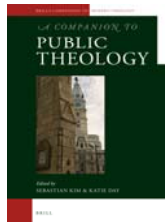


Answers about and Questions  
for Public Theology:  
Sebastian Kim and Katie Day (eds.),  
*A Companion to Public Theology*

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Public theology is a relatively new field of study in theology and a fairly recent notion put forth in Romanian context. Speaking of “public theology” can stir a wide range of reactions because of the familiarity of the words taken separately, and their presumed meaning in this specific phrase. It could also raise questions to whether this new discipline is but an excogitation of some restless scholarly minds in search for public attention or a new label to apply to an old business.

*A Companion to Public Theology* is a valuable resource able to clarify for a larger audience some perceptions and misconceptions in regard to this domain and to accustom both common reader and trained ones to the challenges posed to it. The book was published after a decade from launching of the *International Journal of Public Theology*, sponsored by the Global Network of Public Theology, an international partnership founded two years earlier and joining tens of institutes and centers from around the world. This volume is a collection of twenty essays written by twenty-five authors.

The structure of the *Companion* reflects, on the one hand, three fundamental directions explored by public theologians: historical-descriptive, methodological-definitive and normative-constructive, and, on the other hand, different kind of “publics” to be addressed. The first section – after the introductory chapter – is tailored to set up a biblical,

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historical and methodological foundation for public theology. The other three following sections of the book organize the publics in some major categories that need to be considered: the socio-political, the socio-economical, and civil societies together with ethics. One article deals with what public theology is about in a technical sense: a way of fostering democratic values and nurturing the condition for a solid public space with an informed public opinion. But societies struggle with conflicts and ideologies and theological stances are important on topics such as reconciliation and nationalist ideologies. In the same political sphere, but not limited to it, is placed the discussion about the essential notion of common good. A catholic contribution to the theological approach of social issues, the common good became a key element in every public theology's discourse or involvement and it is analyzed in biblical, historical, political, state and economic contexts.

When it comes to economics, globalization is an inevitable subject and the phenomenon raises a lot of concerns and challenges and calls for a critical evaluation from a theological perspective. Forced labor, human trafficking, race or gender inequities, social injustice, health care system and citizenship are all themes treated in the third part of the book.

The last section deals with climate injustice, ecology, bioethics, minorities' difficulties, media, worship and liturgy.

All the articles reflect some basic features of public theology: its intrinsic ethical nature dealing with injustice, the global (global-local) contextualization, interdisciplinary approaches, the necessary prophetic voice, the constructive thrust and critical evaluation. Yet, the performative character (or incarnational facet) of its agents is the final test for those who practice it.

The credit for coining the "public theology" term goes to Martin Marty, who was the first to use it in an article on Reinhold Niebuhr written (in 1974) as a response to Robert Bellah discussion about civil religion in US. David Tracy contributed to the development of public theology by identifying three publics: the church, the academy and society (p. 3). Richard John Neuhaus, Max Stackhouse and Ronald F. Thiemann are considered the key-figures that "helped to establish public theology within mainstream academic theology" (p. 5). Public theologies (p. 75) aim to be bilingual or maybe multilingual (?) in their own contexts, providing the much-needed translation of Christian vision relevant and knowledgeable for the public square, and simultaneously examining critically the society and the church as well. All these without neglecting Gospel's public dimension (p. 72), a foundational truth and anchorage for every move in public theology.

This book does not come in monolithic approach form, nor in a systematic one. Instead, it illustrates different perspectives, from different parts of the world. The authors' intent was probably not to give all the answers, but it certainly was to prompt thinking and searching for proper solutions to what public theology does entail to do in a very complex and dynamic world. And any given answer to such a question is "cursed" to be provisional in some respects.

"Public" is a term that inescapably takes the discussion into the Church-State relation debate, and Luke Bretherton (95-118) leads the way by asking about the limits of the acceptable sovereignty and suggests the "consociationalist view of sovereignty" (p. 99), a sort of confederalism illustrated here by the "community organizing", as a choice that affects the entire political and societal structure, capable to generate a "collective self-rule" for a better accountability of powers to the people. This model places the interests of the congregation and the *demos* more at hand, restraining the state or the market to bulge out, in order to pursue their common good and flourishing. In this equation, the congregation as a Christian community and the *demos* as a civil community are mutually disciplining.

Clive Pearson (418-440), for another example, offers a complex image of what it means to be part of a minority in different places on the globe and in different political and social contexts – capitalizing important contributions surfaced by the very existence of *IJPT*.

Jolyon Mitchell and Jenny Wright (441-465) look at three approaches to media, "iconographic", "iconoclastic" and (creative-critical) "interpretive", identifying historical testimonies for each of them. Signaling the fact that religion is not anymore an important presence in the public space, they suggest that in worshipping communities lies the possibility of remembering and reframing new content in terms of what is important and how is presented in order to counteract the dangerous memories revived *ad nauseam* by media.

Particularly bewildering, for the Romanian context as well, is Cláudio Carvalhaes' contribution (466-486) that begins forcefully with the assertion that "(t)he ways Christians worship entail a certain posture in society, one that organizes, produces and disseminates a collective form of living" echoing liturgical attitudes common in Church Fathers' thinking (e.g. Basil the Great and his *anaphora* – liturgical prayers). He continues with a harsh charge against public theology aiming to warn that it could easily become a theoretical study for middle-class theologians, if it did not consider the muted voices (the poor, the refugees, the unemployed, the victims of violence etc.) as its main subject.

Drawing on important historical forerunners and their work – from Augustine or John Chrysostom to Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Desmond Tutu – this volume tackles pressing contemporary issues in an informed and provoking manner. For anyone who wants to get in touch with the stage of public theology today, this book is a good introduction to the subject and a challenging companion along the way, leaving the final challenge implicit but clear: to join in the reflective effort for the common good and for the flourishing of all human beings and created order.

