

THE WORD AND THE WORLD: PUBLIC THEOLOGY IN AN AGE OF GLOBAL MEDIA

Hollybank, University of Chester Sept 2nd-6th, 2013

Introduction to 2013 Consultation Theme, Sept 2012

Public theology has traditionally concerned itself with three main streams of public life, embracing the domains of market, state and civil society:

- Economics, globalization, finance
- Civil society, culture, media, ecology, science, public health, technology and the media, grass-roots organizing, education
- State, government, political power and regulation of public life

In delineating these various spheres of public life, however, the question may be whether the field of global media and communications is achieving greater significance, both in terms of its role in reporting, entertaining and informing, but also in its capacity to shape and determine our very experience of the 'public' realm itself.

Since the 1990s the world has witnessed 'the increasingly public character of religion, the proliferation of the electronic media, and the crisis of the nation-state' (Meyer and Moors, p. 2). The 2013 consultation will consider the significance of the convergence of these three streams for global public theology. In particular, it will explore the extent to which media, information and communication technologies have become a new, largely autonomous, 'public' sphere with global reach and an increasingly influential (and not necessarily benign) role to play in mediating religious and spiritual concerns and representing religion to a wider public. The consultation will explore the ways in which electronic media function as powerful means by which religious organizations mediate their presence and message into wider society; and some of the ethical and theological dimensions of the production and consumption of media and popular culture.

Topics for the Consultation will include:

How media in all its forms constitutes an increasingly influential section of public life; and how electronic media (broadcasting, new social media, internet) might figure in David Tracy's delineation of the three 'publics' to which contemporary theology is addressed.

How established and emerging forms of media and mass communication shape the ways in which religious organizations and movements communicate with the wider public sphere; for example the strategies adopted by religious organizations and movements for promoting themselves and their concerns. How do such media technologies mediate the 'public' presence of faith to wider society?

How electronic media shape public perceptions of religious belief, practice and representation; how mainstream media – news and entertainment - report and represent religious belief, practice and affiliation in pluralist, secularising and multi-cultural societies; and the role of media in impeding or facilitating wider 'religious literacy' within societies.

How the everyday life-worlds of electronic media serve to shape us as actors, consumers and citizens; and in particular, how media technologies are working to reconfigure the very relationship between ‘private’ and ‘public’, and reshaping our concepts of selfhood, privacy, community.

The re-emergence of the idea of the sacred as applied to public discourse, especially within fields of popular culture, media and popular spiritualities.

Issues of media ethics: sex and violence, ownership and control, freedom and censorship, representation of minorities, commercialism and the use and abuse of information and communications technologies.

How patterns of globalisation affect the theory and practice of communication; how new forms of broadcast, network and social media affect practices of faith amongst global diasporas.

Beginning from the premise that all religious experience is mediated in some way through human practice, language, symbol or material culture, to ask how the sacred has been embodied and communicated throughout history to the present day: from oral transmission, sacred texts, visual and material cultures to new digital and virtual technologies.

The study of religious participants’ active involvement in forms of media in narrating identity, articulating the sacred and developing new religious and spiritual practices and communities.

How new media assist in developing what Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors term the ‘alternative politics of belonging’ – within or alongside conventional structures of democratic participation?

If global media are organized according to commercial criteria, can they genuinely assist in informing and facilitating democratic citizenship; and can they be relied upon as vehicles of religious literacy and cross-cultural understanding in contexts of cultural pluralism or religious conflict?

Format of the Consultation

1. Plenary Speakers

Professor Jolyon Mitchell (University of Edinburgh)

Professor Linda Woodhead (Lancaster University)

Dr. Heidi Campbell (Texas A&M University, USA)

+ International speaker or panel (to be confirmed)

2. Themed Seminar Papers

Four themed sets of seminars will run throughout the consultation, reflecting core interests of the Global Network. The themes are:

- i. Media, Public Life and Public Theology**
- ii. Globalization and Public Theology**
- iii. Learning, Teaching and Researching in Public Theology: Methods, innovations and case studies**
- iv. Theological Sources and Resources for Global Public Theology**

A call for papers will be issued in January 2013.

3. Excursions

As a complement to our conference sessions, the consultation will make two visits to centres of interest in the immediate region:

- i. *Gladstone's Library* (<http://www.st-deiniols.com/>). Now a designated research library of the University of Chester, Gladstone's Library is a working archive and academic library based on the personal collection of William Ewart Gladstone, British Prime Minister, which numbers over 32,000 items and includes his books, non-political correspondence, speeches and papers. The Library has recently opened an Islamic reading room, organizes residential conferences and courses on a variety of topics and hosts a 'Writer-in-Residence' scheme.



During our visit, there will be an opportunity to view the Library's holdings in politics, history and theology and to learn more about its residential facilities and events. In the evening, there will be a special lecture by Professor Linda Woodhead, who recently presided over a major (£12m) five-year inter-disciplinary research programme in Religion and Society (<http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/>). In her lecture, she will reflect on the significance of the programme for its findings on many aspects of religion and society, as well as considering how the research project itself has made an intervention into public discourse about the role of religion in public life. This will be followed by a formal Conference Dinner.

- ii. *MediaCityUK, Salford* (<http://www.mediacityuk.co.uk/>): based on reclaimed industrial dockland in the heart of Greater Manchester, the new MediaCityUK complex, opened in 2011, now forms a major focus for many arms of the media industry, both public sector and commercial, as well as creating a hub for partnerships with the academy and other creative industries.



We will visit the headquarters of BBC North, and its department of Religion and Ethics, where we will hear about its strategy for religious broadcasting within a public service context. We will also visit the Anchor, MediaCityUK's chaplaincy centre, to learn about its style of public ministry to the area (<http://anchormediacityuk.org/>)

4. Participants

In addition to members of the Global Network for Public Theology, we will welcome students from the University of Chester's new MA in Theology, Media and Communication, many of whom are practising church communicators. We hope this will be an opportunity for researchers and practitioners to engage in dialogue about the relationship between the media, religion and public life.

5. Publication

It is intended that papers from the conference will be published in a special issue of the *International Journal of Public Theology* (Brill), scheduled for 2014-15.

Registration and Conference Fee (*Bursaries and Discounts may be available*)

£250.00 (Participating Centres of GNPT)

£220.00 (University of Chester students)

£280.00 (all other participants)

Day rate: £ 75.00

Includes:

- Lunch and evening meals in Chester inclusive of Monday evening – Friday lunchtime
- Excursion to Hawarden, including tea & conference dinner
- Excursion to Salford (including packed lunch but not evening meal)

Accommodation

Conference participants are asked to make their own enquiries regarding accommodation. A number of local hotels provide excellent bed & breakfast accommodation at reasonable prices.

1. Travelodge Chester Central Delamere Street:

<http://www.travelodge.co.uk/hotels/431/Chester-Central-Delamere-Street-hotel>

Advance rates: from £35-40 per night B&B

2. Brookside Hotel:

<http://www.brookside-hotel.co.uk/index.html>

Advance rates: from £55 B&B

3. Premier Inn, Liverpool Road:

<http://www.premierinn.com/en/hotel/CHEEGE/chester-central-north?cmp=GLBC>

Advance Rates: from £65-71 B&B.

Registration Opens: March 1st, 2013

Details of the programme and how to register will be issued with the call for papers.
