

God in Public: A Prolegomena to Public Theology in the Romanian Context^{*}

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Abstract:

This paper intends to begin a conversation on *public theology* in the Romanian context. The launching of the *Global Network for Public Theology* and of the *International Journal of Public Theology* some 10 years represent two significant markers for this new field of study. Public theology is a serious engagement of Christian faith with the public domain in all its social, political, cultural and economic spheres of life in society. It is proposed that the engagement of theology in conversation with issues of public domain becomes not only relevant but extremely urgent if we consider the historical, post-communist, post-dictatorial, transitional context of Romania and the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe, where faith was privatized and excluded from the public discourse for many decades. It is argued that in this context one of the most important and urgent tasks of the church as well as of Christian theology is to become an authentic witness in the public realm, to proclaim and embody the gospel as public truth, i.e. a theology concerned with and addressing the *entire reality* of life in society. It is thus shown that a crucial preoccupation for Christians in Romania and in this part of the world is an articulation of a solid public theology of culture, of work, of social justice and reconciliation, a public theology for the common good and human flourishing. After a brief presentation of a particular aspect of the Romanian regarding religion and public life, the paper offers an introduction to this new field of study by looking at some definitions, characteristics, approaches and tasks of public theology.

Keywords: public theology, faith and life, society, public realm, Romania, religion

Public Theology – Setting the Stage

It is more than ten years now since the launch of the *Global Network for Public Theology* and almost as much since the subsequent launch of the *International Journal of Public Theology* published by Brill. These were two very significant events for all those engaged in the academic study of theology, in general, and of *public theology*, in particular – which has become well established field of study in its own right. Public theology is

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not necessarily a new concept or domain of study as theologians have always been concerned with the public dimension of Christian faith, with the relevance of theology for society. However, with the privatization of religion in an increasingly secularized modern world, public theology has emerged as an intentional effort of Christian theologians and practitioners to enter into a meaningful dialog with society. They do this, on the one hand, in order to reflect on the specific contribution that the Gospel can bring to the common good and human flourishing while learning from the public discourse, and, on the other hand, to encourage Christians to participate and engage meaningfully in the public domain with a commitment to influence public policy and effect transformation, at a personal level, and transformation of social structures.

Public theology is thus a serious engagement of Christian faith with the public domain in all its social, political, cultural and economic spheres of life in society. It starts from the premise, proven throughout the history of Christianity's engagement with culture, that the Gospel can and should offer alternative moral, ethical and spiritual answers to the multifaceted and complex questions facing our world today. Public theology is concerned with theological questions that address the public sphere. The engagement of theology in conversation with issues of public domain becomes not only relevant but extremely urgent if we consider the historical, post-communist, post-dictatorial, transitional context of Central and Eastern Europe in general, and of Romania in particular. There is no question that communists did not like religion and that one of the most distinguishable Marxist 'prophecies' was that religion will soon disappear and will no longer play any role in society. And they worked hard to eradicate it and thought they could! Contrary to that, and somewhat unexpected, what we have witnessed at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, was a surprising and spectacular return of the religious phenomenon as an important and influential factor in the social arena. However, what the communists did manage to do was to discredit religion and to push it into the private sector of life, totally detached from any aspect of real life. In their struggle to survive, churches either withdrew from society or collaborated with the communist authorities conceding to their imposed limitations on churches. Unfortunately, the ultimate consequence of this tragic reality was that churches accepted this state of affairs and took their faith as something purely spiritual, between the believer and God, a faith that had nothing to do with the wider cultural, social, and political world!

It is in this context that it became evident that one of the most important and urgent tasks of the church as well as of Christian theology was to become an authentic witness in the public realm. This means to develop afresh and holistic, comprehensive public theology of *missio Dei* for our

days and articulate clearly the coordinates on which the gospel is to be channelled for addressing the social, economic, political and religious issues facing the Romanian society today. This should be a theology which emphasizes the mission of God to redeem the entire creation, which points to the lordship of Christ over entire reality, a theology which articulates clearly the contribution the gospel can bring for the common good and human flourishing. This may be, indeed, one of the most important missiological concerns for Christians of this generation, in our context: to proclaim and embody the gospel as public truth, i.e. a theology concerned with and addressing the *entire reality* of life in society. This is, in my opinion, an urgent missiological preoccupation for Christians in Romania and in this part of the world: to search for and articulate a solid public theology of culture, work, power, social justice and reconciliation, a public theology for the common good and human flourishing.

The purpose of this paper is to begin a conversation on the possibility and necessity of public theology in the Romanian context. After a presentation of a particular aspect of the Romanian context and the contradictory reality regarding religion and public life, the paper offers an introduction to the field of public theology by looking at some definitions, characteristics, approaches, tasks.¹

Faith and life in Romania: a contradictory reality

Romania ranks among the highest in Europe in religious adherence, with some over 99 percent of the population indicating they belong to a religious group, only 0.11 percent atheists and 0.10 percent indicating no religious affiliation.² However, the implications of this high religiosity for the everyday life of people and its effect on the concrete social, cultural, political and economic realities of the country reveal a disturbing and contradictory reality. Romania, the country with the highest ranking of religiosity in Europe, is also among the leading countries in terms of corruption, poverty, abortions, lack of trust.³ The

¹This paper represents an updated, revised and shortened version of a much larger material that I prepared for the Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series and published as "Public Theology: Christian Faith and Public Square in Central and Eastern Europe," in Corneliu Constantineanu, Marcel V. Măcelaru, Anne-Marie Kool, Mihai Himcinschi (eds), *Mission in Central and Eastern Europe: Realities, Perspectives, Trends*, Oxford, Regnum Books International, 2016.

²According to the latest National Census conducted in 2011, available at http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/publicatii/pliante%20statistice/08-Recensamintele%20despre%20religie_n.pdf, accessed on 28 october, 2015.

³Silviu Rogobete, "Between Fundamentalism and Secularization: the Place and the Role of Religion in Post-Communist Orthodox Romania," in *Religion and Democracy in*

causes are many for such a state of affairs and for the lack of correlation between the predominant religiosity and the actual practice of life. This discrepancy does not invalidate the thesis that religion has a potential for being a positive factor for social, economic, and political change. It shows, however, at least two things: first, that the religious “potential” is not automatically translatable into the social realities; and, second, that it is not just any kind of religiosity that could contribute effectively to human flourishing and wellbeing. For an effective and beneficial practice of faith, and in order for its potential to bring about hope, compassion, reconciliation, and social healing, we must find resources within our own religious texts and traditions and explicate them in ways that are relevant to the concrete social and political realities of the communities.⁴

For far too long the church has divorced faith from the other aspects of reality and reduced it to a purely spiritual dimension with terrible consequences for the embodiment of the gospel. We have reduced faith to church attendance and to a private life of prayer and spirituality, a faith for Sundays and primarily within the walls of the church. Consequently, we did not gain the theology or the practical skills to embody the Christian faith in our families, at our work, in the society at large, from Monday to Saturday. The biblical usage of “the gospel” testifies to its public nature, as the Greek term used, *euangelion*, meant *good news* which was announced in the public square, for all the hear, concerning the life of the people and affecting everyone. The Christian gospel was never intended to be a hidden thing, a ‘private’ matter, because its proclamation about God in Jesus Christ as *gospel*, “entails an overarching claim to public truth.”⁵ The gospel is thus not simply a

Moldova. Edited by S. Devetak, O. Sirbu and S. Rogobete (Maribor-Chişinau: ISCOMET/ASER, 2005), 105–110. See also Tom Gallagher’s impressive and detailed analysis of the complex causes and factors which undermined the development of a stable, independent, and autonomous democracy in Romania, *Theft of a Nation. Romania Since Communism*, London, C. Hearst & Co, 2004.

⁴Two specific studies in the Romanian context illustrate the positive role that religion could have for a healthy political culture: Violeta Barbu, “Bisericile in Europa – un partner social?” in Radu Carp, ed. *Un suflet pentru Europa. Dimensiunea religioasa a unui proiect politic* (*A soul for Europe. The religious dimension of a political project*) (Bucureşti: Anastasia, 2005) and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, “Biserica și politica: religia ca determinant al culturii politice”, in Mungiu-Pippidi, *Politica după communism*, Bucureşti, Humanitas, 2002. See also my study on the biblical foundations for the social dimension of the gospel, and its application to the Romanian context, Corneliu Constantineanu, *The social significance of reconciliation in Paul’s theology. Narrative readings in Romans*, London-New York, T&T Clark, Continuum, 2010.

⁵Gavin Drew, “The Gospel as public truth in a pluralistic world: A reflection on Lesslie Newbigin’s thought”, in *Evangel*, 24.2 (Summer 2006), p. 53. See also the strong

dialogue ‘partner’ in the public sphere but has the capacity to contribute to the public life, to model it in a specific way. This understanding of the gospel as public truth is essential for the development of a public theology for the common good. Just before we turn our attention to look closer to a public theology for this context a brief word in order about the danger and potential of religion in public square.

Public Theology: definition, characteristics, approaches, tasks

Even though in Romania this field of study is relatively new or even unknown, it is probably right to say that public theology is rather a flourishing discipline in Christian theology nowadays. As we will see, there are many approaches and proposals regarding the public significance of theology and even though it is not the space here to go into much details, we will look briefly at some of the most relevant definitions and categories that public theology operates with.

When we talk about *public* theology we have in mind a public activity, done in the public domain and in search for public truth, just as William Storrar and Andrew Morton correctly show: “Public theology has to do with the public relevance of a theology which has at the core of its Christian identity a concern for the coming of God’s kingdom in the public world of human history.”⁶ Duncan Forrester, a pioneer and significant figure in public theology, gives a more detailed description of it:

Public theology is ... talk about God, which claims to point to publicly accessible truth, to contribute to the public discussion by witnessing to a truth that is relevant to what is going on in the world and to the pressing issues which are facing people and societies today...It takes the public square and what goes on there seriously, but it tries to articulate in the public square its convictions about truth and goodness... Public theology is confessional and evangelical. It has a gospel to share, good news to proclaim. Public theology attends to the Bible and the tradition of faith at the same time as it attempts to discern the signs of the times and understand what is going on in the light of the gospel (2000, p. 127–128).

Public theology does not affect only private life and it is not just a function of individual subjectivity. It is regularly assumed and people usually work with the assumption that the private and public dimensions of

argument made by Tom Wright in his very recent book, which inspired my title, *God in Public: How the Bible Speaks Truth to Power Today*, London, SPCK, 2016.

⁶ William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton, “Introduction”, in William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton (eds.) *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, London, T&T Clark Continuum, 2004, p. 1. In similar fashion, Moltmann states: “Its subject alone makes Christian Theology a *theologia publica*, a public theology. It gets involved in the public affairs of society. It thinks about what is of general concern in the light of hope in Christ for the Kingdom of God”. See Jurgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, London, SCM Press, 1999, p. 1.

life are clearly demarcated and even totally separated. But reality shows that this is not the case at all. Even though these are distinguishable dimensions of our life, they are inseparable, the personal and institutional, the private and public, are permanently interacting with each other. Who we are and what we do in private life affects and determines to a great extent who we are and what we do in public life. And vice versa. That is why we have to resist the tendency and temptation to make a sharp distinction between the private and the public and, especially, to confine faith and theology to the private sector. The *gospel* makes public claims about the way things are – about God, about human beings, about the world, about society, about life – and therefore it is public truth, concerned with and addressing the entire reality, private and public. And as a result, theology, whose subject matter is the gospel/good news of God the creator, sustainer and redeemer of the entire creation, must be an activity concerned with and engaging the whole of reality (Morton, 2004: 25–26).

Theology is done in public, in the public forum and so involves two major components: proclamation of the good news for individual people and for society, for the common good; and also dialogue with other interlocutors from the public domain - which implies a careful listening and receptiveness to the other. It is clearly then that public theology is not simply a communication exercise but it is in the actual conversation with the other actors of public life that theology is produced. Or, in the words of Andrew Morton, “such conversation involves throughout both the persuasive eloquence of advocacy and the attentive silence of receptivity” (*Ibidem*: 28).

As we become interested in theological engagement in the public realm, we need to have a correct understanding of both the possibilities and limitations of the contribution of theology to public life and so should beware of the two temptations: to overestimate the contribution that theology can realistically make or, on the contrary, to underestimate the significance of theology for the public life (De Gruchy, 2004: 45). Given the reality that theology has lost its privileged status it once had, many do question whether theology has any public significance at all. But as De Gruchy rightly observes, “we should not confuse the one-time public status of theology with the real contribution it can make when rightly pursued within public life” (*Ibidem*). Theology can thus make a real contribution to the public realm but it needs to be pursued rightly and be aware of its own limitations and specifics.

In order to have a better understanding of public theology, a few words about *public* are in order. What is public domain? Is there only one or can we talk of more ‘publics’? If we understand “public” as a place or places where dialogue happens, where difference exists and is accepted and

therefore a particular distance is allowed, where people are free to disagree, then we can think first of society as a whole, the public domain as being such a space – a place where the social, the cultural, the economic the political and the religious sectors of life meet. And this will probably be the main ‘public’. Others define the public domain as being formed from various entities, individual or organized in various associations, which mediate between the State and society (Carp, 2009: 11–12). For Charles Taylor public sphere is a ‘common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media: print, electronic, and also face-to-face encounters; to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about these’ (2004: 82). Duncan adds two other ‘publics:’ ‘Church’ and ‘Academy’ which meet the criteria for public entities referred to above. What is important to remember is that these ‘publics’ are all interrelated to each other and we have to consider very carefully this reality when we reflect on public theology.

A few words are in order about the different approaches to public theology. Duncan Forrester speaks about two broad ways of doing public theology: one more ‘top-down’, the *magisterial* mode, in which the church/theology teaches the truth (which is believed to be public truth) authoritatively to the powers that be; and the other, more ‘bottom-up’, the *liberationist* mode, which arouses from the everyday realities and experiences of life, closest to the least powerful in society (2000: p. 118–125). The first position is a bit pretentious and authoritative as it presupposes the church or Christianity to be in a position of neutrality, without interests of its own or promoting any particular agenda, attempting to offer a strong theology which to set and control the public agenda from the above, from the high place of power. The second position seeks to allow the voice, the experience, the emotions of those at the margins to be heard and then attempting to relate them to the gospel story. While this approach is somewhat closer to the experienced reality of many, it tends to lack solid theological questions about the fundamental issues involved. And so, both of these approaches are important for a realistic public theology as it needs to relate to both publics and to both centres of power and, eventually, hold the tension between them. Max Stackhouse, one of the most productive proponents of public theology, proposes a four-fold pattern, or four pillars on which to build a public theology: creation and liberation; vocation and covenant; moral law, sin, and freedom; ecclesiology and Trinity.⁷

⁷ Stackhouse, *Public Theology and Political Economy: Christian Stewardship in Modern Society*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987, p. 33. Chris Green, in *A Higher Throne: Evangelicals and Public Theology*, Nottingham, Inter-Varsity Press, 2008, takes a more Evangelical approach by emphasizing the core biblical doctrines of creation, fall, redemption and revelation around which he builds his public theology. For a similar

Raymond Plant reminds all of us of the truth that public policies are closely related to the questions of value. All the difficult issues and concerns related to a meaningful life together in society - freedom, equality, punishment retribution, rehabilitation, restitution, distributive justice, human rights, social solidarity, welfare, etc. - these are all important moral issues, vital for our humanity, and it is our responsibility to consider them carefully in our engagement with the public life (2004: IX–X). And it is exactly here that public theology finds the first element of its difficult task, “to formulate a theologically coherent account of the moral issues facing public policy in a complex society”, together with the second “*meta-task* to do with arguing for a role for theology amongst the voices in society brought to bear upon these question” (Plant, 2004: X). Thus, public theology is attempting “to articulate a Christian social vision, which can be brought to bear upon the problems of civil and political life and arguing for a very strong case for the seriousness of that voice to be heard and respected within the conversation of modern society” (*Ibidem*: XI).

Many affirm today an obvious truth, namely that we live in a ‘glocal’ context, which is simultaneously global and local, with dynamic, pluralistic, multicultural societies, with numerous and increasing links and interconnections with regard especially to our economy and technology. This new reality requires that we reflect afresh theologically and respond appropriately to the new situation. It is in response to exactly this challenging new context that Max Stackhouse considers four areas of public theological explorations, which are, in his opinion, much neglected in contemporary thought: 1) a perspectival shift from ‘orders of creation’ to dynamic *spheres* of relative sovereignty; 2) a theological analysis of the global *powers* – principalities, authorities, thrones and dominions; 3) a comparative investigation of how *religion shapes civilizations*; 4) a recovery of covenantal thought as a mode of *public theology* for global civil society (2004: 18–191).

Conclusion

A very short word is in order at the end of this brief presentation. Public theology is a theology which seeks the welfare of the city and would consider itself an instrument in the service of common good and human

approach see George Hunsberger, “The Mission of Public Theology: an exploration”, in *Swedish Missiological Themes* 93.3 (2005): 315–324. At the other spectrum we find Kathryn Tanner, who believes in a common basis of both religion and public square and argue that the universal values and principles (equality, liberty, justice, mutual regard and pursue of happiness) should be the starting point of a public theology, in “Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate”, in *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 1996, p. 79–101.

flourishing. Miroslav Volf is right in arguing that a vision of the human flourishing is the most important contribution Christian faith brings to the common good, especially as this is not done “by imposing on others their vision of human flourishing and the common good but by bearing witness to Christ, who embodies the good life” (2011: XI) And if Jesus placed at the centre of his ministry the love of God and the love of neighbour, so should the Christians do, as both God and neighbour are fundamental to human flourishing⁸.

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⁸ For a solid argument on human flourishing see the very recent two books by Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing. Why we need religion in a globalized world*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2015, and Miroslav Volf & Justin Crisp (eds.), *Joy and Human Flourishing. Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015. I am very glad to see that theologians from Romania are beginning to pay attention to the concept of human flourishing. See, for example, the works of my colleague Marcel V. Măcelaru, who argues that “human flourishing describes a state of being, a mode of existence that is markedly Christian – its definition needs a Christian mind-set and its full experience is available only to the believer.” Marcel V. Măcelaru, “Human Flourishing – a theological perspective,” in Geogeta Rață and Patricia Runcan, *Happiness Through Education*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 2014, p. 233. Similarly, my younger colleague, Benjamin Mocan, concludes his discussion on public theology by stating that “a thorough public theology will always aim to seek the welfare of the city. It will always work towards human flourishing, and it will always do it with respect to the plurality and diversity existed within the public”. Benjamin Mocan, *Social Imagination and the Possibility of a Pentecostal Public Theology*, MTh thesis presented to the Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2014, p. 40.

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