WHERE ARE WE NOW?
Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Negotiating Religious Voices in Public Places

In February 2008, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, delivered a speech at the Royal Courts of Justice in London, entitled 'Civil and Religious Law in England: a Religious Perspective'. He used the lecture to address the status of shari'a or Islamic law within the British legal system, arguing that the growth of religious pluralism made the case for greater recognition of religious considerations within an overarching system of statutory law. He suggested that for the state to have legal monopoly flew in the face of modern democratic principles of human dignity, and that parallel jurisdictions might go some way towards acknowledging religiously-founded codes of conduct.

The text of the lecture was released in advance to the press, and even before the lecture had been given, Williams found himself at the centre of a media furore. He was accused of calling for the introduction of shari'a law in the UK and sanctioning legal immunity for Muslims from the universal rule of law. Even those who conceded that he was attempting to negotiate his way through a complex and nuanced set of questions about multiculturalism, religious freedom and the challenges of pluralism accused him of obscurantism and lack of clarity, amounting to a 'disengenuous' (Parris, 2008) failure to anticipate that his speculations would, inevitably, be misunderstood.

Rowan Williams' speech on shari'a has already received much attention already (Kim, 2011), (Higton, 2008), (Chaplin, 2008). Through the issues he raised, and the public reaction, are refracted other, vital but unresolved questions: the right of a faith leader to comment on matters of common concern; the increasing role of the media in managing 'public' opinion and debate; and how a nation forged from a particular religious tradition (with, in this case, the legacy of an Established Church) might accommodate greater religious pluralism into its legal, political and cultural institutions.

This case is an example of the delicate position of religion in much of Western public life, and it touches on a number of themes that are relevant to my theme today: how explicitly religious voices and interventions are projected into political debate, and secular or non-religious reactions to that; the benefits or otherwise of the public mobilization of religious social capital; and debates about religious freedom, tolerance and discrimination. Primarily, however, it shows how we live in a time of significant realignment of the way in which, for over two hundred years, Western philosophy and politics have conceived of the nature of the body politic and the character of civil society.

We see the tension in other areas. For example, in Western democracies such as the UK, faith-based organizations are experiencing a heightened public prominence as partners with government in the delivery of welfare and other public services (Dinham, Furbey and Lowndes, 2009). Political leaders in the West, especially in Europe, often face difficulties in negotiating questions of personal religious belief in relation to their public images. Tony Blair, and recently Angela Merkel, have found that the relationship between private conviction and public office can be fraught with difficulty, especially when opinion amongst

the electorate at large is at all sceptical or suspicious of those who claim to 'do God' in relation to political policy (Graham, 2009a), (Graham, 2009b).
Looking at the European context, then, it is clear that the current situation is characterised above all by complexity and ambivalence. I am clear we are not talking about religious revival, and yet equally I am not convinced that the resurgence of religious discourse and practice is but a blip on an otherwise undisturbed trajectory of modernity. Similarly, whilst the resurgence of 'religion' and things of the spirit may be interpreted as posing a challenge to modernity's emphasis on rationality, contemporary discourses founded on the continuing triumph of reason and science continue to maintain a vigorous defence of secularism. Religion is both more visible and invisible: both more publicly prominent and more vicarious; more elusive institutionally (and intellectually, theologically), and yet more cited, more pervasive. So this new dispensation represents significant challenges to existing assumptions about the way religious voices are mediated into public spaces.

This seemingly paradoxical co-existence of the religious and the secular takes us into uncharted territory, sociologically and theologically, and is giving rise to talk of the emergence of a 'post-secular' society (Habermas, 2008) (Keenan, 2002); (Bretherton, 2010, pp. 10-16). This has been acknowledged in the work of some leading social theorists, most notably Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Judith Butler and Jose Casanova – the latter speaks of 'public religions in a post-secular world' (Casanova, 1994). Increasingly, political theorists of many kinds are asking questions about the self-sufficiency of the secular to furnish the public domain with sufficiently robust values for consensus. To that end, therefore, post-secular culture must openly recognize religion not only as a set of private beliefs but also a source of public discourse. As Hent de Vries concludes, 'A society is "post-secular" if it reckons with the diminishing but enduring – and hence, perhaps, ever more resistant and recalcitrant – existence of the religious.' (de Vries, 2006b, p. 3)
Whilst it is a contested concept, what characterizes the post-secular is, in my view, both its paradoxical and unprecedented nature: the emergence globally and nationally of revitalized religious activism as a decisive force, alongside the continuing trajectory of institutional religious decline accompanied by robust intellectual defence of secularism in Western societies. All to greater or lesser extent hinge on the legitimacy of religious institutions to intervene in public affairs, and how public authorities arbitrate between competing accounts of citizenship and the common good. In this lecture, therefore, I want to consider some of the ways in which the paradox of the post-secular might be felt, at the intersection of religion and society, and what that means for our established conventions of negotiation between the two. It is therefore my contention that this new dispensation of 'post-secularity' presents novel challenges for public theology and the public witness of the Christian churches. Christian engagement in the public square – in word and deed – must learn to negotiate between the 'rock' of religious revival and the 'hard place' of secularism.

Post-Secular Society

Despite the predictions of secularisation theorists, a distinguishing feature of Western societies such as the UK in the twenty-first century is that religion has not disappeared from the public sphere. New manifestations of public religion are emerging, especially in the global South, calling into question the universality of normative Western models of religious

decline. Yet even in Europe – increasingly coming to be seen as the exception not the rule of secularization – religion is returning to public prominence, due in no small part to immigration and resulting religious pluralism. (Dinham, Furbey and Lowndes, 2009) Interest in personal spirituality beyond creedal and institutional expressions of religion continues to be strong; and in many areas of health care, education and welfare, there is talk of the 'spiritual' dimensions of service delivery and professional practice.

In a reformulation of his original secularization thesis, then, Peter Berger has claimed that it is now more accurate to talk about a process of 'desecularization' (Berger, 1999):

> 'The world today…is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some cases more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled 'secularization theory' is essentially mistaken.' (Berger, 1999, p. 2)

However, the situation is more complex than a mere reversal of religious decline. In fact, levels of formal institutional affiliation and membership in mainstream denominations continue to decline, a trend that is apparent throughout Western Europe (Kaufmann, 2012). Levels of formal institutional affiliation and membership in mainstream Christian and Jewish denominations continue to diminish across the Western world. In the UK, the national population censuses of 2001 and 2011 included a voluntary question which asked, "What is your religion?" The shifts within that decade are instructive: those identifying as 'Christian' fell from nearly three-quarters (72%) in 2001 to less than two-thirds (59%) in 2011. Those claiming 'no religion' rose to 25% in 2011 from 15% ten years earlier. Whatever people think they mean by 'no religion', it suggests that identification with institutional, creedal religion is diminishing. Other evidence suggests also that public scepticism towards religion is on the increase (Voas, 2010). Religious observance is increasingly disaffiliated and individualised; religious institutions are viewed with distrust at worst, indifference at best.

The prominence of those who profess no religious faith, or declare themselves secular humanists or atheists may be gaining impetus through the popularity of works by the 'New Atheist' writers, who include the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, philosophers such as Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris and the journalists Polly Toynbee and the late Christopher Hitchens. As Charles Taylor has noted, 'We no longer live in societies in which the widespread sense can be maintained that faith in God is central to the ordered life we (partially) enjoy' (Taylor, 2007, p. 531).

There are many signs of religious vitality, therefore, but this does not amount to a restoration of pre-modern faith, at least not in the sense of the restoration of Western Christendom. So there are reasons to believe that we are not witnessing a linear process, a religious revival or reversal of secularization, which is what 'desecularization' implies. The secularization process is clearly neither uniform, inevitable nor irreversible, since religion continues to exercise a global influence and has demonstrated a new public resurgence. Nevertheless, whilst the inevitability of secularization may now be open to question, this must not be thought of as a religious revival.

The current condition may therefore be better framed in terms of the simultaneous and dialectical presence of re-enchantment and secularized and secularizing socio-cultural trends. This transcends the binary of mere religious revival or sociological revisionism, and represents the unique juxtaposition of both significant trends of secularism and continued religious decline (not only in Northern Europe, but certainly undeniably so), and signs of persistent and enduring demonstrations of public, global faith. What has also raised the stakes about our current situation is the growing gulf between people of faith and wider society in terms of a widespread deficit of religious literacy and in the objections of reasoned sceptics who question the very legitimacy of religious voices and the benevolence of faith-based interventions in equal measure.

A cluster of social and political theorists, amongst them the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, are also now speaking of the 'post-secular' public square, and acknowledging that religious values may have a role to play in what he calls 'the ethics of citizenship' (Habermas, 2006). He has called for a re-evaluation of the secular nature of the public square and the introduction of religious sources of reasoning (albeit mediated or moderated via processes of 'translation' into common terms) as an enrichment of our social and political imaginary, a means of incorporating 'what's missing' into a renewed vocabulary of civic virtue (Habermas, 2010, pp. 15-23).

In this renewed sense of public prominence, for better and for worse, therefore, religion provokes wider discussion about the neutrality of the public square and the secular nature of liberal democracy, as well as the 'public' and 'private' demeanour of its citizens. The new prominence of religion within a continuing trajectory of pluralism means that public discourse and public space becomes more differentiated but potentially more polarised, with a small but increasingly well-mobilised religious minority operating alongside a majority of disaffiliated non-believers who may have little or no first-hand understanding of religious belief or practice. This has particular impact on the discourses and practices concerning citizenship and values informing the public sphere, and I would like to explore these challenges through three brief case studies:

1. Religious Literacy – emergence of new agencies of mediation of religious life and experience
2. Faith and welfare – instrumentalisation of 'faith' against the grain of institutional fragility
3. Equalities Agenda – competing convictions and a 'hierarchy' of rights in context of greater currency of religious identity and widening gap between people of faith and majority

Religious Literacy

I have been suggesting that as Western society becomes, sociologically, post-Christian, an increasing gulf opens between a small but increasingly pluralist religious minority and the rest of society, which may not be consciously secular or atheist by conviction, but lack first

hand, lived experience of what it means to be a person of faith. The commentator Jonathan Rauch has coined the term 'apatheistic' to denote those who are religiously indifferent rather than militantly atheistic (Rauch, 2003). That lack of awareness is all very well if faith is marginal or invisible in daily life, but the new mobilisation of religion, its re-entry into social policy and equalities and human rights discourses, arguably creates a need for greater understanding.

However, whilst religion is visible in some, often unexpected respects, it is becoming increasingly marginal to most people's everyday concerns and beyond their direct experience. In that case, then, who and what are the vehicles by which religious and theological concerns are brought to public consciousness? Hence the emergence of the language of 'religious literacy'.

This term originated in the U.S. with the work of Stephen Prothero and the debate on whether religion can be taught in public or state schools (Prothero, 2007). In the British context, however, 'religious literacy' is concerned more with how to foster greater understanding across the growing gulf between an increasingly secular political class and much of the grass-roots community activity that goes on in the name of faith. Talk of 'religious literacy' originates in state or public education, where it is considered one of the objectives of religious education in schools (Carr, 2007). In the UK, a daily act of collective worship and some form of religious instruction have been required by law since 1944; but as British society has become more diverse religiously and culturally, such provision is less about the observance of a shared Christian heritage and more about negotiating the pluralism of religious beliefs and practices in a multi-cultural society.

More broadly, however, the new public visibility of religion has extended the use of the term 'religious' or 'faith' literacy to apply to the training of government and public services personnel. Recent changes to equal opportunities legislation in the United Kingdom have proved something of a catalyst. The Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations of 2003 and the Equality Acts of 2006 and 2010 represent the extension of basic protection against discrimination to questions of 'religion and belief'. Since employers and service providers are now required to be more aware of religious factors affecting employees and clients, there have been calls for greater sensitivity towards matters of faith in relation to everyday practice and the law.

As a recent Report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission suggested, however, if the promotion of religious literacy is entering the consciousness of public institutions and service-providers, it may be that media and popular culture are as influential as more formal sectors such as education (Woodhead and Catto, 2009). Such a suggestion is reinforced by trends in contemporary scholarship in religion, media and culture which argue that popular culture and media perform a correspondingly formative role in articulating and constructing people's perceptions and orientations to the sacred (Lynch, 2007); (Graham, 2011).

Current debates about religious literacy may place emphasis on the formal sectors of religious education or equal opportunities training, yet at the expense of considerations of our everyday exposure to a range of different media – albeit with their own commercial, political or

ideological agendas. For that reason, any consideration of religious literacy needs to consider how our consumption of all kinds of broadcast and social media may become increasingly influential.

'Faith' in the 'Big Society'

Another feature of contemporary religion in the UK and across Europe perfectly illustrates the contradictions of increased prominence – and heightened expectation – alongside continuing institutional fragility, and it is the debate about faith-based involvement in the restructuring of welfare. Religion (or 'faith') figures prominently in the present coalition government's evocation of a vigorous civil society as integral to the reconstruction of communities. As public expenditure comes under increasing pressure, the role of the voluntary or 'third' sector assumes greater prominence: as stakeholders or partners in government initiatives, or even as an arm of service delivery. Religious organizations are seen as rich in what is known as 'social capital': in human resources, the ability to forge networks, to mobilise resources, and to espouse the values that foster altruism and community service (Bretherton, 2010).

Concern to involve churches and other faith-based organizations in the delivery of public services, is not, of course, the invention of the current coalition government, but dates to the first term of the New Labour government in the late 1990s. But whilst there may be benefits across the political spectrum in mobilising 'faith' as part of a rejuvenated third sector, activists themselves see dangers (Dinham, 2012). The language of social capital risks buying into the commodification of welfare services. It also threatens to instrumentalize faith-based contributions, thereby distorting and narrowing their concerns. Faith groups are in danger of colluding with agendas imposed from above rather than being free to articulate those of their own stakeholders, and especially their core values around empowerment, well-being and community development. Faith-based organizations may be regarded as providing 'warm hearts and safe pairs of hands' from government's point of view, then, but are not granted the independence to challenge or negotiate with their terms of engagement (Dinham, 2012); (Archbishops' Commission on Urban Life and Faith, 2006).

This contradiction between the mobilisation of 'faith' as an imagined variety or category of social capital and its institutional fragility (or its vulnerability to co-option by the State) may tell us more about the incoherence of the idea of the Big Society than the precise dynamics of post-secularity. But I think it does serve to illustrate the problems inherent in a greater visibility of religion in public that is often decoupled from its traditional, mainstream institutional expressions. It means that 'the inspiration, motivation and effectuation of political theologies no longer lie within the cultural and institutional, ecclesial or communal heritage of the major religions or within the modern forms of political sovereignty with which their theologically ... driven politics were historically, geographically, empirically, and conceptually linked.' (de Vries, 2006b, p. 9) The loosening of established, institutional ties is evidenced by the 'increasingly delocalized, deterritorialized, and volatile mobility' of religion (de Vries, 2006b, p. 8). The flows of secularization engender the de-institutionalisation of religion, whilst at the same time, State intervention co-opts organizational structures and

bureaucracies in ways that threaten to instrumentalise and 'hollow out' the distinctive values of religious belief and practice.

Evangelical Identity Politics

One telling instance of the new visibility of religion in Western society, and thus the shifting boundaries between the sacred and the secular, has been the incorporation of the categories of 'religion and belief' into human rights legislation. Since the middle of the twentieth century, there have been articles pertaining to religious freedom which have been well-enshrined within national, European and international law. What is newer, however, is the constitutional inclusion of religious equality alongside other principles of anti-discrimination, such as race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and disability. Whilst this may be seen as a straightforward extension of anti-discriminatory practices, however, sensitivity towards religious conscience and identity has sometimes conflicted with more general considerations of public welfare. It raises the question of whether there is in fact a hierarchy between different kinds of protected characteristics, and how the exercise of public jurisdiction can be managed without passing judgement on the nature of belief itself.

The most prominent and contentious expression of this may be seen in the actions of a small number of conservative Christians who have brought high-profile legal cases in the UK against their employers, claiming to have experienced discrimination for wishing to express their faith. This has generally followed disciplinary action by their employers for being in breach of the various equality and diversity legislation introduced in the early years of the 21st century.

In January 2013, the European Court of Human Rights released its verdict on the cases of four Christians who had all appealed against earlier verdicts of Employment Tribunals in the U.K., all of which to some degree concerned the extent to which they had experienced discrimination at work because of their faith. They were appealing on the basis of Articles 9 and 14 of the European Convention of Human Rights (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2013). Two concerned whether the wearing of a crucifix was compliant with employers' uniform codes, and two related to the extent to which the employees in question were prepared to comply with their organizations' policies on working with same-sex couples: one as a registrar of civil partnerships, and the other as a relationships counsellor working in sex therapy. Of the four appeals, only one – that of Nadia Eweida – was upheld. Ms Eweida, a check-in clerk for British Airways, was sent home in October 2006 after being told that her necklace cross contravened uniform regulations. BA subsequently changed the policy in 2007, but on returning to work Ms Eweida sued on the grounds of religious discrimination. She lost her case at the Employment Appeal Tribunal and the Court of Appeal, but EHRC found in her favour on the grounds that no harm was done to BA by allowing staff to hear a cross.

It's unfortunate, I think, that such cases (and others) have been somewhat appropriated by Christian campaign groups in the UK, who, to be candid, appear determined to use such cases as evidence of a wider cultural declension. Confronted by the rise of secularism and increasing cultural and religious pluralism, the response of many conservative Christians has

therefore been to ‘clarify challenging and ever-changing moral ambiguities, provide answers to new moral questions, defend traditional view-points and establish fresh boundaries’ (Hunt, 2010, p. 188). In particular, liberalization of attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and intersex (LGBTI) lifestyles within wider Western society, in which ‘a range of sexual and reproductive rights are increasingly wedded to expanding definitions of citizenship’ (Hunt, 2010, p. 184), has served as a particular lightning-rod.

I have a wider thesis, that this is part of the formation of a new evangelical identity politics, which mirrors some of the aspects of the new Christian Right in the U.S. and their declaration of ‘culture wars’ against progressive political causes. Confronted by the rise of secularism and increasing cultural and religious pluralism, the response of many conservative Christians has therefore been to ‘clarify challenging and ever-changing moral ambiguities, provide answers to new moral questions, defend traditional view-points and establish fresh boundaries’ (Hunt, 2010, p. 188). In particular, liberalization of attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and intersex (LGBTI) lifestyles within wider Western society, in which ‘a range of sexual and reproductive rights are increasingly wedded to expanding definitions of citizenship’ (Hunt, 2010, p. 184), has served as a particular lightning-rod.

Behind these individuals who have taken their cases to court lies an intriguing network of conservative evangelical Christian campaigning groups such as the Christian Lawyers Fellowship, the Christian Institute and a number of church leaders. In their public statements, they tend to deploy the language of persecution and polarization to depict a beleaguered Christianity now mortally under attack from equality and diversity legislation (especially around same-sex relationships) ‘aggressive secularism’ and global Islam. Pope Benedict himself has linked the rise of secularism – aggressive or otherwise – with the erosion of an historic European Christian legacy. Two prominent retired Evangelical bishops in the Church of England have also been very vocal: George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury between 1991 and 2002, and Michael Nazir-Ali, who retired as Bishop of Rochester in 2009. The title of Nazir-Ali’s recent book, *Triple Jeopardy for the West: Aggressive Secularism, Radical Islamism and Multiculturalism*, sums up the essence of their stance against the cultural marginalisation of Christianity in the face of ‘an aggressive secularism that seeks to undermine the traditional principles because it has its own project to foster’ (Beckford, 2009). As George Carey has put it, ‘At times it seems a “*crusade*” is being waged by the *militant wing* of secularism to eradicate religion in general – and Christianity in particular – from any role in public life.’ (Carey, 2012, p. 9), my emphasis.

The question is, whether such a discourse of persecution and moral crusade is actually justified. Individuals are entitled to feel threatened if they believe they are not allowed to express their faith as their conscience dictates. However, the evidence suggests that the perception amongst British Evangelicals is largely unfounded. In 2012, a group of MPs, “Christians in Parliament” conducted an enquiry into this very phenomenon. The report, *Clearing the Ground*, referred to a ‘hierarchy’ of equalities, and conceded that Christians in the UK may have grounds to feel marginalised, on the basis that ‘the frequency and nature of the [legal] cases indicates a *narrowing of the space* for the articulation, expression and demonstration of Christian belief.’ (Christians in Parliament, 2012, p. 5), my emphasis. We may regard this as broadly consistent with the ambivalent position of religion in a post-

Christian, post-secular society; but despite this, the Report refuses to support anything approaching 'persecution':

> 'In the United Kingdom Christians do not risk their lives to meet to worship, are not prevented by the law from preaching and do not face the death penalty if they have converted from another faith. Whatever difficulties may be experienced by Christians in the UK, they are not comparable with those encountered by fellow believers in the world.' (Christians in Parliament, 2012, p. 10)

Rather than lamenting society's indifference to 'Biblical values' or Britain's descent into post-Christian multiculturalism, *Clearing the Ground* argues that Christians should place more emphasis on making a positive contribution to public life. 'It is essential', says the report, 'that Christians once again provide hope and a vision for society that goes beyond defending their own interests and includes the good of all.' (Christians in Parliament, 2012, p. 45) In particular, it suggests that the root of misunderstanding between Christians and employers or public authorities is often merely a lack of religious literacy rather than deliberate hostility: 'we see in the actions of government, public bodies and employers an inadequate grasp and inability (or unwillingness) to accommodate belief' (Christians in Parliament, 2012, p. 17). Christians should express a faith that is 'neither private, nor privileged' (Spencer, 2008), which contributes constructively to helping a post-secular society reach an equitable settlement for expressions of religion in public.

Similarly, a report for the British Equality and Human Rights Commission found evidence that religious people do sometimes face incidents of 'being misunderstood, denigrated, ignored, trivialised, distorted or ridiculed, including by the media, in education, and in public discourse'(Woodhead and Catto, 2009, p. 15). It did not conclude, however, that these amounted to direct discrimination in terms of the tangible withholding or misdirection of physical goods and services. But it may be fair to suggest that these cases do expose the tension between liberal principles of freedom of expression – including the right to challenge the beliefs and actions of others – and respect for cultural difference, including religious practices and identities. This is perhaps not surprising, and as precedent is developed, courts may establish clear criteria for passing judgement. For the time being, however, the difficulties of finding appropriate balance between respect for religion and belief and other criteria of equality and diversity within the legislation continue. I think this is a good illustration of the way in which Western society finds itself 'between a rock and a hard place' – on the one hand, of religious conviction and newly-prominent public recognition of religious belief, identity and activism – and on the other, a resilient and indefatigable tradition of resistance towards the very legitimacy of religion in the public square.

Public Theology as Christian Apologetics

In many ways, the kind of religious faith that is emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and which dominates the public imagination, is very different from what went before. It represents much less of a religious revival and much more a quest for a new voice in the midst of public debate that is more fragmented, more global, more disparate. It is a public domain in which the contribution of religion to the well-being of communities is

welcomed by some, with new agendas and increasing enthusiasm; but at the same time, the very legitimacy of faith to speak or contribute at all is contested as vigorously as ever.

If this is where we are, then how might the churches respond? Not, as I have been arguing, defensively, to act to try and defend historic privileges. The particular challenges of the post-secular condition suggest that if the Christian churches are committed to any kind of significant public role, the nature of public theological discourse must change. No longer is it speaking into a common frame of reference, in which the theological and moral allusions fall comfortably on waiting ears. The post-secular describes a public square that is both more sensitive to and suspicious of religious discourse. Indeed, in a context where people's familiarity with any kind of organized religion is ever more tenuous, it places greater onus than ever on the importance of significant communication across the post-secular divide.

The churches face the challenge not only of articulating theologically grounded interventions in the public square, but of justifying and defending the very relevance of the Christian faith in a culture that no longer grants automatic access or credence. A climate of political debate that is both more sceptical and more pluralist, and yet in some respects is more receptive to the language of values, will require a more explicit level of self-justification on the part of religious actors.

What is needed, arguably, is a form of 'public theology' capable of building and sustaining such a dialogical sensibility: to regard the responsibility to uphold a broad-based, mutually accountable public discussion as an essential part of a Christian vocation. The voices of public theology may still need to intervene in public debate on specific issues or policies, but they should also cultivate a clearer rationale for their very right to speak at all. In other words, the proponents of public theology – ranging from Church authorities, public intellectuals to local activists and campaigners – should contribute critically and constructively to public debate, but must be more attentive than ever to the tasks of justifying and articulating the theological well-springs of these commitments.

So I have been considering whether this may now be the time to recover a more *apologetic* dimension to Christian engagement in public affairs. Christian apologetics may be defined as 'the various ways in which thoughtful Christians, in different ages and cultures, have striven "give a reason for the hope that is within them" (cf 1 Peter 3:15)' (Dulles, 1971, p. xix). Christianity has from its very origins been a missionary faith, centred around the proclamation of the life, death, resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ. From the very beginning, however, it has also been charged with an apologetic task. It has needed to defend and commend its claims against a variety of non-believers, detractors and persecutors.

Apologetics is about Christians being capable of justifying the vision and motivation behind their involvement in public life. But it is always committed to making the language of its core convictions accessible and intelligible to its audience. From the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and Paul's appearance in Athens (Acts 17: 16-33) the effectiveness of those preaching the Gospel rested on the adoption of the cultures and philosophical assumptions of their listeners. It entails a kind of 'bilingualism' capable of mediating theological truths into more 'secular'

terms of reference – in order to communicate the well-springs of Christian conviction to others. The North American theologian Max Stackhouse puts it like this:

> 'Apologetics seeks to speak in ways that can be grasped by those who doubt or do not share the faith. It thus tests the reasonability and morality of the faith and those who hold it by engaging those who are not already convinced. It acknowledges that if it is in principle impossible to make a case for the truth or justice of theology, others are under no obligation to take it seriously.' (Stackhouse, 2006, p. 168)

In other words '… if theology is to be trusted to participate in public discourse it ought to be able to make a plausible case for what it advocates in terms that can be comprehended by those who are not believers ...' Especially in a religiously pluralist, global context it is expedient to articulate (and be prepared to defend) the values that inform Christian statements about, and interventions in, the public realm.

However, I think we also have to ask how well ordinary lay people are equipped to 'give an account' of themselves within a post-secular society. Traditions of public theology that have concentrated on the statements of church leaders may need to be augmented by a more sustained approach to building up the grass-roots practices of discipleship that spill over into active citizenship. It makes a priority of the cultivation of the skills of theological literacy amongst the laity, not least in order to maintain the reservoir of theological reflection on which continued faithful engagement depends. I wonder how many churches really attend to the task of enabling lay people to debate questions of Christian belief with their co-workers, friends and neighbours, or give them opportunities to reflect on the theological grounding of important ethical and political issues of the day.

Public theology is not only concerned to do theology *about* public issues, but called to do its theology *in* public, with a sense of transparency to those of other faiths and none. Whilst there may be times when the Church speaks and people do not listen, that is never a reason for not speaking at all. I am calling, therefore, for public theology to retrieve an understanding of itself as Christian apologetics, a sharing of the motivations behind the practices of citizenship as well as those of discipleship. This is a form of theological witness in public life that 'seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church' (Forrester, 2004, p. 6). Indeed, one of the ways in which public theology might promote the welfare of the city is to contribute towards a civil, inclusive space of public debate and action in which everyone is welcome to cultivate the skills of active citizenship. It is a vital task for such public theology to show that it can 'form, inform and sustain the moral and spiritual architecture of a civil society so that truth, justice and mercy are more nearly approximated in the souls of persons and in the institutions of the common life' (Stackhouse, 2007: 107).

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