

The Priority of Public Witness: A Response to Robert S. Heaney

JOHN Y. H. YIEH*

In his compelling essay, Robert Heaney makes a robust missiological argument for a theology of “public witness” over against the secularly framed “demythologized public theologies” by siding with Charles Mathewes’s approach to a “theology of public life.” This theology upholds a particularist point of view, encouraging religious actors to speak and act in public according to the scriptures and traditions of their worshipping community.¹ Heaney’s essay is full of insights and wisdom concerning missiological theology, cross-cultural study, and interfaith dialogue. Three of his arguments on the locus, plurality, and *modus operandi* of a missiological approach to public witness are particularly noteworthy.

First, *public* can be defined in three ways: as (1) a corporate entity of bounded identity, (2) a particular context of shared concerns, or (3) a common site of social interaction. It is the third definition that Heaney adopts in his approach to public witness. To regard public as a “zone of social interaction” is to recognize the social reality of pluralities and contestation. In his words, “This locus speaks less of bounded identities and [common] 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.” But it is precisely to the pluralities that Christians are called to bear their witness.

Second, Christians are called to bear witness to God “in public pluralities.” The descent of the Spirit on the disciples and the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem on Pentecost (Acts 2) created a commotion

* John Yuen-Han Yieh is Molly Laird Downs Professor in New Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary. Widely published in both English and Chinese, his work includes *The Sermon on the Mount* (2018) and *Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of Matthew* (2012). He is a contributing author to *The T&T Clark Handbook on Asian American Hermeneutics* (2019) and *The Oxford History of Anglicanism*, vol. 5 (2018).

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

among the crowds and inspired Peter to preach Jesus as Christ and Lord; as a result, the first church was born. "Here," writes Heaney, "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." As the early church grew and expanded to include Gentiles, theological questions and ecclesial disputations arose; the church itself became the locus for interchange and debates over the new configuration of the people of God. The Apostolic Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) demonstrates how that fierce disputation eventually "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." Drawing from his expertise on African theology, Heaney also cites Jesse Mugambi, who interpreted Acts 15 as a counter event to the testimony of foreign missionaries in Africa. An African convert need not be circumcised into European culture to become an "honorary white" before he can be baptized as a Christian, Mugambi insisted. In this postcolonial argument, we see "the social or missional interface where contextualization and contestation constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs articulations and expressions of the faith."

Third, regarding the *modus operandi* of public witness, Heaney endorses a model of "prophetic dialogue" developed by Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder in their book, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*.² For Heaney, the fundamental role of witness is contextualization. This means discerning the work of God's Spirit in particular locations and making the word of God intelligible in local languages and cultures. In order to contextualize the Christian gospel, one needs to listen deeply and learn humbly from local languages and particular cultures. To engage in such social interactions, the practice of prophetic dialogue is crucial.

For a Christian theology of public witness, Heaney insists, three fundamental convictions must be upheld. The first of these convictions is that the christological claim must not be eschewed. Here, Heaney interprets Eucharist as a liturgy in which "we meet the risen Christ and we meet the discarded Christ. To turn to Christ is to be turned to the world." He warns church leaders, "To form a people with apparent liturgical proficiency who cannot articulate the gospel

² Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

beyond the assembly is missiological and theological malpractice.” The second such conviction is that porosity of sociality must be recognized. Jesus transgressed boundaries. The Spirit brings Gentiles into the church. God reconciles all. Making peace in the church and in the society is therefore the central task of Christian mission. The third is that the eschatological hope must not be overlooked. We should love the whole creation by “storying the land” and loving our neighbors of different faiths with bold humility. A prophetic dialogue calls for a deeper vision of God and vigilant attention to the prophetic voice of God’s Spirit in interreligious solidarity and in porous community. The content of Christian witness is the hopeful gospel of God that reconciles all by creating a community of reconciliation.

In conclusion, Heaney reminds his reader of the porous quality of publicness, and urges the church to bear its witness by engaging in prophetic dialogue for deeper understanding of each other in order to build a community of peace. Heaney’s article makes a convincing case for a Christian theology of public witness. It takes seriously the challenge of public pluralities and social porosity, promotes the model of prophetic dialogue as a way to reach deeper understanding of oneself and others, and provides essential convictions that inform Christian public witness: the worship and proclaiming of Christ, the porosity of sociality and congregation, and the eschatological hope for God’s reconciliation with creation and all humanity.

In appreciation for Heaney’s contribution to public theology, I will offer three brief comments in the hope of carrying on the dialogue he embraces and encourages.

The definition of public. Heaney invites the reader to think of “public” in terms of a “zone of social interaction” rather than a corporate entity of bounded identity or a particular context of shared concerns. Social interaction assumes pluralities, and pluralities inevitably create disputations. However, as demonstrated in the descent of the Spirit on believers at Pentecost (Acts 2), the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), and the postcolonial African theology of Jesse Mugambi, the “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.” These biblical and missionary examples remind the church to gaze upward on the living God and discern the work of God’s Spirit in

the whole world rather than focus its energy on conserving its institution or traditions. They also encourage the church to open its door to welcome anyone as children of God and to serve the poor and the sick. They further show that, under the direction of God's Spirit, even confusion and disputation may lead to a deeper level of understanding and new mode of community. Heaney's interpretation of the stories in Acts is convincing and his discussion of Mugambi is germane.

The model of prophetic dialogue. Heaney endorses the model of prophetic dialogue from Bevans and Schroeder as a useful means to engage in public witness. In interfaith dialogues, people often try to box their God or other religions' beliefs into a simple theological or religious language easy to handle. That tendency becomes idolatry; but as Heaney argues, "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." Prophetic dialogue can create a wider and safer space for richer conversation and closer relationship between partners of the dialogue.

One question I hope Heaney can clarify further for us is a specific definition or connotation of the "prophetic" assumed in "prophetic dialogue." Does it describe the radical nature of the dialogue as a process because it may be divinely used to subvert or transform the church and society? Does it suggest particular themes for the dialogue, such as justice and mercy in the prophetic tradition of the Bible? If taken from Latin American theology, does it focus on liberation from poverty and oppression? If following Bevans and Schroeder, does it concern ecology, interreligious exploration, and reconciliation? Or does it refer to the purpose of the dialogue as finding "something beyond the world"? Is it so called, because such a dialogue can alert and open us to discern "the prophetic voice of God" for all people of all faiths?

The model of prophetic dialogue that Heaney advocates has proved to be constructive and fruitful in helping participants of interfaith dialogues to gain a deeper understanding of and build closer relationship with one another, as evident in *Faithful Neighbors: Christian-Muslim Vision and Practice* (2016). The principles of authenticity, generosity, and humility in Heaney's "prophetic dialogue" find resonant echoes in a similar effort to attain interfaith understanding in the movement of Scriptural Reasoning, whose rationale and goals can be found in the projects and publications of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme based in Cambridge University and the Scriptural

Reasoning Network in the University of Virginia. In this movement, groups of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic scholars gather together regularly to listen to and reflect on the interpretations of their scriptures in relation to major beliefs and practices side-by-side. They form a community of careful listening and thoughtful reflection on the scriptural arguments for each religion's doctrines and practices, hoping to gain a sharper understanding of one's own and other's faith, to explore their differences critically and honestly for a better disagreement, and to build genuine friendship among teachers and leaders of each religion. Both prophetic dialogue and scriptural reasoning share the same final purpose: to seek true understanding in the disputations of different faiths, which is indeed an urgent task for the world devastated by religious discrimination, hostility, terrorism, and outright wars. I wonder if there is any significant difference between these two models, in regard to their respective emphasis on the prophetic and the scriptural?

Three essential Christian elements. True to his stated particularist point of departure for a theology of public witness, Heaney ends this essay unapologetically with trinitarian convictions of Christ standing at the center and the margin, of the Spirit breaking open boundaries, and of God providing eschatological hope of reconciliation. He insists on the worship and proclaiming of Christ, and calls Christians to be open to the other, to be humble and penitential in their attitude, to create space for prophetic dialogue, and to build a community of reconciliation and peace.

In short, Heaney's arguments are persuasive, and his appeals, if heeded, will change the way Christians bear witness to the gospel in public to renew the church and transform the world.