

## Public Theology and Public Missiology

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*Faithful public witness is an expression of the faith of particular communities of formation. Thus, demythologized public discourse should be rejected in favor of the outwardness (or mission) emerging from theological particularity. This article draws from missiological resources in a bid to identify priorities for Christian formation toward public engagement. First, I take “public” to be a dialogic space where bounded entities and identities (people and communities) take part in interaction, engagement, and adaptation. Second, such an understanding of “public” is already at work in the prophetic emergence of the early church, thus pointing toward the theological significance of such sociality. Third, I identify priorities for formation from the missiological vision of prophetic dialogue.*

**Keywords:** Acts 15, porosity, prophetic dialogue, public, Spirit, witness

There is no agreed-upon point of departure for public theologies or theologies of public life and witness. Charles Mathewes, writing in a US American context, prefers a “theology of public life” over against secular-framed “public theologies.” He makes the case for a particularist point of departure. Religious actors, he argues, are to speak and act in public in their own voices according to their own scriptures and traditions.<sup>1</sup> The search for a public Esperanto exorcised of philosophical, theological, and spiritual commitment has failed. Danger lies in any expectation from authorities—governmental, civic, or scholarly—

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

toward deincarnation. That the bodies of believers bespeak the bodies believers have been shaped in is beyond dispute. By the same token, the words and actions of religious actors presume a “witness” in a worshiping community and received tradition. The witness of religious actors is always a “turning outward,” or “sentness.” Both images are predicated upon notions of a community or matrix from which the public words and actions of witness are always fed. For Christians such “sentness” is a theological idea. It emerges from a vision of the outward-turning God. How believers discern the divine outward turn, take heed of it, or participate in it is at the heart of a theology or missiology of public witness.<sup>2</sup>

Given this rejection of a demythologized public discourse and the outwardness of theological particularity, this article will draw from missiological resources in a bid to identify priorities for Christian formation toward public engagement. First, I take “public” to be a *dialogic* space where bounded entities and identities (people and communities) take part in interaction, engagement, and adaptation. Second, such an understanding of “public” is already at work in the *prophetic* emergence of the early church, thus pointing toward the theological significance of such sociality. Third, I will identify priorities for formation from the missiological vision of *prophetic dialogue*.

### *Witnessing to Public Pluralities*

A particularist approach to public witness that recognizes the integrity of particular scripture, history, and theology means, at the same time, a recognition of a plurality of particularities. This signifies not just a recognition that in the public space many truth claims are made and many religions witness to the divine. It does not simply mean a recognition that the deepest dialogue and witness come in exchanges between those who hold to their commitments in good faith. To recognize a plurality of particularities includes the recognition that there are a number of ways of understanding what is meant by “public” and how witness in “public” operates.

Whatever we understand by the term *public*, we have in view some kind of sociality that takes account of human relations beyond

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<sup>2</sup> See Mathewes on how sin, in Augustinian terms, is “privation” and how we are called to resist the temptation to retreat further into our own “private” selves. Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 32.

the interactions of individuals.<sup>3</sup> *Public* can be conceived of as a corporate entity, as shared concerns, and as social interaction. A corporate entity as public signifies a body that is both bounded and bound together by some sort of commonality. What is public is, then, for example, this nation or that socioeconomic group. In more expansive terms it is diaspora, catholicity, Communion, and the *Ummah*. What is in view in this public is the sum of the people that make up a community. *Public* can also mean that which is shared by everyone in a particular context. Thus, we have “public services,” “public discourse,” and “public opinion.” This public is the sum of that which is shared together, open to everyone, or applicable to all. Both these concepts of “public” focus on a boundedness as it pertains to corporate identity and access to collective goods. For that reason the boundaries and the boundedness not only construct sites of identity and community but also create sites of contestation. Who is it that is counted as part of this community? In practice, does “all” mean everyone? Do the boundaries need to be policed and, if so, who does that? On what basis is access to particular resources invited or permitted? Who adjudicates or how are such questions adjudicated? All of this might be summed up in one question at the heart of social theory: What is the relationship between social structures and the agency of actors?<sup>4</sup>

A third conception of *public* lays emphasis first on a site of social interaction instead of on bounded presence, and does not entirely eschew the boundedness of identity or the contested necessity of public goods. What is in view in this “public” is social engagement that is transparent to others. It is a zone of interaction or performance or dialogue.<sup>5</sup> This locus speaks less of bounded identities and goods, and more of social porosities, instabilities, and processes of contestation in human discourse where exercises of power (via structures and agents) are more readily unveiled. The phenomenon of “globalization” particularly speaks to realities that strain any theorizing about the public that suggests an easy discerning of bounded sociality. While this might be easily conceded on a macro scale, it is also the case for

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<sup>3</sup> Tim May and Jason L. Powell, *Situating Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Open University Press McGraw-Hill Education, 2008), 216.

<sup>4</sup> Jason L. Powell, ed., *A Short Introduction to Social Theory* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2012), 33.

<sup>5</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger with F. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989 [1962]).

local contexts and communities. Tim May and Jason Powell, referring to a globalization that signifies intense interconnectedness, exchange, and power differentials, recognize that nation states are deeply “enmeshed” in and “functionally part of a larger pattern of global transformations and global flows.” A “complex range of social interactions governed by the speed of communications” signifies a “partial collapse of boundaries within national, cultural and political space.” Indeed, since the end of the Cold War it is possible for privileged actors to conceive of a “borderless” world. Such an expansive world is fueled by the apparent victory of capitalism and neoliberalism, the development of digital communication technologies, mass communication, and the growing threat of ecological degradation. The same privilege also enables and encourages the entrenchment of nationalisms and the destabilizing impact of one superpower executing a so-called War on Terror. A radical reading of such phenomena that problematizes bounded identities and socialities has led some to demand a “theory beyond societies.”<sup>6</sup> Thus a “public” defined as a dialogic zone of social interaction or as a social interface might well appeal to more recent social theory.<sup>7</sup> However, that is not the main motivation for appealing to such theorizing. Arguably, before social theorists made appeal to a “public” defined by interaction, porosity, instability, and power differentials, the agency of God and mission history were pointing to such realities and necessities.<sup>8</sup> Let us, then, turn from the people’s public to God’s public.

### *Witness in Public Pluralities*

The beginning of Luke’s second volume gives dramatic definition to “public spirit.” During the feast of Pentecost the Spirit publishes God’s promised prophetic renewal (Joel 2:28–29) with what sounds like rushing wind and looks like fiery tongues.<sup>9</sup> This public spectacle is evidently apparent not only to the apostles, in their newfound linguistic abilities, but also to the throngs present in Jerusalem from “every

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<sup>6</sup> May and Powell cite the work of J. Urry, *Sociology beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2000). May and Powell, *Situating Social Theory*, 258–66.

<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 204–10.

<sup>9</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Works of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 198–200.

nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5 NRSV). The event provokes the question from the gathered audience, "What does this mean?" (2:12). The sending or mission of God's spirit as divine event blows open a field of inquiry, clears the air for exchange and doubt (2:13), and inspires the bold climax of Peter's sermon in Acts 2:36: "God has made [Jesus] both Lord and Messiah." Here is scriptural witness to sociality that makes space for divine agency or, more accurately, here is a type of publicness created by the mission of God's Spirit. It is difficult to imagine a more dramatically charismatic example of the social or missional interface at the genesis of the Christian movement. Jewish witnesses to Jesus and Jewish pilgrims who come to the city for Pentecost engage, quite literally, in a public square in the wake of an act of God. Given this interface, and a myriad of other interfaces in the New Testament and beyond, it is of little surprise that for Christians, mission is considered the "mother of theology."<sup>10</sup> That is to say, in social and dialogic witness to Christ by the first believers and the early church, key questions were asked and key answers and disputations emerged.

As the Jesus movement grew and became inclusive of Gentiles because of the mission of God's Spirit, the church itself became the locus for interchange, exchange, and disputation. For this reason Robert Jenson refers to the "primal church" as a "congeries of prophetic phenomena."<sup>11</sup> Famously, these early congeries and contestations came to a head at the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, and centered on a question that remains live in contemporary theology: To what extent can there be continuity between pre-Christian thought and practice or non-Christian thought and practice and the Christian gospel? The council is the turning point in the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>12</sup>

The Jerusalem leaders eventually accept Gentiles into the church without demanding that they submit to circumcision (see Gal. 2:1–3:14). The Gentiles do not have to become Jews to follow the Jewish Messiah. The text of Acts, focusing on the mission of the Spirit, does not evidence an ecclesiology of bounded identity. A different kind of sociality is envisioned. If anything, the text stresses the transgressing and porosity of boundaries, and even the deletion of boundaries of

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Kähler cited in David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:198.

<sup>12</sup> S. G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke–Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 193.

antagonism (see also Eph. 2:11–22). This disputatious nature of social engagement and exchange, created by God’s agency (first in Christ’s resurrection and then in the descent of the Spirit), turns the church around from a fixation with boundaries and bounded identity in favor of a community centered on discerning the movement of God’s Spirit.<sup>13</sup> The so-called Judaizers preferred the foundationalism of clear ground and boundaries. The day of Pentecost disturbed such stability, and the gift of God’s prophetic Spirit (Joel 2) to Gentiles meant a renewed configuration of what it meant to be the people of God was required. The space (or public) that the Spirit of God created on Pentecost was for witness and was for discernment. The Jerusalem Council honored that work of the Spirit by saying both yes to the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah and yes to continuity between Gentile discernment and gospel reception. However, the disruptive and inclusive witness of God’s public testimony has not always been something that believers have been able to accept.

In modern World Christian theology the Jerusalem Council is regularly cited as something dishonored in the dominant and domineering attitudes and practices of the modern missionary movement. Anglican theologian Jesse Mugambi, critical of foreign missionaries in Africa, makes appeal to the Jerusalem Council. Despite many modern missionaries being “biblical literalists,” they did not take heed of the text of Acts 15. The text declares plainly that “it was not necessary for a Gentile to become an ‘honorary Jew’ in order to become a Christian.” Yet in Africa, he observes, it is often the case that a would-be convert must be “‘circumcised’ into European Culture” thus becoming an “‘honorary white’ as a precondition for becoming a Christian.”<sup>14</sup> Foreign missionaries, even as they prided themselves for their orthodoxy and stand against all kinds of idolatry and syncretism, were at the same time standing in continuity with the Judaizers and against the apostle Paul. Mugambi finds this to be one of “the most disturbing

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<sup>13</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:178–88. Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> J. N. K. Mugambi, *The Biblical Basis for Evangelization: Theological Reflections Based on an African Experience* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 59. J. N. K. Mugambi, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1989), 56.

ironies of the modern missionary enterprise.”<sup>15</sup> His appeal to Acts 15 stands as a countertestimony to the testimony of many foreign missionaries. Here is the social or missional interface where contextualization and contestation constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs articulations and expressions of the faith.<sup>16</sup> Given these criticisms in text and context, what formational priorities might be discerned? This is the focus of the next section.

Mugambi is a strong critic of foreign missionary practice in Africa. Yet he points to bishop John V. Taylor (1914–2001) as an exemplar of a different way. Mugambi describes Taylor as someone who displayed a deep presence with Africans, exhibited empathy not sympathy, and whose witness invited foreign missionaries into a process of conversion to the God already present in Africa.<sup>17</sup> Given Taylor’s example of Christian presence and dialogue, Mugambi goes as far as to name him as one of the progenitors of African Christian theology.<sup>18</sup> What Mugambi sees in Taylor’s work is a witness that emerges from deep presence and deep listening. Mission, as Bevans and Schroeder recognize, “is first and foremost dialogue.”<sup>19</sup> Given that such commitment to dialogue comes from prior theological commitments, the dialogue will be ill-served if these commitments are not made public. One way of meeting these demands for deep listening and the articulation of theological commitments is “prophetic dialogue.” The concept and practice are more complex than this essay would suggest but, by way of conclusion, I want to suggest some intimations toward how this practice can resource religious formation for public witness, particularly in a US American context today.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Mugambi, *African Christian Theology*, 56. See Paul S. Chung, *Postcolonial Public Theology: Faith, Scientific Rationality, and Prophetic Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 97–99.

<sup>16</sup> See Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014 [1989]).

<sup>17</sup> J. N. K. Mugambi, introduction in John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 2001 [1963]), xii.

<sup>18</sup> Robert S. Heaney, *From Historical to Critical Post-colonial Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 32.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 59. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> For work on prophetic dialogue and related theology see, for example, Cathy Ross and Stephen B. Bevans, eds., *Mission on the Road to Emmaus: Constants, Context, and Prophetic Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015) and Craig Van Gelder and

*Witness as Prophetic Dialogue*

The theme of prophetic dialogue emerges from post-Vatican II Roman Catholic missiology though it reflects major shifts in conciliar and ecumenical theologies of mission since the second World War.<sup>21</sup> Theologically, the theme appeals to the communicative and dialogic nature of God's mission and missions and the disputatious nature of Christian thought as it has developed over centuries and is seen in texts like Acts 15. Inherent in this process is the inevitability of contextualization and a commitment to contextualization. Discerning the work of God's Spirit in particular locations (Acts 15:8–11) and making intelligible that word of God to hearers in a range of languages, cultures, and locations is a fundamental task of witness.

First, for Christians, christological particularism cannot be eschewed. Rather, to be "in Christ" is the very identity of the baptized and the mystery of ecclesiology. The first duty of Christian formation is, thus, proclamation. Such proclamation is heard in the congregation (liturgy), in witness, and in context. In the Eucharist, Christ is made public (1 Cor. 11:26) as the congregation centers itself on the one thrown to the margins. In looking to the center, the people are faced with the Christ of the margins. In the breaking of bread and pouring of wine the congregation is simultaneously centered and de-centered. We meet the risen Christ and we meet the discarded Christ. To turn to Christ is to be turned to the world. In the meeting, the church is turned to the margins. The liturgy, in grace, breaks open and makes porous the boundedness of the congregation for the life of the world.<sup>22</sup> In this feast, Christ continues to constitute the church as witness in and to the mission of God. Thus, in "service after the service" the prophetic Spirit of God calls for proclamation. To form a people with apparent liturgical proficiency who cannot articulate the gospel beyond the assembly is missiological and theological malpractice. Indeed, it is ultimately liturgical malpractice because a disarticulated body that separates itself from gospel witness at the Lord's table

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Dwight J. Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 368–510. Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 56–63.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), 362–66. Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Assembly as Locus on Mission" in *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 1–21.

in inarticulate or silenced witness at the tables of the world becomes a community not of testimony but of countertestimony.<sup>23</sup> Given the porosity of the congregation, the power of globalization, and a commitment to catholicity such contextual discernment cannot be done as if congregations are bounded. In a globalized world contextualization is intercontextualization. It is time for robust intercultural theologizing across the church and Communion. Accessible resources, not to mention existing partnerships, already exist to help dioceses, congregations, and Christian organizations do just this type of formation.<sup>24</sup>

Second, the porosity of sociality and the congregation raises broader issues for the process of formation as prophetic dialogue.<sup>25</sup> A recognized public porosity is already at work in the key text of Acts 15. To conceive then of a particular (porous) “publicness” is not simply the adoption of particular social theory, it is the recognition of a particular way the early church discerned the movement of the Holy Spirit. If the picture of Jesus transgressing boundaries (associated, for example, with ethnic identity, gender roles, socio-economics, and purity laws) is central to Luke’s Gospel, then Luke’s second volume depicts the work of God *bringing down* such boundaries.<sup>26</sup> The Spirit enlivens Gentiles so that the “outside” comes “inside” (Rom. 11:17–24). God acts for reconciliation and a renewed people of God emerges (Eph. 2:14–14). God acts to make porous the assumed boundedness of God’s people.<sup>27</sup> Given this reconciliatory ecclesial porosity, prophetic dialogue will prioritize conceptions and practices of peace. Drawing from Bevans and Schroeder, this vision of peace will mean that prophetic dialogue encompasses concern for ecology, interreligious exploration, and reconciliation.

The worship of the people of God is set within a broad eschatological ecology. God’s good creation is in continuity with God’s full redemption of creation (Rev. 21) and the communion we are invited

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<sup>23</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 365.

<sup>24</sup> Ian T. Douglas and Kwok Pui-lan, eds., *Beyond Colonial Anglicanism: The Anglican Communion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Church Publishing, 2001); Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008); Robert S. Heaney, John Kafwankak, and Hilda Kabia, eds., *God’s Church for God’s World* (New York: Church Publishing, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Tanner, *Theories of Culture*.

<sup>26</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 47–48.

<sup>27</sup> Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 170.

into in worship is a foretaste of that continuity.<sup>28</sup> To witness to this integrity of creation is part of what it means to align ourselves with the will of God. It is, in a very basic sense, formation. Indeed, processes of formation may need to begin with “reading” the gospel in the context of “reading” the land. It may well be that key to renewed practices of formation are practices of “storying” the land and community. What is the story of the land that congregations occupy today and what historical antecedents created today’s realities? For churches whose genealogy is that of settler colonialism, this can be challenging work, especially when done in light of Native American theology.<sup>29</sup>

A commitment to the integrity of God’s creation cannot exclude other human beings. Part of the wide ecology of God’s creation is the relationships we are called into with the diversity of other cultures and religions (Rev. 21:24). This public “ecology” seeks after richer *self-understanding*, *deeper relationships*—that do not ignore difference or power relations—and seeks after *generosity* and *humility*. These principles, though not unique, emerged out of real-life partnerships and a project hosted by Virginia Theological Seminary and published as *Faithful Neighbors*. The book is a mix of theology, empirical research, and stories of local engagement across religious divides. We did not frame the work in terms of public theology, but a significant number of the chapters deal directly with some form of interreligious public conversation or witness. The point of departure was a commitment to making ourselves present one with another as embodiments of our traditions. We did not meet as experts but as people with stories and testimonies about the hope our faith in the one God brings.

Time and again participants witnessed to how deep interreligious conversation drove them back to the sources of their own faith (self-discovery), thus making them more “public” and thus more present in the dialogue. Deeper relationships emerged, and we always sought to take account of power relations. Class, race, culture, and gender were named as present and important, and laypeople were not made to answer to trained theologians. Generosity meant not comparing one tradition’s ideals with another tradition’s malpractice. It meant, rather, a prayerful approach to discovery for the presence and voice of God in the other. This often led to a humbleness in the hearts and attitudes

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<sup>28</sup> Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 245, 292–95, 319–20.

<sup>29</sup> See Richard Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

of participants. No one claimed the high moral ground. All sought the mercy of God that led to “bold humility.”<sup>30</sup>

David Bosch, defining “bold humility,” wrote that it “boils down to an admission that we do not have all the answers and are prepared to live within the framework of penultimate knowledge.”<sup>31</sup> This does not mean an embrace of agnosticism nor does it mean a radical relativism that abandons any prospect of truth. On the contrary, it is based on prior theological (not least christological) commitments declaring that the risen Christ, in the power of the Spirit, is present and active in the world. It is existential acceptance of the “complexities, ambiguities, and simple difficulties of life . . . predicted on the affirmation that something exists beyond the world, that makes us recognize the world as not the ultimate frame of our lives.”<sup>32</sup> Such are the characteristics of a witness that is both dialogic and prophetic. In *Faithful Neighbors* this prophetic dimension of dialogue came from deep within the traditions present in both Christian and Muslim participants and called us to examine the seeming insatiable appetite humans have for idolatry. This temptation is always present in public religious discourse. In putting God into words and the theological convictions of our neighbors into words we mold the divine and our neighbour into forms that we can “handle.” A prophetic dialogue unveils those idols and calls for a deeper vision of God in interreligious solidarity and community that is open, porous, and alert to the prophetic voice of God’s Spirit. This conception of porous sociality, founded on theological conviction, can create further space for explorations of the most controversial kind in interreligious dialogue. Though not a major focus of *Faithful Neighbors*, we had some conversation, for example, on “insider movements” and religious “multiple belongings.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Heaney and Zeyneb Sayilgan, “Principles for Constructive Interfaith Conversation’ in *Faithful Neighbors: Christian-Muslim Vision and Practice*, ed. Robert S. Heaney, Zeyneb Sayilgan, and Claire Haymes (New York: Morehouse, 2016), 153–65.

<sup>31</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 489. See Jennifer M. McBride, *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 29.

<sup>32</sup> Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 307. Mathewes, *The Republic of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 26–35.

<sup>33</sup> See Francis X. Clooney, “God for Us: Multiple Religious Identities as Human and Divine Prospect,” in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 44–66; Paniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar and Joseph Prabhakar Dayam, eds., *Many Yet One?*

All of this is, ultimately, the admission of the eschatological. It opens us to the hopeful horizon of God's work of reconciliation. The porosity of sociality conceived of here is, thus, not simply a recognition of the intercultural and interreligious borrowing and adapting and contextualizing of centuries of faith. It also admits to the agency of God. It is a mode of witness that is inherently hopeful.<sup>34</sup> Given that this eschatological hope is an expression of God's will and God's intent, the status quo might be defined as out of kilter with God's healing will. The call of religious actors is to speak to such dysfunction. For Christians, witness is the hopeful gospel of God that reconciles by creating a community of reconciliation. Yet that community falls short and thus witness is carried out in penitential mode. Witnessing to failure, in light of eschatological hope, is a public expression of God's Spirit revealing deep-seated sin.<sup>35</sup> It is a participation in God's prophetic mission. It is a dogged holding on to hope. It turns us toward God for mercy and toward our neighbor in penitence. Hope "helps us imagine a 'counter-polis.'"<sup>36</sup>

Christianity is a public religion. It admits openly to bold theological claims for Jesus the Christ. In this article, "publicness" has a porous quality according to Christianity's own story (Acts 15) and to social theory. The "missiological energy"<sup>37</sup> of Christianity leads to a public witness that is always prophetic because it is dialogic and always dialogic because it is prophetic. This has some very practical, attitudinal, and formational implications for building communities that can build better community. God knows, in these days, we need such public witness and counterwitness.

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*Multiple Religious Belonging* (Geneva: WCC, 2016); H. L. Richard, "New Paradigms for Religion, Multiple Religious Belonging, and Insider Movements," *Missiology* 43, no. 3 (2015): 297–308; Hans Gustafson, "Descandalizing Multiple Religious Identity with Help from Black Elk and His Spirituality: An Exercise in Interreligious Learning," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51, no. 1 (2016): 8–113; Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Richmond, VA: OneWorld, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 250.

<sup>35</sup> For a thorough exploration of "ecclesial repentance," see Jeremy M. Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts* (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), and Heaney, *Post-colonial Theology*.

<sup>36</sup> Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 244–49.

<sup>37</sup> Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 25.