

On Reexamining Our Errors: A Response to Rose Hudson-Wilkin

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As a church historian, I cannot help but think that to create a theology of the public sphere, *any* such theology in a political climate as polarized as ours today, involves reexamining and unraveling many of the errors of our past history. In the United States, but in the United Kingdom as well, our theological outlook and how we read our sacred texts makes itself felt, consciously or unconsciously, and inflects our other political differences. The question of who has been left behind by modernity, and how, inflects both American and British politics today. The anger and resentment, bubbling under racial and class differences in both of our countries, underscores the particular role of practical religion in helping people to understand and to find their place in the world, and in so doing, to define what their political responsibilities are, as individuals and in society.

America inherited a twin legacy from Enlightenment tenets that shaped our founding fathers: a belief in religious toleration and the separation of church and state, both hard-won convictions after years of religious war. Combined with American individualism, this legacy has created a deep and instinctive sense that religion ought to be a private, personal, internal matter, to be decided by the individual conscience. From our Puritan forebears we have also inherited a definition of religious belief, even of faith itself, as an intellectual matter. Even when we are born again, it is an experience that is happening predominantly in our heads. As Rose Hudson-Wilkin has shown, we too easily participate in dualisms that compartmentalize or marginalize the experience of the body, our own and other people's, as incidental by comparison. American religion—and I use that term deliberately, from the Latin *religio*, to bind—is extremely strong when it

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comes to questions of individual morality and individual choice. It is much more brittle when it comes to addressing questions of “corporate morality,” in both senses of the term.

A particularly American problem at this present moment is that a morality centered solely on a personal, individual moral code and on individual action is ill-equipped to question that individual’s participation in larger socioeconomic systems that crush and exploit racial and ethnic minorities, non-Christians or non-Americans, or the environment. Sarah Coakley’s Costan Lectures at Virginia Theological Seminary in the fall of 2018 take as their founding premise that the American prison system overwhelmingly cages and brutalizes young black men. In cases like these, the blind and willful ignorance of upstanding American citizens is a form of Pilate washing his hands. In the words of the South African bishop Peter Storey, “You have to help good people see how they have let their institutions do their sinning for them.”¹ It strikes me that the role of the theologian of the public square is exactly that work: helping people to better see and hear one another, and to “live out” their faith until it bleeds into their politics. If the cry of the oppressed is that the world is a place that we are just passing through—“I ain’t got long to stay here”—then the business of the theologian of the public square is to ask why, for some, life is a burden they would gladly lay down.

In his memoir *A Man without a Country*, Kurt Vonnegut demands, Why is it that Christians (by which he means American Christians) are always demanding that the Ten Commandments be posted in public places, but never the Beatitudes?² We feel safe with the “Thou shalt nots,” he goes on to suggest, but would be highly uncomfortable with an explicit reference to mercy, for example, in a courtroom. I would add that there is a role in this that gender politics has to play as well: the virtues of the Beatitudes—mercy, meekness, purity of heart, even mourning—are understood in American culture as private, “spiritual” and “emotional” virtues, which are “feminized” accordingly. They exalt the vulnerable; they *are* vulnerable. They have no role in public spaces, which are historically, by definition, theaters

¹ Quoted in Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 360.

² Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man without a Country* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 97–98.

for shows of strength, and remain overwhelmingly male.³ Moreover, the Beatitudes are reminders that everyone ultimately comes under the judgment of God, who may or may not come to the same conclusions that we do.

Historically, it must be said that those Christian groups that have tried to model a way of life close to that of the Beatitudes have often had a strong streak of apocalyptic expectation. Not by coincidence, this way of life is much closer to what we know of the early Christian communities. Many of these groups have been very strange indeed. But a Christian faith that does not, as it were, post the Beatitudes somewhere in its own personal courtroom will turn easily to crusading or witch hunting in the public sphere, or worse. Truthfully or not, like the rich young ruler we may claim to keep all of the Ten Commandments and thus achieve a certain moral safety; I doubt that any one individual could honestly and realistically claim to keep all of the Beatitudes, not least because these teachings describe moral qualities that are internal and embodied, often by people who are very different from one another. To keep the Beatitudes most fully and truly, therefore, we need one another. A morality truly oriented to “the poor in spirit” and to “the least of these” is a morality with an entire ecology already built in.

The role of public theology, particularly in a pluralistic society, is to bring more people into the public square, so that they can be seen, so that they can participate and flourish. When Christ gave the Sermon on the Mount, he did not pluck the word *blessed* out of thin air: it stands in a long tradition of covenantal language given by God to his people. In Deuteronomy, the Israelites are told that, if they keep his law, they will be blessed in the land they have been given; if they do not, they will be cursed and ultimately uprooted from it. The psalter opens with a strong echo of this language: the first words of Psalm 1 in the Vulgate are *Beatus vir*, “blessed is the man,” or in the modern translation,

Happy are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked. . . .
 They are like trees
 planted by streams of water. (Ps. 1:1, 3)

³ Mary Beard, “The Public Voice of Women,” *London Review of Books* 36 (2014): 11–14, accessed at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n06/mary-beard/the-public-voice-of-women>; reprint *Women and Power: A Manifesto* (New York: Liveright, 2017).

The wicked, by contrast, “are like chaff which the wind drives away” (v. 4), echoing this language of impermanence. The vision of the new Jerusalem that closes the Apocalypse describes streams of water, the water of life, flowing out from the city of God, with the tree of life planted along each bank, whose leaves “are for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2).

Christians or not, our actions have unleashed on the planet the forces of income inequality and human-generated climate change, now recognized to be the greatest threat to human rights in the new millennium. It seems increasingly likely that many things in our daily lives we and our parents have taken for granted will change, and change dramatically, in the next fifty years. Technological solutions alone cannot help people deal, and deal healthily, with this rate of change without turning on others as ostensible culprits or threats. The work of public theology, it seems to me, is therefore necessarily going to be work of reconciliation. What will be required is a combined approach of listening, pastoral presence, and local initiatives in communities marginalized, disadvantaged, or otherwise altered by the pace of change, with a keen eye to the place of immigrants or refugees within those communities. There is past history that needs to be uncovered, past narratives that need to be examined, things done and left undone in the past that need to be unraveled. A theology of the public square for a Christian practitioner carries with it the responsibility and the burden of establishment, even or particularly in America, where the church is not openly established as such but the social expectation for public figures remains an avowed Christian faith and a denominational affiliation. This does not mean, necessarily, that the church must therefore be responsible for everything or do everything; indeed, as numbers of regular churchgoers dwindle across denominations on both sides of the Atlantic, that seems unlikely and unrealistic. The American church would do well to learn a lesson many who already serve in the Church of England know: as William Temple said, the church is one of the only organizations who works for the benefit of those who are not its immediate members. Our “blessedness” lies in creating a space in which all can be seen and heard, in recognizing that our covenant is only fulfilled if everyone, Christian or not, can participate.