**Public Theology: A New Model of Public Engagement**

**David Steven’s Memorial Lecture**

I am grateful to Jacqueline Irwin and the Community Relations Council for the invitation to give this year's David Stevens Memorial Lecture. It was an invitation I could not refuse. I count it an immense privilege to be able to honour David in this way. We knew each other well, worked from the same building in Elmwood Avenue for some years and our paths crossed in a variety of ways over a long time. We shared some exciting adventures together. On one occasion we even slept together! Let me quickly explain. We set off to a conference in the Romanian city of Sibiu, arrived first in Bucharest airport expecting to be met, taken to a hotel and then travel on by train the next morning. There was no one at the airport and we had no contact numbers and it was late at night. We thought perhaps the railway station was the meeting point, so we went outside and took a taxi. We were ripped off because we ought to have used the official airport taxi booked from the airport desk. Now we were at Bucharest Central, almost penniless, and no meet and greet Romanians. There were just guys offering to drive us to Sibiu, which would have probably meant re-mortgaging our houses in Belfast. So we slept together on a bench in a deserted Bucharest Central Station, with lots of pigeons for company. It was a relief around 6am when a little huckster of a stall opened selling very bad coffee, but coffee! At 8am the train left for Sibiu, a 4-5 hour journey, with David and I at our least charitable towards Romanians and each of us running out of expletives in both English and Romanian! We arrived in Sibiu, unwashed, unfed and unimpressed. We then discovered that Sibiu was also known as Hermannstadt, and that the name you used depended on your interpretation of history and your ethnicity and identity politics. We felt at home. We had Derry-Londonderry Stroke City and it was not unique after all. I have many other fond memories of David, and especially of his work and commitment to peace, reconciliation and good relations. I count it a great privilege to be able to give this lecture in his memory today.

The title I have chosen is Public Theology: A New Model of Public Engagement. The language and concept of public theology was not much in our Irish discourse during David's professional lifetime, but I do think it is a way of doing theology and engaging with the big public issues of our global time that would have engaged him and to which he would have been strongly committed.

**WHAT PUBLIC THEOLOGY IS NOT**

Public theology is not civil religion. Civil religion arose out of a time of national creeds established by political regimes. It is the religion of a national constitution. Around the period of the Reformations the religion of the ruler became the religion of the people. When the Tudors under Henry VIII made Ireland England's first colony, the assumption was that the religion of the King, the Anglican form of Protestantism, would become the religion of the Irish people. That was resisted and Ireland did not become Protestant, at least 90% did not. The rest became bitter sectarian history.

Civil religion is associated with nationalism and identified with a flag. It is a strongly patriotic religion, patriotic in the sense that God is American or God is English and it is my nation right or wrong, my nation. Civil religion is often baptised by the symbols of the dominant faith. In the USA it is always white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, or a distinctly evangelical type. In the then Free State which became the Republic of Ireland in 1948, Irish identity and nationalism were baptised by the Catholic Christian tradition. It was the faith of the majority of the people and was the dominant faith in more ways than one. In the new Northern Ireland, the unionism of the majority of the population was baptised by the Protestant Christian traditions. We had a Protestant parliament for Protestant people and a Catholic state for Catholic people. To be Catholic was to be Irish and to be Protestant was to be British.

Britain had its own civil religion especially through the 1688 Act of Settlement where the monarch can only be a Protestant, which means Anglican and can only marry an Anglican. There is an established state church, the Anglican State Church of which the monarch is the Supreme Governor. Even though Prince Harry is well down the succession line the American he will marry in May is having to go through Anglican confirmation classes to become an Anglican. So too did Kate Middleton. Civil religion takes on the trappings of a national religion. The flag usually has a prominent place in the church.

At its worst civil religion becomes idolatrous, God created in the state, national image, the patron of the nation. Civil religion is also the religion of the state constitution. German Reformed theologian, Jurgen Moltmann once asked the very pertinent question, who is the God of the German constitution? Who is the God of the American dollar, 'In God we trust'? Or who is the God of the Irish constitution? The latter is probably unique in that the constitutional God of de Valera's 1937 constitution is Trinitarian and also invokes Jesus Christ. In a more democratic and secular world it is becoming anomalous to invoke a deity, God or Allah in a constitution, especially in more pluralist societies. There was a right good row a few years back when God was missing from a European constitution. If it is proposed to eliminate the Preamble from the Irish constitution with its Trinitarian and Christological references we may have another good row. But civil religion is not public theology. It never was and never will be. Public theology is not in the service of nationalism or the state.

Public theology is not political theology. The early church historian, Eusebius, saw political theology in the work of Constantine and the Christianisation of empire. This carried on in the Reformations with the development of national creeds and confessions. With the 19th century development of nationalism and the nation-state with flags and sacred hymns or anthems, we had politicised theology.

Reformist and overtly democratic political theologies developed in the 1970s and 80s through the Catholic Metz and Protestant Moltmann. This was a European development in response to the student unrest and civil rights movement of the 1960s. Political theology tended to be statist, still too closely tied to the state. But there was God beyond politics and God beyond a politicised God.

The difference between political theology and the now preferred term public theology is that for political theology politics is the primary narrative and politicians are the key players or actors. For public theology civil society is the primary narrative and the people are the key actors. Politics and politicians are not the elite or the ultimate. To borrow words from the American constitution, public theology is 'we the people' theology. Public theology stands at a critical distance from politics, not in a dominating role or intimate bedfellow, but as critical and prophetic friend. This is why the faith community has to work out in a post-Christendom world a very different relationship with and to political power and the state. In an AC world we are in a very different place and our relationship to power is very different, but what does it look like? There are also politicians and nationalist and unionist mind-sets that have still to rework and reimagine that relationship.

**PUBLIC THEOLOGY AND THE SECULAR**

We live in the West in a very secular society, whatever exactly that means. What does it mean to live in a secular society and how secular is society? Church leaders sometimes complain about the secular and lament the marginalisation of the church. The media is frequently blamed for the secular agenda. Many years ago I remember a then leading politician in the Republic complaining on the RTE Late Late Show that there was no sex in Ireland before the Late Late Show! I think he thought Gay Byrne was the devil incarnate. The issues are much deeper and more complex.

From early in the 20th century we had the death of Christendom, the loss of power and influence of organised, institutional religion, and we had the largely global spread of democracy. We need to understand what the process of democratisation has been doing in societies. We will come to that soon. Meanwhile our language is confused and confusing with words like secular and related words meaning different things to different people and in different cultures. Something has been going on in our Western society and from the academy down we are not altogether sure what it is or how to describe it. Let me attempt to give meaning to three like words but which may mean different things. The words are secularisation, secularism and secular.

Secularisation is the process of religion increasingly losing power in the public square. Institutional religion in Ireland over the last 50-60 years has lost its public power. It no longer controls and no longer has the power of control in public life. Institutional religion no longer dominates. In areas of life the state now controls what the church once controlled.  Institutional religion, either because it has been pushed out of the public square, or because it has itself retreated from public space, it is now on the margins. This is secularisation and the process is often a societal reaction to once powerful and dominating religious institutions.

Secularism is the often aggressive opposition to religion in public space, the insistence that religion should have no space in public life but should be where it rightly belongs, in the realm of the private. This has been the stance of the New Atheists that all religion is only superstition, irrational and a toxic poison. There is a militancy about it that is as intolerant as religion itself has sometimes been. It can be as closed as the most militant forms of religious fundamentalism and may be a form of atheistic or secular fundamentalism. It is anti-democratic in its insistence that no religion should have any place in the public square but stay in the private. This is secularism and its intolerant, anti-democratic stance should be called and opposed.

Secular is something different. It recognises that the politics of society and governance should be carried on without interference or dominance of religion and religious institutions. That national constitutions do not need a God-reference. Secular is society organised on the basis of human reasoning and not divine revelation. Secular actually means democratic or democracy. Democracy is pluralist and though it is not a perfect form of governance, always a work in progress, it is and will remain for the foreseeable future the best form of governance we have. We live in a pluralist democracy in both parts of Ireland, though there may be some who find the pluralism of democracy hard to accept. But without pluralist democracy we have exclusion and social, political and cultural forms of discrimination, in other words injustice.

Democracy has core ingredients: pluralism, freedom, tolerance/respect, human rights, equality of participation, power shared, mutuality and accountability, rule of law. Democracy is also participative and deliberative in that all are involved and engaged in the conversations, dialogue and discourse around public affairs and what makes for the common good. Democracy means that all have a voice, with equal right to be heard and express that voice, but no voice is privileged.  The faith voice has the right to be heard in a pluralist democracy but no longer a dominating voice, no longer a hegemonic voice, but one voice among the plural many. And the only power the faith voice has is the power of moral persuasion.  Faith in the secular, pluralist democratic society no longer has the power of the state, the power of state legislation or any coercive imposition. It has the right to be in the public square with all the other voices only with the power of moral persuasion. This is what it means to live in a pluralist democracy and this is the secular society.

This is how a leading public intellectual and Turkish Muslim philosopher and theologian understands secular. He is opposing ideological 'secularists' and political 'Islamists'. Fethullah Gulen understands the secular as 'the participation of citizens of all religions and none in the public life of a society.' (Paul Weller and Ihsan Yilmaz, European Muslims, Civility And Public Life, 2012, p7) For Christians or Muslims, or any other religion, secular is our best bet, living in a pluralist democracy. Christianity in the West is not going to return to any privileged place, to any kind of hegemony or dominance. Nor should we want to live in a society that has any hint of theocracy, the rule of God through political or religious leaders. In a democracy or secular society we have a place in the public life of society. Those committed to secularism need to realize the nature of the secular and the practice of pluralist democracy. People of faith need to recover the appropriate confidence to return to the public place as partners in the creation of the common good. Public theology needs the secular and can contribute to it.

**Connecting and Collaborating with the Secular**

The primary Christian symbol of the kingdom or reign of God is the presence and activity of the sacred in the world. Its roots were in the imaginative vision and thought of the Hebrew prophetic book of Isaiah. The key impulses, energies and dynamics in history and life are towards liberation or freedom, social justice, peace or wellbeing, joy in life, restoration and healing. These are the signs of the kingdom in the midst of life, the active, transformative God imagined in the symbols of spirit and light. The key sign of the kingdom among us is liberation, freedom or salvation. An historian has said that 'if there's an acceptable bias in the writing and teaching of history, let it tilt towards liberation.' (John Lewis Gaddis in Douglas Boin, Coming Out Christian In The Roman World: How The Followers Of Jesus Made A Place In Caesar's World, 2015, p150).

Where peoples, communities and nature are liberated from the things that dehumanise, oppress, enslave and destroy, the kingdom is among us, has drawn near as Jesus said. For a very long time the church thought it was the kingdom but this kingdom of God, these impulses, energies and dynamics of liberation, social justice, peace, joy, restoration and healing were never confined to the church or Christianity. These impulses are not confined to religious communities. The kingdom impulses and energies are present in the world, among the world's religions and beyond them. The kingdom of God draws near, is present and experienced in the secular. Living and working in a very different context, Sri Lankan theologian D Preman Niles was right to ask through his book title, Is God Christian? The answer, not just in the Eastern context but also in the Western context is no. God is God, spirit and light, in the world, in and beyond all religions. Niles pushes further and says, ' Is there a Christian God? Remains to challenge Christian piety.' (D Preman Niles, Is God Christian, 2017, p192). In the secular world public theology will imagine its ultimate symbol G-O-D differently.

The secular is the pluralist democratic world of many religions and none. The levels of religious practice and belief have diminished radically in Europe in the 20th century. We have lived through a time in the West, including Ireland, of deconfessionalisation. There are attempts on the part of some church leaders and clergy, and some lay also to reconfessionalise. But that is not going to happen. A lot of traditional, confessional theology has been abandoned by most Europeans and most Irish people. And yet we now speak of a post-secular Europe. We have moved from religion to spirituality and secular spirituality and public theology can connect and collaborate.

**TOWARDS AN ABRAHAMIC PUBLIC THEOLOGY**

The globalisation of religions has challenged all religions. Domination and superiority are more difficult to sustain. The way each religion articulates its truth claims are challenged and the close encounter of world religions, now neighbour religions, locally and globally, is leading to both self-criticism and an enhanced and enriched self-understanding. No religion is self-contained, nor does it exist in a sealed bubble. We exist and practice faith in the world of geopolitics, politics, economics and culture. We are now more aware that globally religions are present and actively alive in the public square, that religions have core values and social ethics, and that religious experience is public rather than private. Religions are present in the world for good and ill. Religious people are involved in terrorism and acts of violence, and religious people are involved in promoting and building democracy, human rights, and in justice and peace advocacy and projects. There is now serious research and thinking or rethinking on the role of religion in international affairs and diplomacy. Dialogue, therefore, between the religions is a global imperative. We are in a world that is trans-national, cross-cultural, multi-ethnic, and poly-linguistic and in a world where many inter-religious encounters of many kinds do take place. These encounters and dialogue are leading to a sense values and ethics that are fundamentally shared. We are part of a global public and awareness of these realities 'is constituting a new public beyond the local contextualisms of many current analysis...' (Stackhouse, Max, Globalization and Grace, 2007, p79).

Dialogue might lead us to explore the possibility of an Abrahamic public theology. There are initiatives and development of public theology within parts of the Christian tradition. Much good work has been developed in the US but also in Germany, Scotland, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Korea, Hong Kong and in Beijing.

There have been substantive publications coming out of research centres and projects. Public theology is intentional about the role of theology in the public square. It may be in part a resurgence of public faith in response to the fading secularisation thesis. The later has been about the demise of religion from public life and its location in the sphere where it belongs, the private. Politics is public, faith is private. The more aggressive and at times militant secularism asserted that no religion should have a place in the public square, that all religions are toxic and should be banished from the public. If people want to be religious then religion belongs to the private sphere. Not only was that stance intolerant and anti-democratic, it was as fundamentalist and a denial of freedom as anything religion itself has been in moments of history. The secularisation thesis is fading and the world is more religious than it has ever been. Religions did not go away and God is back, though it has got to be said, that not all of the public resurgence of religions is good.

There is very little in any religion that can be confined to the private reality. Religion deals with values, virtues and ethics that are public, weighted with social meaning. Religion is and has always been relational and religion has ever been in the proximity of power. Religions have ambiguous histories and these have included the energy for positive change and social transformation. Public theology appeals to the positive and liberating in religion and though there is development within the Christian religion, public theology is not confined to Christianity. Public theology is about applied social ethics, social ethics applied to the big public questions and issues in critical and creative ways.

Public theology is not about a form of theocratic governance, organising society or the world by a group of people or institutions that believe they have access to God's secret diaries. Or that they have a divine right to govern and shape society according to their interpretation of divine laws. That is not how things work in pluralist democracies. The divine right of kings may have passed in history to the divine right of systems, Rulers, empires or superpowers, but none of these had the divine right of anything. The DG that appears on British currency, by divine appointment, was a fiction of the imagination, a very human invention to monopolise the sacred and legitimise everything, which often meant injustice, oppression, conquest, domination and wealth and power for the few. Public theology will not only resist or critique abuses of power, social, political, economic, environmental and cultural injustices, it will also resist any theocratic tendencies and pretensions to absolute power.

All religions do theology. It is how we speak of the sacred and how we allow our sense of the sacred to shape and guide our social and ethical living. In pluralist democracies every voice has the right to be heard and present its vision of a common good. No voice in a pluralist democracy is privileged, none dominates, but all have the space to be heard, and the only power the public voices have, especially religious voices, is the power of moral persuasion.

Public theology does not produce political, economic or environmental blueprints. There are experts in these fields, but what public theology does is articulate the ethical values and the moral fibre that enables politicians, economists and environmentalists to create strategies and policies and practice which can lead to human and eco-flourishing. Doing public theology is the challenge of the 21st century. There is a human responsibility to engage with 21st century public issues and questions and with the challenging theological and ethical questions of our time.

The world around us is changing and to develop an active theology for this century is to take seriously faith and ethics as applied to the public questions of politics, economics, environment, globalisation, technology, poverty, war, violence, patriarchy, gender justice, common good and planetary flourishing. These are the 'publics' in public theology.

Croatian Christian theologian, Miroslav Volf has written: Globalisation will be able to contribute to 'improving the state of the world' only if visions of human flourishing and moral frameworks shape it'. (Miroslav Volf, Flourishing: Why We Need Religion In A Globalised World, 2015, p24). It is the visions of moral frameworks that globalised religions have as their essence. Globalised religions have a transcendent dimension. However we articulate or accent the sacred, the source of being is incomprehensible mystery, beyond our finite minds. Each of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, certainly recognise that. Our talk of the sacred can only go so far. God the sacred, the Other, transcends our religious systems and institutions. And yet we claim to know something of the mystery. There is a Word, the sense and experience of which gives us a clue, a glimpse of the heart of the ultimate Being and mystery. Though we speak with different accents in our religious traditions we highlight non-violence, love, justice, compassion and peace as the heart of the sacred. Globalised religions are not about private virtues, they are about public virtues and social ethics, neighbourliness and neighbourly values and practices. These are the moral frameworks by which globalised religions live, signposts towards the humane and authentically human.

The Abrahamic religions make up most of the planet's population. The three faiths have many 'common points'. It is not possible in a globalised world to fly solo as a religion. We can only do theology now in the midst of others and with each other. The Abrahamic religions have a unique opportunity to do public theology together. This does not mean excluding others.

Given the emerging world power of China, economic, political and military power, the emerging new empire of the new world order, there will need to be awareness of and engagement with the ethical system, which also has a spirituality, Confucianism. For over two millennia it shaped Chinese education and culture and is being recovered as the Chinese become aware of their place in a new world order.

For the Abrahamic religions there is the dialogue imperative. It is the dialogue of social ethics, the dialogue of what matters most to us in an often divided, violent and unjust world. We dialogue on our visions of eco-flourishing, and our dialogue in ethics and ethical vision becomes the dialogue of action together in the public place, local and global. The Abrahamic religions with their shared commonalities of the prophetic and ethical are significant actors in shaping, nurturing and sustaining a more just, compassionate and peaceful globalisation.

Doing public theology, applied social ethics together may be the greatest challenge to the Abrahamic religions in the 21st century.

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