

Editorial

Special Issue—God and the Public Debate

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Guest Editors

In May 2014, the Protestant Theological University (PThU) held an international conference in Amsterdam on the theme, 'God in the Public Domain'. Fifty theologians from the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Czech Republic, the United States of America, China, Indonesia, South Korea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and South Africa participated in a programme which included keynote lectures, research presentations, debates and excursions to places where theology and culture meet, all around the central theme, God in the public domain.

The organizers deliberately chose a theme which included God rather than mere expressions of faith or religion. In being more 'theo-logical' than an approach from, for example, religious studies, this theme is bound to raise questions. What do we mean by 'public domain': politics, the media, popular culture, society as a whole? What do we mean by 'God'? How and where can we find God in the public domain? And how do we interpret, address and manage the vast plurality of convictions found with regard to the answers to these questions? The fact that not only God is included in the theme, but that the term was not even put in quotation marks, may stir skepticism: do theologians believe that, as theologians, they can say something about 'how things really and ultimately are', as the American ethicist James M. Gustafson puts it?¹ Well, no—and well, yes. By picking the theme as it was, two things were obvious beforehand. First, there is the assumption that not only God-talk and religion can be found in the public domain, but that theology's task is to 'discern divine presence' (John D. Caputo, as presented by Rein Brouwer in this issue). Secondly, this theme invites participants to explicate their own personal questions and convictions about God and God's relations to the public domain. There is no hiding behind disciplinary standard definitions, no appeal to ecclesial authority, no safe haven in the mere description of possible

1 James M. Gustafson, *Ethics and Theology*, vol. 2 of *Ethics from Theocentric Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 98.

positions. Public theology in this way is more than a scholarly debate; it is also a discourse on a highly existential level about the relations between personal life and public goods. The highlight of this outward and open attitude at the conference was found in a broadcasted evening debate in which a Muslim political scientist, a Jewish rabbi, a secular ethicist, a Christian sociologist, and a Protestant synod chairwoman discussed the relations between faith and ethics in a pluralist society.²

For this special issue, we have selected five papers that were presented at the conference and that have been edited for a broader readership. The papers take different vantage points: biblical theology (Prudký), theology and politics (Van der Borcht), theology and popular culture (Klomp), theology and society (Brouwer), and theology and health care (De Lange). The Prague Old Testament scholar Martin Prudký starts his quest for public theology in the narrative of Abram's vocation, which he calls a 'programmatic speech' by JHWH. Abram steps out of his status quo (symbolized in the word, 'vocation') and enters a new journey (symbolized in the word, 'mission'). Whereas the leaving of his status quo contains an element of exclusivity and demarcation—something which can be found in many religious narratives—the mission to which Abram is called stresses the bonds and the universality of humankind. Contrary to other opinions Prudký argues that the focus in this text is on Abram becoming a blessing, not on him becoming blessed; this means, a focus on other people. A blessing to be chosen is not a blessing at the expense of others; rather, it is directly and instrumentally defined for others. In its inclusivity the story of Abram is fundamentally different from, for example, the Exodus narrative, which speaks in terms of a holy war both where it regards the vocation (Abram narrative) and the mission (in the Abram narrative). Prudký stresses the value of this narrative not only within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam separately—each of these religions highlighting their own characteristics in the narrative—but also as a common ground for a dialogue between these monotheistic religions. In time, Abram precedes the pivotal orienting figures that embody the special identity of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. The challenging question, of course, is to what extent this interfaith dialogue, based on a shared religious narrative, is applicable to discussions in the public domain. In the words of the author, 'Is it possible to suppose that the sentence "and God said" makes any sense at all in the general "public culture"?"

2 PthU Talkshow, see <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hrg972ceqHU&feature=youtu.be>> [accessed 26 March 2015].

In his contribution 'Reconciliation in the Public Domain: the South African Case', Eddy Van der Borgh, Desmond Tutu professor of Reconciliation at VU University, reconstructs the history of the concept of reconciliation as it became central within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) from 1995 onwards in the aftermath of the struggle against the apartheid. In the decade before, the notion of reconciliation was not only used by theologians and church leaders, but increasingly became a term in the public discourse of other partners: the South-African government, the political parties, civil society. The key role it then played in the TRC shows that the modern liberal dichotomies between the sphere of the private and the public, and between the religious and the secular are obsolete. Van der Borgh even suggests that the theological notion of reconciliation in the public domain may have become 'the new face of God in a secular age.' In his contribution he describes how multi-layered and complex reconciliation functioned in the process of overcoming apartheid. From a theological concept, it became a political symbol, a public event. It can only be understood and interpreted in a multi-disciplinary approach, in which the voice of theology, an important source for reconciliation, should not be missed.

In 'Theology, Perhaps: A Practical Theological Reflection on Kristien Hemmerechts' Novel *The Woman who Fed the Dogs*', PThU practical theologian Rein Brouwer turns to popular culture. As a 'practical public theologian' he asks whether there is 'divine presence' discernible in the public debate that arose in Belgium around Hemmerechts' novel about Michele Martin, 'the woman who fed the dogs', but let the two victims of the sexual abuse of her husband, Marc Dutroux, starve and die. Both in the novel and in real life an important role is played by the sisters of the convent of Poor Clares, who give refuge to Martin after she is released from prison, despite severe public protest. Brouwer uses the work of the deconstructionist theologian John Caputo to show how notions of prayer, hospitality and forgiveness play a key role in understanding the attitude of the sisters. Caputo criticizes a 'strong' theology, meaning a (supernaturalistic) onto-theo-logy focused on the existence and reality of God. He is more interested in 'answering to the provocation of the *event* of the name of God, than in adjudicating whether there is an entity somewhere who answers to this name.' Brouwer concludes not just that Hemmerechts' novel is an illustration of the presence of religion in popular culture, but that 'it might also be read theologically, as a witness to the excess of the event that stirs in the name of God, perhaps'.

Since its first edition in 2011, 'The Passion', an annual performance on the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the heart of one of the

Netherlands' big cities, has become a large media event in Dutch society. By choosing Dutch-language hits, the biblical story of Jesus' last days and hours is appropriated by the public. This, in turn, gives new meanings to the existing popular songs. In 'Staging the Resurrection: The Public Theology of Dutch Production and Broadcasting Companies', Mirella Klomp describes the event, and concentrates on the way the resurrection was staged over the last years. At every single occasion, the risen Christ is performed differently. Christ is presented as a trustworthy friend, a sacramental event, a guiding companion in life, a light bringer, close to us. The specific choices the organizers make in their presentation reflect theological choices. Production and broadcasting companies therefore act, Klomp argues, as constructors of public theology, a practice no longer reserved for the church and the academy. This is not to be deplored. In these late-modern times, ecclesiastical meanings prove no longer authoritative, and the religious heritage of Christianity constantly moves from the ecclesial to the public domain and reversely. Klomp argues that this kind of public theology not only changes the methodology of theology, but also influences theology's agenda and content.

In his contribution, 'Learning by Doing: Being a Public Theologian in the Debate on Ageing', Frits de Lange draws upon his extensive experiences in debates both in and outside the Netherlands. De Lange defines public theology as a contextual reflection on the good life for all in the light of the Christian narrative. He refers to Hans Reichenbach's distinction between the context of discovery for a Christian understanding in ethics, and the secular, multi-religious context of justification in which this understanding is communicated. Drawing upon Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological understanding of reality, De Lange stresses the this-worldliness of public theology. It is theology 'for the public,' in full confidence that there is no reality outside the reality that is created, sustained, and reconciled by God. This does not mean that the theologian always uses God-talk, but even so he/she has important instruments. 'A theologian, trained in hermeneutics, acquainted with a sensitive reading of symbols, metaphors and myths, is especially well suited and equipped to recognize and analyse the narrative power of the central metaphors that feed social imaginaries'. On the basis of his experiences, he suggests four methodological guidelines for a theologian's engagement in public debates: this engagement is contextual; it contributes to the development of 'social imaginaries'; it must be well-informed in the topic that is at stake; and it seeks cooperation with manifold allies. This engagement is not a one-way road: rather it is an ongoing, open-ended dialogical hermeneutical conversation with culture and society.

In these contributions, as on the conference from which these papers originated, theology is practiced in a certain manner: presenting and explaining what one believes to be true and valuable as scholars and believers, but also being susceptible to outside arguments. By putting God in the title of a conference without parentheses, public theology is an audacious enterprise. At the same time, public theology conducted in this way is vulnerable, because no final word can be spoken.