

Theology for Life: Doing Public Theology in Romania*

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Abstract:

This paper builds on my previous work, “God in Public: A Prolegomena to Public Theology in the Romanian Context,” where I made an argument for the need of public theology in the Romanian context and offered a brief introduction to the nature of this new field. Now I present several issues that would need attention in a public theology in our context. One such issue, to begin with, is the atrophy of the capacity for dreaming, for envisioning a better world, of the capacity for imagination and hope. Most of people living through the difficult period of a long transition period, with such a high rate of corruption, poverty and uncertainty, have lost any hope for a positive social change. There are no solid institutions and structures in these young democracies and people are really struggling to live a normal life. Similarly, other crucial dimensions of life have been downplayed and so in need to be recovered, such as work, family, civil society, justice, to name just a few. It is argued that a public theology for Romania and for the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe would need to address exactly these kinds of issues: a vision for a better world, Christianity and nation-building, faith and work, faith and society. The paper concludes by pointing to several example of platforms that are very promising for public theology.

Keywords: public theology, life, vision, hope, faith and work, society, Romanian context

Issues in Public Theology for Romania and Central and Eastern Europe

Having presented in a previous paper an argument for the need of public theology in the Romanian context and looked at some definitions and characteristics of the field, I would like to present here a few specific issues that would need attention in a public theology for this context.¹ For those living in this part of the world it is obvious that the

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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

legacy of the totalitarian regime is still visible today in several areas of life. One such issue, to begin with, is the atrophy of the capacity for dreaming, for envisioning a better world, the capacity for imagination and hope. Most of people living through the difficult period of a long transition period, with such a high rate of corruption and poverty, have lost any hope for a solid, substantial social change. There are no solid institutions and structures in these young democracies and people are really struggling enormously to live a normal life. Similarly, other crucial dimensions of life have been downplayed and so in need to be recovered, such as work, family, civil society, justice, to name just a few. A public theology for Romania and for the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe would need to address such issues and we will tackle some of them in the present paper. Unfortunately, the limited space does not allow us to do more than to simply list some of issues that a public theology will address in this context.

A vision of a better world

One significant task of public theology which Forrester points out is *vision*.¹ Starting from the familiar but truthful wisdom saying according to which “where there is not vision the people perish” (Proverbs 29: 18), he elaborates on the crucial role that *vision* has for life in society and for the particular contribution that a Christian vision brings to the discussion. Without vision people perish because “they are locked in their past and present and incapable of imagining a future that will be better, because they have lost hope. For vision is what generates purpose for a society. Without vision public life becomes a battle of interests, unconstrained by a larger horizon of meaning” (*Ibidem*: 143–144). In a Christian understanding of the social vision, “the imagination is shaped and resourced by the symbols, narratives and imagery of the Christian and biblical tradition. An imaginative vision which encompasses the purpose and sweep of history, is open to the future and hence not at ease in the present; is also shaped by a descriptive yet critical vision of the present; and it is not afraid to name oppression and injustice and ugliness and lies – all that distinguishes the present from the Reign of God” (*Ibidem*: 144–145). Theology’s task is thus not only to pose theoretical, abstract, academic questions or to address particular problems and moral issues. It is also preoccupied with visions that

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¹ See Forrester, *Truthful Action*, p. 143–157. The other two significant tasks he elaborates on are *prophesy* and ‘*theological fragments*’.

provide a horizon of meaning for life in society. And if we really want to offer a contribution in the social arena we need to rediscover the religious language, the symbols and narratives of the Bible which can serve as the vehicles for a renewed vision for society, one which will offer an alternative future which will enable people to leave meaningfully with one another.

Our culture of fear and anxiety has almost annihilated our capacity for dreaming, for imagining and envisioning a new possible future. It is in this context that the biblical prophetic tradition comes as an important resource for a public theology of engagement. From their authentic spirituality of resistance and lament we learn the importance of analysis, critique and condemnation but also the crucial aspect of imagining and envisioning alternatives, a new future which they proclaim from God, a new dream to follow.

If our part of the world experiences a great spiritual crisis of morality and values an important part of the answer is to be found in recovering an authentic spirituality for life. Mary Grey proposes that a Christian theology of the Spirit may bring a significant contribution to the public square, “a conviction that it is the power of the Spirit to reconnect personal life with public and reawaken a people become apathetic and disillusioned with public life and church life alike”¹. And if we speak of the need to recover the dreaming, the imagination and the vision for an alternative world, for human flourishing and the common good, for an alternative way of being in the world and for the world, nothing is more important than the Spirit of God – which is the Spirit of prophetic hope, of truth, of justice, of love, of peace and reconciliation, of solidarity, of boundary-crossing, of integration, the Spirit of life. It is therefore mandatory that we explore in more depth and from fresh perspectives the biblical evidences for the active and powerful role of the Spirit in enabling us to reimagine, to re-envision the transformation of the world through the communities of those who have experienced healing and reconciliation, and thus rekindle the hope for a better future, for a better world.

A public theology of engagement in Romania will make it as a first priority to inspire a new generation of believers to pursue with all the intellectual seriousness a holistic vision of Christian faith and mission, a vision in which faith determines a particular way of being *in* and *for* the world. A holistic understanding of Christian life and mission will lead to an appropriate involvement of the church in the world as agents of

¹ Mary C. Grey, “*Living Without Dreams: is there a spirituality for justice in a globalized world?*” in William F. Storrar & Andrew R. Morton (eds.), *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, London, T&T Clark Continuum, 2004, p. 241.

change and social transformation. If there is any truth in the affirmation that our conduct is shaped by the condition of our vision, it follows from that, that to transform this world we need a particular vision of life. Not just any vision but a vision of righteousness, reconciliation, and hope for this world; a vision for a culture of love and acceptance, of forgiveness and grace, of justice and mercy, a vision of the new creation in Christ.

Christianity and Nation-Building

There is no question that one of the crucial issues for an authentic Christian witness for the countries emerging from a totalitarian context is the need for a theology of nation-building. And one does not need to be an expert in politics or economics in order to realize the great struggle of a nation to recover and re-build after almost half a century of totalitarian regime. Probably it is not too much to say that nation-building is one of the most important and urgent tasks that we, as Christians, should be concerned with, and contribute to, in this time. Twenty-five years of freedom and the young democracies in this part of the world are still recovering from the strong totalitarian legacy: mistrust, corruption, poverty, watered-down democracies, denial of fundamental human rights and freedoms, social injustice, etc. In such circumstances, it is vital that we struggle to find the way in which the Christian message addresses these crucial questions and the way it contributes to a better social justice and democracy, to strengthening civil society, political stability and peace.

To be sure, nation-building is a complex and slow process which involves, among others things, increasing the capacities of a nation for solid communities and economic development; building strong institutions that are able to respond to the challenges of today's world; a sustained effort to (re)build robust societies that work; increasing the standard of living; building the democracy; preserving the nations' distinct and unique identity, etc. In sum, as professor Jeremi Suri puts it, nation-building is "an effort to build institutions and practices that allow a people to govern themselves in peaceful and prosperous ways"¹. It is not the church's task or her call to respond to such challenges. Rather, her job is more limited and refers more specifically to a possible Christian contribution to the development of specific values and behaviours, strengthening the capacity of cultural,

¹ Jeremi Suri, *Five Principles Critical to Successful Nation-Building*, available at <http://www.utexas.edu/news/2011/09/26/nation-building/>, accessed on 12 January, 2016. See also his book *Liberbt'y's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama*, Simon & Schuster, 2011.

social, economic and political institutions that are able to sustain and enhance the development of a particular nation which should have as its ultimate goal the flourishing of human beings. Particularly, it should concentrate on such issues as mind-set and mentality change, alleviation of poverty, moral reformation, processes of reconciliation and social integration, a vision of freedom and democracy which enhances life and is conducive to human flourishing.

An important step towards reflecting on, and equipping for, nation building is the need for a fresh reading of our biblical resources in such a way as to rediscover the social and political dimensions of the gospel. In a research on the social dimension of reconciliation in Paul's theology I have shown that contrary to the common perception, Apostle Paul was very much aware of the social, political, cultural, and religious context in which he lived and that he encouraged a positive interaction with these realities. Anchored in a strong creational theology, with a perception of God's sovereignty over history and with the conviction that the historical reality was irreversibly affected by God's intervention in Christ, Apostle Paul had a positive view of the world and of the structures of society. For Paul and all first century Christians, there was one realm of reality in which body and soul, religion and politics, private and public, individual and social aspects of reality were intermingled in a complex unified vision of life. The gospel Paul proclaimed was not in any way detached from the everyday reality, and that it also had a political message at its heart. Further still, I have shown that the political dimension of the gospel was not secondary or accidental to Paul's writings but rather an integral and fundamental element of it. The gospel of the crucified and resurrected Christ, it is claimed, not only has a few social and political implications, rather it is political at its core (Constantineanu, 2013). It is these aspects and dimensions of faith that we need to rediscover for a proper public theology of nation-building.

Faith and Work

Work takes the most part of people's active life, it encompasses and determines the lives of men and women. It is thus appropriate that "work", one of the central components of daily living, has become a major concern for society at large, from many angles and for many considerations: in terms of providing the possibility and access for everyone to work, for improving the conditions of work, for limiting the exploitations through work, for the transformation of the meaning of work. What is even more revealing is the fact that after a too long neglect of the subject in the Christian quarters, there is an increased

theological and ecclesiastical interest in the question of work. There is a greater sense of the significance and urgency of theological reflection on the subject of work from a biblical perspective.

Work is enormously important for the life of human beings in society. Its significance consists first of all in the fact that, through it, people provide for their subsistence. In order to live, one has to work. It is not a surprise to anyone that Apostle Paul understood it very well when he admonishes the Thessalonians “if anyone will not work, neither let him eat” (2 Thess. 3: 10). But work also provides a sense of individual and social identity as our daily work shapes and determines, to a certain extent, what we are. Thus, work is indispensable for people’s continued existence, well-being and identity. Being such a vital area of our lives it has to be a substantial issue for theological reflection.

The second reason for serious theological consideration on work is given by what can be called “the crisis of work,” which is experienced in various degrees throughout the world. Whether we think of child labour, unemployment and discrimination of work, or of exploitation and dehumanization of work, these are serious challenges that many people face in the contemporary world. It is not the place here to go into any details about these sobering problems or even begin to unpack the various personal, structural or technological causes of this crisis. Their very existence forces us to think responsibly and creatively in order to find possible and realistic solutions. Unfortunately, throughout the history of Christianity, the subject of work has been of little concern for the Church. As a consequence, many Christians have inadequate, defective and even negative attitudes toward work. This is yet another reason for the urgent need for biblical and theological reflection on work.

A public theology for our context, if it wants to be as comprehensive as possible, cannot avoid this crucial subject of work. On the contrary, it should strive to find the larger biblical story about the ultimate significance and meaning of human life within which to integrate the topic of work. We should, therefore, look for stories, for theological and biblical principles that serve as guidelines for the practical decisions we have to make in order to relate our beliefs to the world of work. The contours of a biblical theology of work, however, could only be properly understood and interpreted within the larger story of God’s good creation, of the fall with its devastating consequences for humankind and the entire creation, and, especially, in the light of the great story of God’s redemption that culminated with the death and resurrection of Christ and the beginning of the new creation ‘in Christ.’ Further still, a proper public theology of work will be

integrated into the larger context of God's work, of human creation in the image of God, of God's command for people to work as part of his provision for human life and of human cooperation with God in work. It will show that it is the Spirit of God who inspires and endows people with gifts and skills for various work and activities (Exodus 31: 2-5; Judges 3: 10; 1 Sam. 16: 13), that work has both an intrinsic and instrumental value, that our work matters to God, that work as cooperation with God has fundamental meaning and ultimate significance in the context of the eschatological transformation of the world. Such a theology of work, understood as service, will bring dignity to labour and see work as involving social benefit and a contribution to the common good of society.

Faith and Society

The last aspect I would like to mention in a public theology for the common good in this context is the dynamic relationship of Christians to society at large. If one's faith is primarily lived out "in the world", then one has to find appropriate resources for an authentic Christian living in the world, for a proper relation to the life of contemporary culture and society. Given the lordship of Christ over entire reality, a Christian should be concerned to make sense of his/her faith as it interacts with all aspects of life in society. A public theology dealing with this issue, would strive to re-unite different compartments of human existence into one realm of reality in which body and soul, religion and politics, private and public, individual and social aspects of reality are intermingled in a complex, unified vision of life. To be sure, it will have to take into consideration the ambivalence and the dialectical relationship of Christians to the world as they experience the tension of being *in* the world yet not *of* the world. Paul's language of "belonging" and "separation" offers a view into the way in which the identity of those who "belong to Christ" was maintained and positioned vis-à-vis the outside world. On the one hand, the insider/outsider terminology implies a negative perception of society and the "qualitative difference" between outsiders and insiders. On the other hand, however, Christians are not to withdraw from society. Paul encouraged his congregations not only to continue to participate, as good citizens, to the life of the city, but also to behave in a manner that will bring approval from the outsiders. Thus, for example, the strong work ethic of the believers in Thessalonians was intended to "earn the respect of outsiders" (1 Thess. 4: 12), while the exercise of the spiritual gifts in the Corinthian congregation were to be amended not to give the wrong impression to the outsiders (1 Cor. 14: 23).

The attitude and relation of early Christians to the outside world was complex and it should be given careful consideration. The tension should not be removed: the world is God's good creation and yet is now in a present state of corruption and the 'god of this world' is active in it; Christians were "resident aliens" in this world and had their "citizenship in heaven" (Phil. 3: 20), and yet they were encouraged neither to withdraw from the world (1 Cor. 5: 10) nor to totally deny or reject its realities and values. In fact, it was precisely because of their new identity and status that they were able to work towards the transformation of this world. 1 Thessalonians, one of Paul's earliest letters, is an excellent example of how Paul was, from the very beginning of his ministry, concerned with both the internal cohesion and growth of the Christians communities, but also with the Thessalonians' social conduct and positive attitude and behaviour towards outsiders. It was of greatest importance for Paul that Christians should not "repay evil for evil but always seek to do good to one another and *to all*" (1 Thess. 5: 15); that they should "increase and abound in love for one another and *for all*" (1 Thess. 3: 12); that they should "aspire to live quietly, to mind [their] own affairs, and to work with [their] hands... so that [they] *may behave properly toward outsiders*" (1 Thess. 4: 11–12).

One important aspect when dealing with faith and society, therefore, is to encourage an active and positive, even though critical at times, involvement of the Christian in the world, advocating practices that are conducive to a meaningful and peaceful life in the larger society. In the new context of re-emergence of religion as a major factor in the public domain, there is an important and urgent task of public theology to rethink afresh the relation between faith and society, between church and public domain, between moral leadership and cultural values, between religion and political economy, between Christian faith and everyday life in society. And this the more so since within contemporary biblical studies there is a growing understanding that the fundamental theological concepts of the New Testament, such as those regarding the Kingdom of God, redemption, salvation, peace and justice, forgiveness and reconciliation, are understood to have significance much beyond the individual and private spheres of life, and as involving the change and transformation of life in its totality. It is true, in order to function properly and authentically, such public theology needs to be self-critical, sensitive to the historical context, concrete in its attempt to bring insight into the debate and speak the truth clearly and unequivocally to the powers that be. Thus, a public theology does not look to maintain the status quo of society but rather seek to contribute to its transformation and redemption. It points to

sources beyond the individual self-interest, to the renewing power of the Spirit of God who “gives creatures the energy to act in the world according to the distinctions that the Creator has made and to struggle with the powers that are reduced to chaos. The Spirit is a renewing power that not for the first time inspires us to restore a lost order, but that creates order time and again”¹. The story of the Spirit at work in human history to renew and redeem represents a great source of inspiration for Christians to engage in a responsible way and with hope in society and work towards its transformation.

In this discussion I only offered a few remarks on some of the relevant issues which need to be addressed. To be sure, a public theology in Romania and Central and Eastern Europe should address further important and urgent issues such as corruption, education, migration, public policy, justice, roma communities, human rights, religion, poverty, disability, social inequality, among the most significant.

Platforms for public theology

As we look to the future in this specific and complex political, cultural, social, economic and religious context of Romania and of Central and Eastern Europe, it is important that we attempt to create adequate platforms for advanced, interdisciplinary, integrative reflection and research in public theology which will promote a transformative public engagement for the common good. While academic endeavours among Evangelicals in Romania, for example, have started almost one hundred years ago, due to the isolation and specific circumstances under which the church lived during the communist era, theological efforts have been local and provisional. After 1989, in the newly experienced freedom, some specific phenomena took place. The Evangelical community grew in number with a fast pace, and the number of Evangelicals studying theology increased exponentially in order to meet the ministerial and educational needs of each Evangelical denomination. Although these developments are certainly necessary and useful for the different churches, little effort has gone into systematic and coordinated research on the various missiological aspects of the theology, mission and life of Evangelical communities. Consequently, there is a need for meaningful reflection and reliable research on the theology, history, life and ministry of the evangelical churches as well as on the directions for

¹ Kees J. Klop, *Equal Respect and the Holy Spirit: the liberal demand for moral neutrality in the political sphere and Christian respect for creation*, in William F. Storrar & Andrew R. Morton (eds.), *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, London, T&T Clark Continuum, 2004, p. 97.

theological and missiological development in connection with the contemporary needs/challenges of society. The need is still there for the creation of an appropriate framework within which these needs will be addressed by providing platforms for promoting and sustaining research efforts, and by networking theologians and scholars for a fruitful academic dialogue. Such platforms will be able to carry out and coordinate various research projects on the religious life and various trends in contemporary society in general. They will also represent centers for documentation and research, with a significant collection of theological resources made easily available by means of a centralized database. Further, they will stimulate and develop reliable integrative interdisciplinary academic research within and for the Christian communities in this context. Lastly, at least some of these platforms will be learning institutions who will be offering specific educational research programs at the graduate and postgraduate level. There are already several excellent endeavours in this regard which gives great reasons for hope in the future efforts toward a constructive public theology in Romania and Central and Eastern Europe, and I would like to mention some of these: *The Institute for Faith and Human Flourishing*, Timișoara; *Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad*; *Areopagus Centre for Christian Studies and Contemporary Culture*, Timisoara; *The Centre for Faith and Culture* within the University of Bucharest; *Teologia Socialis*, Cluj-Napoca; *Balkan Institute for Faith and Culture*, Skopje, Macedonia; *Osijek Institute for Mission Studies*, within the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia; *Evangelical Theological Centre*, Wroclaw, Poland.

Conclusion

I conclude by saying that a public theology for the Romanian context is one that is intentionally concerned with common good and human flourishing. As such it is seeking the enable churches and communities to make a contribution to the social reality in a post-totalitarian context by offering and maintaining a sense of fundamental values for human life in the world; by discerning, unmasking and resisting any form of totalitarianism and absolutism; by offering a framework of hope and a vision of life that will enable people not simply to cope with “otherness” and “difference” but also to promote a culture of peace and justice, of freedom and love, a culture of life and human flourishing.

As theologians and educators we seek to endorse a public theology that promotes an understanding of the gospel as public truth –

concerned with and addressing the entire reality. In our search for an authentic public theology we should revive God in the public consciousness. But neither a God limited by an individualistic, selfish perception, nor a God interested in a spirituality which emphasizes only the unseen dimension of human beings. But rather a God of the whole reality, the Creator of all things – and therefore, the God of all peoples. It is only this God, Christ incarnated, who lived among us, died for all, and roused from the dead, who offers hope for future. Only He can help us, through the power of the Spirit and through His Word, to recapture the joy, fulfilment, and innocence of a humanity created in God's image. Confronting the world with the Word of God and promoting what is good and right, what enriches us in art, in science, in culture, and in society, we will urge our communities towards a new understanding of what is true, worthy of praise, pure, just, worthy to be loved. This is the preoccupation of a public theology in the service of common good and human flourishing.

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