

## Public Theology: Toward a Christian Definition

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Public theology is a phrase that has been used both descriptively (like Bellah's civil religion) and prescriptively (so that public theology is an attempt to recommend policy prescriptions seen through the narrative of faith). After a survey of the evolution of the phrase, I concede that most contemporary theologians use the phrase in a prescriptive way. Many using public theology in a prescriptivist way do so out of a revisionist theological framework. This is problematic because the majority of Christians are much more traditional in their theology. Building on a distinction between "process" and "content" in Christian ethics, the article argues for a particularist account of public theology that is shaped by liberation theology and yet still committed to conversation in a pluralist society.

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Public theology is a deeply contested area.<sup>1</sup> For some Christians, theology is the realm of the eternal; it should have nothing to do with the ephemeral world of the public.<sup>2</sup> For other Christians, their faith is inherently public, although not necessarily political. The Amish are a good example. Their lifestyle makes them publicly very visible, yet there is no explicit political agenda. Then again for others public theology is a political theology, with an explicit agenda. The civil rights

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the group convened by Robert Heaney and the rich conversation, which much improved this article. Special thanks are due to my respondent Ross Kane.

<sup>2</sup> The best statement of this position remains Edward Norman, *Christianity and the World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

movement, as it emerged out of the black church, is a good illustration of this.

This article will start with a critique of the debate over public theology that started with Martin Marty. It will make a distinction between descriptive and prescriptive uses of the phrase. Conceding that the prescriptive advocates have triumphed, the article then suggests that any definition of public theology needs to build on certain basic insights found in liberation theology. The article concludes with an analysis of the conundrum of advocating a particular vantage point in the public square while maintaining a commitment to conversation in a pluralist society. The definition this article suggests is this:

*Public theology is the explication of, witness to, and agency toward the vision that God intends for social life within the parameters of the Christian tradition.*

However, such a vision of public theology, the article will argue, needs to be committed to conversation with other visions in the public square.

### *The Genesis of the Debate*

It was Martin Marty who first coined the expression *public theology*. He does not explicitly define the term, but he does begin with the following explanation: “The main strand of American religious thought has drawn together the work of various figures who have interpreted the nation’s religious experience, practice, and behavior in the light of some sort of transcendent reference.”<sup>3</sup> Marty suggests that this has both been done within and outside the church. Jonathan Edwards and Horace Bushnell talked about the American experience within the church, while Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln interpreted the American experience using theological categories from outside the church. These two strands, argued Marty, combine in Reinhold Niebuhr: “Reinhold Niebuhr’s thought was grounded in his perception that he was a servant of and, in a sense, a prophet to America-in-praxis.”<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr’s achievement was to create a commentary on American life in conversation with the theological trajectories of American life. So, for example, Niebuhr constantly denounces

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<sup>3</sup> Martin E. Marty, “Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience,” *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 4 (October 1974): 332.

<sup>4</sup> Marty, “Reinhold,” 336.

simplistic social movements that do not take seriously the realities of sin.

The origins of the term then are *descriptive*. Public theology for Marty describes how theological categories are used in the public square. In this sense, the word overlaps with the phrase *civil religion*—a term made famous by Robert Bellah, who in his famous 1967 article argued that the speeches of John F. Kennedy represent an American form of civil religion.<sup>5</sup> In Kennedy's inaugural address of 1961, there are three references to God that provide the frame for the rest of the speech. Kennedy, Bellah argued, stood in a tradition that can be traced back to the founders. It is a religious tradition that is *related to, yet distinct from*, the Judeo-Christian tradition. This then created a lively debate. Advocates for the American civil religion argued that all the characteristics of this distinctive religion are there: beliefs (a Unitarian God, providence, democracy), texts (the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution), institutions (the presidency), a sacred calendar (the public holidays), and a living tradition (including the War of Independence and the Civil War).<sup>6</sup>

Within two years, the term had evolved. David Hollenbach suggested that there was a need for a public theology that would attempt “to illuminate the urgent moral questions of our time through explicit use of the great symbols and doctrines of the Christian faith.”<sup>7</sup> Now the term was becoming *prescriptive*. Public theology was an attempt to say *how* society should be ordered in the light of a theological narrative. Although David Tracy does not use the phrase *public theology*, it is clear that he is developing this trajectory when he advocates for a theologian to address “three distinct and related social realities: the wider society, the academy and the church.”<sup>8</sup> When Tracy explains what it means for a theologian to address wider society, he further subdivides the project into three. He writes,

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<sup>5</sup> See Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967).

<sup>6</sup> For an extended discussion of civil religion, see my *Plurality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994), 92–96. Parts of this paragraph are taken from that work.

<sup>7</sup> David Hollenbach, “Public Theology in America: Some Questions for Catholicism after John Courtney Murray,” *Theological Studies* 37, no. 2 (June 1976): 299.

<sup>8</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad 1981), 7.

1. The realm of the technoeconomic structure is concerned with the organization and allocation of goods and services. This structure forms the occupation and stratification systems of the society and uses modern technology for instrumental ends.
2. The realm of the polity is concerned with the legitimate meanings of social justice and the use of power. This involves the control of the legitimate use of force and the regulation of conflict . . . in order to achieve the particular conceptions of justice embodied in a society's traditions or its constitution.
3. The realm of culture—chiefly, but not solely, art and religion—and reflection upon it in various forms of cultural criticism, philosophy and theology is concerned with symbolic expressions.<sup>9</sup>

For Tracy, then, public theology is a comprehensive theological engagement with all the key aspects of society—the economic, political, and cultural.

The prescriptive advocates have largely won. An academic and ecclesial industry has emerged that seeks to speak from the church, using theological categories, to explain how society should be ordered. E. Harold Breitenberg Jr. argues that there is now a consensus to suggest that public theology can be defined as follows:

Public theology is thus 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 and criteria.<sup>10</sup>

For Breitenberg, there are three features to public theology.

First, public theology is theologically informed discourse that seeks to be understandable both to those within its own religious tradition and to those outside it. . . . Second, public theology is concerned with issues, institutions, interactions, and processes that are of importance and pertinence both to

<sup>9</sup> Tracy, *Analogical*, 7.

<sup>10</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 (2003): 66.

the church or other religious communities and to the larger society, including those of the same religious tradition, those of other faiths, and those who claim no religious beliefs and maintain no formal religious ties. Public theology interprets public life, engages society and its institutions, and offers guidance to and for society and its different sectors, interactions, and organizations: public theology is ethical in nature. Third, public theology draws on and makes use of sources of insight, terminology, and forms of discourse and argument that are in theory available and open to all, in addition to ones that are explicitly religious and specific to the religious tradition in which public theology develops and from which it speaks.<sup>11</sup>

Understood in this way, the public theology exercise is clearly prescriptive (it is telling the world how it ought to be ordered). It is also tending toward a Tracy-type revisionist theology. I say tending because logically there are other options, but this version of public theology tends to see Christianity less in terms of revealed propositions and more in terms of symbols out of which a “constructive” theology can be created. The dual emphasis on the public intelligibility of theological assertions and their verification by all traditions means that the particular assertions and distinctive reasoning of a specific tradition need to disappear.

Gordon D. Kaufman follows the logic of this reasoning. In his book *In Face of Mystery*, Kaufman outlines a theology that can accommodate cultural relativism and religious pluralism. Kaufman sees doctrine as a world of symbols that assists with the ordering of human life. He writes, “Theology, like every other intellectual enterprise, should conceive itself not as concerned largely with private or esoteric ideas grounded on privileged presuppositions or claims but as a public activity.”<sup>12</sup> This means, for example, you cannot argue for human rights grounded in the claim of the incarnation. The assertion that “because God became human all humans matter” is a particular insight of the Christian tradition; it is not part of the bridge-building,

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<sup>11</sup> E. Harold Brietenberg Jr., “What Is Public Theology?” in *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse*, ed. Deirdre King Hainsworth and Scott R. Paeth (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 4–5.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 86.

pluralist account of theology that has become the norm among those who are involved in public theology.

For those who are postliberal or Barthian, this is problematic. For the postliberal, Christianity has a distinctive grammar grounded in the tradition that justifies theological discourse. To understand the language, you need to step within the community of the church and learn how the language makes sense of the interactions of God with the world. Karl Barth affirmed the imperative of revelation—a revelation grounded in the eternal Word made flesh as the sole basis for theological language. If you start in the world of George Lindbeck or Karl Barth, then it seems that public theology is an impossible activity.

This is the key insight of Charles Mathewes's impressive study *A Theology of Public Life*. Mathewes argues for a “broadly Augustinian ‘theology of public life,’ a picture of Christian life as it should be lived in public engagement.”<sup>13</sup> Right at the outset, he criticizes the concept of public theology:

Typically, “public theologies” are self-destructively accommodationist: they let the “larger” secular world’s self-understanding set the terms, and then ask how religious faith contributes to the purposes of public life, so understood. In contrast, a theology of public life defines “the public” theologically, exploring its place in the created and fallen order and in the economy of salvation. Hence, whereas public theologies take as their primary interlocutors non-believers skeptical of the civic propriety of religious engagement in public life, this theology of public life takes as its primary audience Christian believers unsure of the religious fruitfulness of civic engagement; and it argues to them that they can become better Christians, and their churches better Christian communities, through understanding and participating in public life as an ascetical process of spiritual formation.<sup>14</sup>

Mathewes is entirely right. Making public theology inaccessible to anyone who believes the particularities of their tradition is a major problem. The fact is the majority of Christians (and, come to that,

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 1.

Jews, Muslims, and other faith tradition adherents) believe in the particularities of their tradition. For Christians, the discourse of faith is not simply Kaufman's symbolic universe, but a true description of the way things are. God really should be understood as triune, even in God's complexity; God really did become incarnate; and the virgin birth and the resurrection really did occur. To take the Anglican tradition, the vast majority of Anglicans in the world are traditional Christians, many with a strong evangelical frame.

Unlike Mathewes, however, I believe there is value in working within the public theology debate.<sup>15</sup> This is partly because it poses an acute question about the precise relationship between the internal Christian narrative and the wider world. Elaine Graham makes this the theme of her work when she writes,

Public theology has reached a decisive stage in its development. . . . It faces the collapse of Christendom in the West, the loosening of ties between Christian observance and wider culture. . . . As Christendom passes away, then, public theology has to come to terms with the fact that it no longer speaks from a position of privilege, but also that its contribution, while not immediately comprehensible to non-theological publics, is undergoing renewed scrutiny. . . . From where does the (public) theologian speak? How immersed does she need to be in the orthodoxies of the institutional Church? What is entailed in the process of “translation” from the doctrines and practices of the Church into the vernacular of social media, journalism, public policy and everyday Christian witness? Amidst the pluralism and scepticism that characterize post-secular Western culture, can there be any guarantee that religious voices will be heeded anyway?<sup>16</sup>

Mathewes is right that we need a “tradition-constituted” understanding of public theology, but Graham is right that such an account still needs to work effectively in a skeptical and pluralist world. Creating such an account is the goal of the rest of this article. We will start

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<sup>15</sup> Mathewes develops a rich account of public life grounded in the Augustinian tradition. There is much that I appreciate in his approach; there are affinities in my own work. See Ian S. Markham, *A Theology of Engagement* (Oxford: Blackwell 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-secular Age* (London: SCM Press 2013), 69–71.

with a focus on the particular: How can we define the concept in a way that an evangelical and an Anglo-Catholic can participate? Then we will focus on the issue posed by Graham: How does this particular account relate to the pluralism of modern society?

### *Toward a Definition That Traditional Christians Can Affirm*

The interesting feature of liberation theology is that it was in many ways “conservative.” In his discussion of Jon Sobrino’s *Christology at the Crossroads*, John Macquarrie notes,

The Christology presented in this book, though it has radical political implications, remains theologically in the orthodox tradition. This is typical of liberation theologians in general. A few years ago I heard Dr. Sobrino declare at a symposium in the United States, “No liberation theologian known to me has ever denied the divinity of Christ.”<sup>17</sup>

Liberation theology’s distinctive methodological insight is that public theology has less to do with propositions about the world, and more to do with praxis. Building on the Marxist insight that our task is not to simply interpret the world but to change it, liberation theologians identify with the divine bias on behalf of the poor, as seen in the narrative of God’s action in history that includes the prophets and Jesus. For liberation theologians, God really does have a “preferential option for the poor.”

Unlike the American description of public theology, which seems to start with the conversation with the secular world, liberation theologians start with the witness of Scripture, which provides an imperative to the church to work for social justice. Working then with this starting point, we have an account of public theology that stresses the obligation for Christians to understand and to witness to the social implications expounded by the God of Scripture. The doctrine of the *imago Dei* creates the obligation on us to recognize the intrinsic dignity of all people; the doctrine of sin creates the obligation on us to recognize the extraordinary efforts that humans will take to resist a just ordering of human affairs; the doctrine of the resurrection creates

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<sup>17</sup> John Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, new ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International 2001), 411.

the obligation on the church to anticipate and create the conditions for just ordering of society; and the doctrine of the eschaton creates the obligation to judge our present age by the age to come and where our age falls short to rectify the moment in which we live.

The definition of public theology that emerges from this approach is one that takes the following form:

*Public theology is the explication of, witness to, and agency toward the vision that God intends for social life within the parameters of the Christian tradition.*

Public theology is *explication* because the truths about the social order implied by Christian doctrine need to explained. It is *witness* because we need to share the vision of the social order in the public square. It is *agency toward* because we need to do everything we can to move toward and bring out that social order.

Let us recognize there is a major difficulty here. How does this account of public theology relate to the pluralism of God's world? Why should a distinctively Christian public theology persuade anyone not sharing Christian assumptions? This difficulty created the definition of public theology that was able to move from shared assumptions across religious traditions to recommendations that everyone would understand.

### *Engaging with Religious Diversity in the Public Square*

To tackle this issue, we need to introduce a distinction between process and content.<sup>18</sup> This distinction cannot be a strict one. However, broadly “process” stresses the means by which truth is discovered, while “content” stresses propositions that are justified by the internal Christian narrative. The process is often historical and sociological, while the content is the resulting assertions. One simple illustration of this is that the councils of the church were the process (with all the arguments and politics), while the creeds were the content.

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<sup>18</sup> This has been a major theme of my work. Parts of the discussion that follows is a development of my argument in *Truth and the Reality of God: An Essay in Natural Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 125–28. In my professorial inaugural lecture “Shades of Grey: The Pope, Christian Ethics, and the Ambiguity of Human Situations” at Liverpool Hope University, I sketched out the argument. This was reproduced in *Briefing: Official Documentation Service* 27, no. 6 (1997): 28–40.

Working with this distinction, a Christian public theology will make pronouncements. This can be anything from discouraging stores from being open on Sunday to advocating for universal healthcare. To assert that this is the Christian judgment on this moment in the public square sounds intrinsically intolerant. It sounds as if we have the truth and others are just in error. And it is true that some groups most enthusiastic about truth in the public square are the most reprehensible. Truth must not become an excuse for exclusion and intolerance. But, of course, there is no intrinsic reason why a commitment to truth should entail this. Scientists are committed to discovering the truth about the universe and yet no one imagines that this commitment will necessarily result in intolerance. Although the Christian tradition is committed to a God who enables truth to be a possibility, this does not imply that the Christian tradition contains all the truth. If truth in science is difficult to discover, then how much harder is truth in metaphysics? God could have made things clearer, but it seems clear that God desires ambiguity and complexity.

To suggest that God desires ambiguity and complexity will come as a surprise to some. Some Christians talk about a “simple gospel,” where Christianity is self-evidently true. However, the “experience” of many (and the education of some) runs counter to this perception. In a number of situations, most of us find it hard to discover “what we should do.” Life is rarely black and white, but gray. But the discovery that the truth of God’s world is not simple but complex should not be a matter of despair. For the benefits that arise from this complexity suggest strongly that the very difficulties involved in discovering the truth are “revelatory” about the nature of God and the nature of humanity in community. In short, the benefits are such that the church should talk about “complexity” as part of God’s world.

What are these benefits? There are, I suggest, three that arise from the ambiguity and complexity of the ethical. First, ethical pluralism is inevitable. The ambiguity is bound to generate different ethical positions: diversity and disagreement are always going to be with us. In the first instance this is an effect of ambiguity; but I list it as a benefit because I believe diversity is inherently beneficial. Second, this ambiguity inculcates in us the necessity of humility. Although some things are clearer than others, for example the need to oppose racism, many things are not so clear. We need to hold our understanding of the truth with humility. And third, this ambiguity encourages conversation and dialogue. We need each other to illuminate the intractable

difficulties facing our age. In dialogue, truth will be illuminated, contrasts realized, disagreements recognized and of course confronted.

It may even be said that for these three reasons God intended the complexity and ambiguity of the ethical domain. Ethical plurality should be celebrated: diversity and disagreement are part of God's world. The ambiguity is intended because it is God's chosen mechanism to bring about conversation between those who disagree; it is intended precisely because it encourages diversity and disagreement.

The idea that diversity and disagreement are revelatory needs unpacking. Let me sketch both a biblical and natural theology argument for diversity and disagreement. At the biblical level, the position is not what it may seem. Within the Bible there are passages that resist the notion of human diversity: there is the old story of Babel, seeing variety in languages as a curse inflicted because of human hubris, and in the New Testament, some writers are alarmed as cracks in Christian unity appear. However, for all the overt aspiration for uniformity, it is clear that the Bible reflects significant disagreement and diverse positions. Judy Fentress Williams has argued that the form of the Bible is clearly dialogical. She makes the striking claim that "Christian commitment to dialogue is grounded in the very structure of the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, once one recognizes the dialogic structure that is inherent in the Bible, one can better perceive the theological insights and messages of the text."<sup>19</sup> Fentress-Williams is right. Chronicles sits alongside Kings, even though there are clearly different theological outlooks at work. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are all in the canon, even though they clearly disagree. Paul was at variance on certain crucial matters with the Jerusalem apostles. So, although we lack explicit reference to justify my desire to celebrate disagreement and though biblical diversity has traditionally been ignored, the actual form of the Bible, critically understood, clearly supports my claim. It is a book that embraces disagreement and diversity, precisely because of the complexity of its subject matter.

Coupled with these reflections on the Bible, I want to argue that diversity and difference must be intended by God because God built it into the creation. This is the natural theology argument, which needs to be formulated thus: the Christian-Judeo God is the God of the

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<sup>19</sup> Judy Fentress-William, "The Bible and Dialogue," in *11 September: Religious Perspectives on the Causes and Consequences*, ed. Ian S. Markham and Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (Oxford: Oneworld 2002), 189. Her discussion of the Tower of Babel is interesting. She sees it as God's way of challenging homogenous communities.

whole universe. This God is responsible for the Big Bang fifteen billion years ago; it is the God responsible for the vastness of space, the diversity of life forms, and the emergence of different peoples in different parts of the world. It seems a very attenuated view of the cosmic God to imagine that God is only involved in the history of ancient Israel starting with Abraham and then the church as it spread through Europe. It is a very impoverished faith that leaves Satan with most of the world and God dabbling in Israel and then Europe. Given that all good things come from God, then God must have been involved with the teaching of Confucius in China. God must have been involved somehow when the Upanishads were being written. God must not only have allowed but delighted in the wisdom of the Buddha.

Yet we feel that all this diversity is confusing, so much so that it seems a respectable deity could not be mixed up in it or recognizable through it. We much prefer that God simply provided one clear revolution: Jesus, the apostles, and the magisterium perhaps, rather than muddy the scene with all these different religions.

That God has not made things simple and clear is manifestly true. Magisteria have always had their work cut out: always adjusting, often belatedly, to circumstances and to new kinds of awareness, while finding ways of denying any such behavior.

With this set of assumptions, our distinctively Christian account of public theology must now engage with the public square. And we should do so recognizing that the process of Christian ethics requires a commitment to conversation with other worldviews and traditions. Conversation is not an end in itself. We converse for two reasons. First, because we believe that conversation is preferable to conflict. The ambiguity and complexity of human situations often lead to conflict. If conversation is not encouraged, then conflict is often the result. Second, we do so in the hope that conversation will generate new and better options for the way forward. Our goal remains the same—a life of virtue and a just society, where all are able to participate. Inspired by the promise of God's kingdom, we are called to transform the present into what God always intended.

### *The Content of Christian Public Theology and Christian Process*

The definition suggested above now needs to be supplemented. In terms of content, Christians should see public theology as the explication of, witness to, and agency toward the vision that God intends for social life within the parameters of the Christian tradition. We should work with the resources of our tradition and seek to understand

what we trust God is revealing about the ordering of public life. But this commitment should run parallel with a comparable commitment to process. We then offer our perspective into the public square and invite other traditions to do the same. We want a society where Muslims, Jews, secularists, and others are contributing to a rich, vibrant conversation about the common good. There will be commonalities, which will be illuminating. And there will be disagreements, which will need to be resolved. But the vision we should uphold is a rich, varied conversation, where democratic processes resolve the disagreements.

This article has been a challenge to the current consensus among those involved in the work of public theology. It joins Charles Mathewes and others in wanting a more particularist account of public theology. While agreeing that the work of public theology is prescriptive, this article has argued that the challenge of pluralism should not be the starting point for public theology because that will inevitably exclude all traditional Christians. Instead, we should formulate our distinctive insights and commitments. And then we engage with the pluralism of the public square out of that integrity, willing to listen, learn, and be shaped by the insights of other traditions.

However, in conclusion, please allow me one postscript. One interesting feature of our political moment is President Trump's challenge to the contours of the civil religion, as defined by Robert Bellah. For Bellah, the presidency is one of the semireligious features of American civil religion. It is an institution that is political, yet sits above politics. It is a focal point in moments of national tragedy. There is, argues Bellah, an emotional tie that Americans have with the office of the presidency. With a Twitter account and much more besides, President Trump has eroded the dignity of the office. Now will there be an erosion of the emotional tie that Americans have with the presidency; and if so, will that matter? This remains to be seen. However, as Christians committed to appropriate process within the public square, this is a legitimate area for us to challenge. A commitment to learning the truth, listening carefully to those who disagree, and seeking to build bridges in society need to characterize our public theology.

Our contribution to public theology in this moment is both content and process. It is *content*, in that we must name the insidious racism that is shaping both discourse and policies. It is also *process*. It matters how we engage with the other. We need to recognize the imperative of conversation across the various traditions that make up this country.