pointed out utilitarianism has been and continues to be an important part of Australian public culture. Even more so than Britain where it originated, and far more so than the US.

(2) We are not handicapped by establishment of civil religion, but there is a deep suspicion of religious institutions and authorities.

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16 The much lamented contemporary dominance of economic criteria in public policy debates is a manifestation of this. Economics retains its intimate association with nineteenth century British utilitarianism.
(3) Our constitutional provision for religion\(^{17}\), which prevents the “establishing any religion” while ruling out interference with the “free exercise of any religion”.

(4) History of our university and theological college system. Unlike the US and UK theology has never had much of a foothold in our universities. The foundation documents of our oldest Universities excluded theology, leading to the foundation the Melbourne College of Divinity under a separate act of Parliament, and theology teaching at University of Sydney only under the auspices of church-affiliated residential colleges which were allowed on campus. Most theological education was carried out away from our universities in church theological colleges and seminaries which focused on the training of candidates for denominational ministry and which tended not to engage with the wider intellectual world\(^{18}\).

If public theology is to succeed in Australia there must be substantial interaction with, and perhaps a permanent home in our major Universities. This unfortunately runs into problems with each of the features above, but there are strategies available to deal with the problems:

(1) In relation to utilitarianism, theologians cannot credibly claim the same immediate and measurable benefits from their discipline for Australia as engineers or medical scientists. However the outcomes that matter for University administrators are student numbers and quality, research grant income, PhD completions and publications. Theology will never attract as many undergraduates as a subject like business, but at the postgraduate level it has attracted enough high quality students to pay the bills and warm administrator’s hearts. On the research outcomes, apart perhaps from research grant income, theology is well placed. Last year the theological college I know best, St Marks National Theological Centre and the co-located Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture in Canberra (affiliated with Charles


Sturt University as its Faculty of Theology) was reported as producing the largest number of publications of any Faculty in the University, as well as having a large and successful PhD program and the only ARC Fellow in the University.

A danger that comes with the utilitarianism of Australian culture is instrumentalising theology. Theologians are often tempted to rebadge their work as ethics or religious studies, compromising its Christian missional character. The instrumentalising of theology has been a problem for University chaplaincy which has sometimes been moulded into an on-the-cheap counselling service for the Universities. If we do have to make a utilitarian argument for theology it would be better made on the basis of student numbers/publications/grant income etc rather than on health or happiness benefits of theology. This is because then the theological content is not in question when the argument is made this way and hence there is less danger of watering down the content (unless watering down systematically enhances student recruitment/publication/grant success rates).

(2) The suspicion of religious institutions is best circumvented by theologically informed lay action in mainstream forums. Theology is a far less charged topic of discussion for Australians than Americans, provided the discussion is not taking place in a church environment or is clouded by questions of religious privilege.

(3) Our constitutional provisions are widely believed to be a barrier to theology having a place in our publicly funded University system. Legally this does not seem to be the case. Such beliefs have been brushed aside in other areas, such as the funding of church schools, and the contacting out of welfare and labour market services to church related organisations.

(4) The largest barrier to public theology having a place in our universities is the historical separation between theological education and our universities. This historical separation can be overcome by innovative institutional linkages. At the moment the theological colleges which have affiliated with Universities are not well integrated with their host Universities. The Church-run residential Colleges at our older Universities have always had the potential to link church and intellectual life, but have a mixed record in this regard so far, and many currently seem to be letting business pressures erode their vision of what a
residential College could be. I would like to briefly review some other models which have merit – some which have been tried in Australia and some which have not\textsuperscript{19}.

One model is forming Christian universities. The Catholic Church has led the way here with the formation of Australian Catholic University and more recently the private University of Notre Dame Australia. Both have their strengths and difficulties. In Australia the other religious group which has the resources and will to mount a substantial University is the Pentecostals - perhaps one day there will be a Hillsong University or perhaps the Assemblies of God affiliated Southern Cross College will develop into a University. The Reformed churches probably have the will, and overseas examples such as the Free University of Amsterdam, but seem not to have the resources to start a credible University in Australia.

There are issues with Christian Universities apart from the resources required, and one innovative alternative is Macquarie Christian Studies Institute (MCSI) founded in the 1990s. It was in some ways an Australian version of Regent College Vancouver, emphasising the preparation of lay people and the integration of faith and life. Its relationship with Macquarie University however was closer than Regent’s with University of British Columbia and MCSI courses could be included in any Macquarie degree. Courses included some traditional theology, but most related particular fields of study to theology, and students were assisted in this by senior Christian mentors. Students could take advantage of the library, sporting and other facilities of the University, with the payoff for Macquarie being additional students attracted to the University by the opportunity of taking MCSI courses\textsuperscript{20}.

If a wealthy philanthropist was prepared to fund a Centre of Theological Inquiry like that in Princeton it would be a wonderful thing for Australia. This would provide opportunities which do not currently exist in Australia for sustained research by theologians and others. Perhaps the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture in Canberra could develop into something like this with a substantial injection of funds.

\textsuperscript{19} This list is inevitably influenced by my own experience – I know institutions in Sydney and Canberra better, and have spent sabbaticals in Oxford Vancouver and Princeton.

\textsuperscript{20} Sadly since the first draft of this article was written MCSI announced it is closing down, due to a decision by Macquarie University which has affected its ability to enroll Macquarie students. The situation remains complex and details may be found at http://www.mcsi.edu.au/.
Another Princeton institution which would work well in an Australian setting would be a Centre for the Study of Religion. It is a Centre within the University which runs events on religious topics and supplements a very small core staff (the current Director Robert Wuthnow holds a substantive position in the Sociology Department, in fact chairing it at one stage) plus about a dozen postdoctoral fellows selected each year, and Princeton faculty and students working on religious topics. It avoids the problems that Departments of Religion have had in Australian Universities, and seems an ideal model for our system, especially appropriate in my view for ANU as our national flagship institution.

An open question about overcoming the historical separation of theology from other disciplines is the treatment of interdisciplinary in the current Excellence in Research in Australia (ERA) exercise. The rhetoric is (as often with these exercises) favourable to interdisciplinary work and displays no in-principle objection to theology, but the test will be the detail of the scheme, in particular the subject classifications, rankings of journals, and treatment of books. Theology has had a poor record with ARC in this regard.

7) CONCLUSION

There are reasons to be hopeful about the prospects for public theology in Australia – about the prospects for to transform theology as a discipline and make a substantial contribution to national life. Each of the cultural barriers is capable of being overcome. However the signs so far are mixed and many will be watching the progress of public theology with interest in Australia over the next few years.