

## Editors' Notes

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Established in 1997, Virginia Theological Seminary's Center for Anglican Communion Studies (CACS) exists to promote and practice better community for the Communion through consultations, research, and publications for the sake of intercultural and interreligious conciliation and reconciliation. As one means to accomplish this work, CACS appoints fellows whose expertise and experience mesh well with the Center's mandate to resource theological reflection and religiously informed peacebuilding. Hence, in September 2018, CACS Fellows Najah Nadi Ahmad, Rose Hudson-Wilkin, and Lucinda Allen Mosher came to Alexandria, Virginia for a week that culminated in a two-day public theology seminar with a small group of Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) faculty, researchers, and former CACS Fellows.

Hosted by Ian Markham, VTS Dean and President, and director of CACS Robert Heaney, the public theology seminar's format allowed for deep conversation. Before participants met the papers were circulated. During the seminar authors presented very brief summaries of their work, which were followed by even briefer formal responses. This allowed for an hour of exploration and explication on the topic of

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each paper. Themes explored in this fashion included the relationship between public theology and missiology, the role of politics, public theology and the Christian gospel, an Islamic perspective on public theology, theology in multireligious contexts, and the very meaning of the term *public theology* itself. The seminar was an earnest, yet informal, working session characterized by frank conversation.

As a point of departure, seminar participants consulted Charles T. Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, fully aware that “a theology of public life” and “public theology” are not quite one and the same.<sup>1</sup> We also considered various definitions of the category *public theology*.

- From Auburn Theological Seminary: public theology is “faith-rooted thinking on crucial issues of public concern.”<sup>2</sup>
- From Katie Day and Sebastian Kim: public theology is “the church reflectively engaging with those within and outside its institutions on issues of common interest and for the common good.”<sup>3</sup>
- From E. Harold Breitenberg Jr.: public theology is “theologically informed public discourse about public issues, addressed to the church, synagogue, mosque, temple or other religious body, as well as the larger public or publics, argued in ways that can be evaluated and judged by publicly available warrants as criteria.”<sup>4</sup>

We took note of the notion, articulated by Katie Day and Sebastian Kim, that public theology has several “marks”:

1. It is inherently incarnational.
2. It identifies which “publics” to engage.
3. It is interdisciplinary.
4. It is essentially dialogical.
5. Its perspective is global.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles T. Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> See Auburn Theological Seminary, “Public Theologies,” <https://auburnseminary.org/public-theologies/>.

<sup>3</sup> Katie Day and Sebastian Kim, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 2.

<sup>4</sup> E. Harold Breitenberg Jr., “To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 2 (2003): 55–96.

6. Not only is it expressed in publications (like journals and books), it is also *performed*.<sup>5</sup>

As will become apparent in the articles in this special edition of the *Anglican Theological Review*, a variety of positions and definitions are at work in our thinking.

From the inception of this project, it was always our intent that the first fruits of the Public Theology Seminar would be published. By bringing together a set of essays that examined the role of public theology dialogically, we hoped to generate a unique resource that will stimulate further exploration of a field that is particularly pertinent for our times. Therefore, during the ensuing year, the conversation continued. Some of the original seminar participants were unable to stay with the project. Others joined it. Seminar papers were revised and others were added. Thus we present here six pairs of articles.

In the opening essay, **Ian S. Markham** posits a definition of public theology centered on a particularly Christian vision of God and God's intent for life. This Christian particularity, always wrought in dialogic form, simultaneously acknowledges the particularity of other truth claims and the reality of a range of views that are skeptical about truth. Markham prioritizes conversational practice as definitive for a public theology in today's pluralist United States of America. **Ross Kane** takes up the contextual appeal made by Markham and further elucidates the direction of his thought. Drawing from Martin Luther King Jr., Leonardo Boff, and Jean-Marc Éla, Kane points to the inherently synthesizing nature of public theology. Christian public theologians are involved in a process of learning from and borrowing from other traditions for the sake of justice. This borrowing, however, is contested. Kane argues that Christians should see the synthesizing of public theologians as a means to discipleship. He sees such a call as very far from easy.

**Robert S. Heaney**, in submitting a missiological dimension to public theology, also appeals to particularism and the contested challenging work of public witness. He gives further definition to public witness as dialogic and as prophetic. Beginning with social theory, which foregrounds zones of dialogue and interaction, Heaney proposes a reading of Acts 2 and 15 as a fundamental resource for the practice of public theology. God births a community, centered

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<sup>5</sup> Day and Kim, *Companion to Public Theology*, 10–11.

on the marginalized Christ, that is open and porous for the sake of peace. **John Y. H. Yieh**'s response largely affirms Heaney's approach. He notes the similarities between Heaney's proposal and the long-standing work of Scriptural Reasoning. Yieh does, however, seek clarification on precisely what Christians might mean when they call public witness "prophetic." Echoing Markham's distinction between content and process, the question remains: Might an appeal to "prophetic dialogue" be an appeal to process over content?

Important to Heaney's understanding of public theology is the role of liturgy. Liturgical theologian **James W. Farwell** provides further elucidation on this theme with a focus on the performative nature of public theology. Liturgy is public and it is theology. Indeed, Christ is God's liturgy and the church, joined to God in Christ, participates in God's ongoing re-creation of the world. This eschatological inbreaking of God's reign, enacted in liturgy, forms the church as a community always called to public discernment and public witness. In her response, **Jean Cotting** begins with modernity and posits that liturgy can redress the closed world of secularism. She is left pondering, however, to what extent the church should make the liturgical antidote to the condition of secularism accessible and open to the public. For Cotting, how the church settles the dilemma of liturgy as formation and liturgy as access to God's presence will largely define the relationship between liturgical theology and public theology.

At the time of the Virginia seminar, **Rose Hudson-Wilkin** occupied the unique position of Chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons in the United Kingdom. From that vantage point, Hudson-Wilkin adopted an autobiographical and contextual method as she reflected on the intersections between public theology and the public space of Parliament. She argues that public theology, as act as well as thought, cannot simply be left to "professional" theologians. Beginning with experience, she offers a reading of God's action in and for the public from a series of key biblical texts. From a black Christian tradition, Hudson-Wilkin is alert to the dangers of a "spiritual" approach to the powers in the world. In contrast, her reading of Scripture suggests that witness in the public square is inherent to Christian discipleship. A holistic and liberative approach is required of Christians, and an outward-looking community that embodies "faithful presence" is definitive of the church.

Writing from an American perspective, **Hannah W. Matis** responds to Hudson-Wilkin by focusing on historical errors made by the church and the ongoing challenge of constructing corporate morality. She argues that the necessary work of any public theology today will be reconciliation. For Matis, this begins when we reject the privatization of faith, read history critically, prioritize compassion in theology (seen particularly in the Beatitudes), and when we diversify the voices present in the public square.

For **Lucinda Allen Mosher**, the public is always a multireligious neighborhood defined by religious “manyness.” Given such a context, she submits five characteristics of Christian public theology. It is multidisciplinary. It is incarnational in that its primary mode is practice and service and not discourse. It is global and thus always shaped and informed in its priorities and practice by other faiths and cultures. It promotes “convicted civility.” It will promote an ethic of collaboration in the face of fear. Finally, it is transformational in that it promotes deep dialogue and ongoing teamwork. In response to Mosher, **Veronika Travis** provides a reading of public theology from the perspective of priestly vocation. She depicts the public as a multi-religious neighborhood where Christian ministers are called to care for those from outside their own faith tradition. This inevitably leads to a range of dangers and opportunities. Travis, therefore, argues for the necessity of “vulnerability” as an attribute of future definitions of public theology.

**William L. Sachs** is particularly concerned with the inevitable limitations of a public theology that begins with a strong claim for Christian particularity. Such an appeal to a particularist foundation often fails to take account of the depths of pluralism and fails to equip believers for constructive public witness. Christianity, he reminds readers, is not simply a theoretical-theological foundation upon which to build systems of thought. It is lived, often in minority communities. Illustrating this reality, Sachs turns to the work of Anglican missionaries in Muslim-majority contexts in the twentieth century. This public theology Sachs sees as characterized by prayer and sharing in faithful practices across doctrinal differences, mutual relationships, and shared spirituality. Such public theologizing neither prioritizes particularity or pluralism, but is birthed in the lived realities of faithful practice that emerges from a desire for the common good and contributes to it.

Both for the seminar and for the Center for Anglican Communion Studies, the Christian-Muslim encounter is particularly important.<sup>6</sup> In responding to Sachs, from a Muslim perspective, **Martin Nguyen** appeals to his own recently published *Modern Muslim Theology: Engaging God and the World with Faith and Imagination* (2018). This, he submits, might be considered a Muslim work of public theology. Noting the “interconnected social web” that Muslims are part of, he also identifies power differentials at work in Western societies that can be overlooked by Christians espousing public theology. Particularly interested in resourcing “imagination” in the public sphere, Nguyen agrees with Sachs in seeing devotional practice as a locus for ongoing fruitful interreligious encounter.

What cannot be captured here is the conversation and fellowship the participants enjoyed at Virginia Theological Seminary a year ago. We are grateful to God for this opportunity. While we cannot invite the reader to participate in a seminar now past, we do invite the reader to draw her or his conclusions on the necessity and the nature of public theology. In closing reflections, Heaney and Mosher, drawing on the themes in this special edition, begin to identify possible future resources and questions that might enable a vision of life-giving futures for Anglican public witness.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Robert S. Heaney, Zeyneb Sayilgan, and Claire Haymes, eds., *Faithful Neighbors: Christian-Muslim Vision and Practice* (New York: Morehouse, 2016).