



**CONTEXTUAL AND PUBLIC  
THEOLOGY: PASSING  
FADS OR THEOLOGICAL  
IMPERATIVES?<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Garner was invited to give the 2015 inaugural lecture at the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership this essay has emerged from that.

## INTRODUCTION

In the opening to his book, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Catholic theologian and missiologist, Stephen Bevans, declares,

There is no such thing as “theology”; there is only contextual theology: feminist theology, black theology, liberation theology, Filipino theology, Asian-America theology, African theology, and so forth.<sup>2</sup>

This sets the scene for the book, where he attempts to define the somewhat nebulous term “contextual theology” and various approaches to doing that. On the whole, Bevans does a good job, and his book is a standard text in missiology, practical, and pastoral theology classes around the world. What Bevans is getting at is that all theology is done from a particular point of view and a particular social or cultural location, rendering all theology contextual in some way. Moreover, Bevans argues that “[t]he contextualization of theology – the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context – is really a theological imperative.”

The term “contextual theology” is relatively new in the history of Christian thought, becoming more well-known in recent decades. Similarly, the term “public theology” is also relatively new, and political theologian, Duncan Forester, describes it succinctly as “theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church, or its proper liberty to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments.”<sup>3</sup> As such it is a theology for the “polis” rather than the “ecclesia” and seeks to offer of something distinctive, and that is gospel, to the world for the welfare of wider human society.

In this essay I will explore these notions of contextual and public theology, looking at how they might be relevant, and even imperative, for the church here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What drives these kinds of theology and gives them momentum? What do we mean by “context” and “public”? What do we mean by contextual theology? How might they be related to other kinds of theology? And what might these theologies look like in practice for both church and world?

Having taught both both contextual and public theology in the university context, and engaged with them in my own research in theology, ethics,

<sup>2</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Duncan B. Forrester, “The Scope of Public Theology,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 2 (2004): 6.

technology and media; I’m aware of both the freedom that they can bring to theologising, and also some of the problems. Nevertheless I am convinced that there is real merit in the interplay of between faith seeking understanding, and that faith being shaped by action and agency.

## CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

All theology is inherently contextual, in that it has been shaped by the historical, social and cultural contexts of the individuals and communities doing theology. However, simply saying that all theology is contextual is not the same as it being explicitly contextual and, as Angie Pears comments, since the mid-twentieth century theological reflection with a emphasis upon specific situations, concerns, cultures, socioeconomic situations and political experiences as theological sources has become a more prominent, active strand of Christian theology.<sup>4</sup>

Stephen Bevans, who as previous noted sees contextual theology as a theological imperative, splits theology into two different approaches, which he terms “classical”

and “contextual” theology respectively. The former is defined by a more objective or “scientific” approach to theology, which saw the twin theological sources or *loci theologici* of Scripture and Tradition containing a kind of immutable content above and beyond culture and history. Against this, Bevans notes the turn within modern society towards a recognition of the subjective as adding another kind of *locus theologicus* or theological source, that of present human experience. Thus, contextual theology is a theology that, as well as recognising the roles of scripture and tradition, also recognises the dimensions of culture, history, contemporary thought forms and human experience in shaping the context in which theological reflection and action takes place.<sup>5</sup> In effect, Bevans is arguing that as finite human creatures, we can only grasp the infinity reality that is God through the subjective, interpretive lenses of our own and others’ lives. Contextual theology enables us to make sense of God and ourselves in and through the world in which we find ourselves embedded, in a particular time and place.

For Bevans, this process of doing contextual theology – and it is an active process – is a dialogue between past and present (and, I would add, also with

<sup>4</sup> Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010), 7–9.

<sup>5</sup> Bevans, *Models*, 1–3.

### CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY... RECOGNISES THE DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE, HISTORY, CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT FORMS AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE

an eye on eschatological horizons). On the one hand, we must take into account the faith experiences of the past which are recorded in Scripture and preserved and defended in tradition. In this, Bevans follows Canadian theologian, Douglas Hall, who comments that a significant part of the theological process is finding out about the Christian theological past. However, the exploration of that past only becomes authentic theology, Hall argues, “when what has been received is appropriated, made our own. For that to happen, the received tradition must of course pass through the sieve of our own individual and contemporary-collective experience: we cannot give it, profess it as ours, unless such a process occurs.”<sup>6</sup> It is this experience of the present, of a context defined as “individual and contemporary-collective experience,” that Bevans breaks down into three overlapping dimensions: the experiences of individual or group personal life; the mediation of that experience through culture; and the concept of social location.

The first dimension, the experience of individual or group personal life, identifies our context as the range of personal experiences we encounter in life – success, failure, births, deaths, relationships, wellbeing, sickness, and so on – and which shape how a person experiences, or is prevented from experiencing God in their own life. The experiences of the community add to that context, including communal celebration of a person, circumstance or event, or the communal grieving and lament over loss, pain and suffering, or perhaps a bitter-sweet combination of the two.

Secondly, Bevans argues that this experience of God is always mediated through culture, because the culture or cultures we are embedded within provide the framework of meanings through which we interpret those experiences. It is culture that allows people to encode and communicate knowledge, values, systems of belief, rituals and rhythms of life, and codes of behavior. In doing so, that framework itself becomes part of our context, and needs to be closely examined in our theological deliberations, even as it shapes how we do that. Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin talked about this when he posited there is no “culture-free” gospel, and to claim that there is one is a denial of the good news as word made flesh. That said, Newbigin does not reject the power of the gospel to critique culture:

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Every statement of the gospel in words is conditioned by the culture of which those words are a part, and every style of life that claims to embody the truth of the gospel is a culturally conditioned style of life. There can never be a culture-free gospel. Yet, the gospel, which is from the beginning to the end embodied in culturally conditioned forms, calls into question all cultures, including the one in which it was originally embodied.<sup>7</sup>

The final dimension of context that Bevans asks us to consider is that of social location. How does one’s place in society, shaped by factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economics, health, or place at the centre or margins of power, both limit and empower us theologically? How does that social location empower people to ask theological questions that are new, relevant and demanding of answers? And how does that social location prevent or oppress theological voices, silencing them and removing

them to the margins?

This examination and experience of our context is, of course, not static. Societies change over time, and sometimes more rapidly than at other times. Our current

world experiences significant changes through globalisation, migration, technology, and media. All of these form part of that experience of life that becomes our context.

### **THE SHAPING OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY**

To say contextual theology is a relatively new thing is both right and wrong. Theology is always done in a particular context, responding to that context and being shaped by it. For example, the form of covenant agreements in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as the Mosaic covenant in Exodus (Ex 19–24), are structured in a way that reflects Israel’s experience and socio-historical context. Similarly, prophets such as Amos reflect theologically upon and respond to the socio-economic experiences of the day, while in the New Testament Jesus’ parables and Paul’s encounter with the Athenians also reflect forms of contextualisation. Through Christian history too, the social and cultural context of the day is both shaped by and shapes theology. From the language and concepts used to describe the Trinity, through to theology’s interaction with philosophy (e.g. Aristotelianism in Thomas Aquinas’ word)

<sup>6</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 33.

<sup>7</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: the Gospel and Western culture* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1986), 4.

and politics (e.g. Marxism in Liberation Theology), to understandings of atonement, faith, justification, and grace, and the theological anthropology, context is both explicitly and implicitly present.

That said, the current shaping of contextual theology, and indeed contextual theologies, particularly since the 1960s and 1970s, has been brought about by a number of external and internal factors or pressures within the global Christian community. Externally, pressure upon theology has arisen from factors including a dissatisfaction with classical approaches to theology; critiques of traditional theological interpretation being oppressive; a perceived focus on individualism (especially with respect to salvation); the influence of the social sciences; and post-colonial churches struggling to create the own identity and theology.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, internal factors such as renewed emphases on Christianity as incarnational, a more dynamic Trinitarian expressions of the faith, the emergence of Charismatic and Pentecostal emphases on the Holy Spirit, of reality possessing a sacramental nature, and visions of a truly universal church as engaging with all levels of human experience have also contributed.<sup>9</sup> The result is a theology that needs to remain faithful to the full experience and contexts of the past, while at the same time taking into account the experiences of the present, because “God is present and acts contextually.”<sup>10</sup>

An example of this within the Oceanian context is Anglican Archbishop Winston Halapua’s development of *moana* theology. Within the Oceanian context, the concept of the land cannot be separated from the oceans and seas surround and embrace it, and Halapua develops this connection using the metaphor of the ocean (*moana*) for God’s embrace of all life, the mystery and depth of God, and for the interconnectedness of all life.

*Moana* as a metaphor holds the good news that all creation is interconnected. Each component in the atmosphere, in the ocean, on the land, finds its origin, definition, purpose, completion and continuity in relationship. Life in relationship is the essence of the *moana* and all its rhythm.<sup>11</sup>

A key aspect of Halapua’s “*moana* theology” is his desire of the Oceanian concept of *talanoa* (telling stories, giving space) to be adopted in the

wider world. Picking up on relational theological themes, Halapua argues that the concept provides for the giving of grace and space to others to tell their stories, to be heard respectfully, for hospitality to be offered, and justice secured. In this, he brings together the experience of the present in dialogue with the past within a local theology relevant to a particular time, place, and context.

## PRAXIS MODEL OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

All of this leads towards a deeper appreciation, or at least awareness, of the way in which our context shapes the way we do and think about theology. It puts terms such as “hermeneutical location” and “local” or “grassroots” theologies on the table; it asks who has the power in determining what is or isn’t considered “good” or “orthodox” theology; it adds ways of thinking about theology in terms of models such as “translational”, “praxis”, and “countercultural”. And, moreover, it adds some tools that are helpful for all levels of the church to work at constructing theologies that are both faithful and relevant to the contexts and experiences in which they find themselves.

One of those tools or models is the “praxis model” of contextual theology (also often known as the “pastoral cycle”).<sup>12</sup> The concept of “praxis” describes the dynamic interplay in which critical reflection leads to action, and agency leads to critical reflection. The result is an iterative spiral between reflection and action, often initiated by the experience of individuals or communities seeking to make sense of their own or another’s particular situation. In effect, this is a kind of hermeneutical spiral, though the “texts” being read are the lives and contexts of people as well as biblical texts.

I suggest that this form of theological process, which embeds those committed to theological reflection and action in a particular context, is helpful in several ways. Not only is it useful for engaging with particular issues and experiences by the church, but it also helpful as a way of showing those in the church that you don’t necessarily have to be a “professional theologian” to bring faith

### TALANOA PROVIDES FOR THE GIVING OF GRACE AND SPACE TO OTHERS TO TELL THEIR STORIES

8 Bevens, *Models*, 9–11.

9 *Ibid.*, 12–15.

10 *Ibid.*, 15.

11 Winston Halapua, *Waves of God’s Embrace: Sacred Perspectives from the Ocean* (London: Canterbury Press, 2008), 11.

12 Paul Ballard, “Tools for Practical Theology: Introducing the Pastoral Cycle,” in *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*, ed. Paul Ballard and John Pritchard (London: SPCK, 1996), 73–86; Bevens, 70–87; Elaine L. Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 170–199; Laurie Green, *Let’s Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology* (London; New York: Mowbray, 2009), 17–38.

and Christ and the issues of the day into dialogue with each other through the material reality of the everyday world.

In the process, the typical starting points are the experiences of individuals and their communities, where some particular experience or burning issue leads into theological reflection to help understand or affect that experience. Thus, the first step is to listen to the stories of those affected, before then moving on to locating those stories within the wider context. Here, in this second step, we look to the wider social, political, economic and religious contexts within which the individual or community is located, to seek a deeper understanding of their context, and to raise further critical questions to engage with.

In the third step, the personal experience and wider context are brought into dialogue with theological and non-theological disciplines and sources. This echoes Terry Veling's idea of a practical theology which combines active reflection upon Scripture and Tradition with skill at "reading the signs of the times." The theological community pays attention to God's concern for the world, while listening and responding to the questions and insight offered by our culture, society and human lives.<sup>13</sup> This echoes a parallel train of thought in public theology, where Duncan Forrester asserts that:

Public theology, it is held, is too important a matter to be left to the theologians. Theologians need to be involved, but only alongside other people with varied and relevant skills and experience for dealing with the specific matters under consideration. Along with theologians, we need to have people who have inside knowledge of the situation being considered.<sup>14</sup>

Forrester's comment about having "insiders" with knowledge of the situation is critical. It would be too easy to reduce this step to a collective of scholars and experts from various disciplines, with the consequence that those practitioners and participants embedded in the context being engaged with find their voices marginalized. This is particularly pertinent with respect to indigenous voices, which bring with them a depth of history and tradition that can complement and critique existing structures and models of engagement and thinking.

<sup>13</sup> Terry A. Veling, *Practical Theology: On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Forrester, *Scope of Public Theology*, 12.

These conversations with other disciplines, with practitioners, and with those enmeshed in the context allow invaluable resources and information about the context to be brought into dialogue with the theological material gathered in this step. All of this information, resources, and reflection – theological or otherwise – is then passed on to the next step of the process for further reflection.

The fourth step in the praxis process brings the questions, stories and resources together in such a way as to develop a particular theological way of thinking about the issue at hand, and which can then provide the basis for "intelligent action." It is a vision of what could be in light of the inaugurated Kingdom of God, and as Forrester notes,

A concern with visions serves to remind Christians that theology is not exclusively engaged with "academic" questions, or with particular problems and policies and ethical conundrums. It is at least as concerned

with the visions which provide a horizon of meaning within which a society exists, policies are formulated, actions are taken and vocations are fulfilled. Visions

generate and sustain utopias, if you prefer that language.<sup>15</sup>

If the first four steps work to bring a new, theologically-informed, vision of the experience or situation, it also provides a future orientation that the next step takes for planning concrete agency in the situation and then enacting it in the world. Here, the theological insight developed previously is put into action, not in an unfocused or half-hearted way, but rather with insight into the heart of the issue and its context, a strong underpinning justification for the action considered, and a commitment to "get one's hands dirty." This is what we're going to, this is why we're doing it, and this is why we've chosen to do it this way.

In itself this might be enough, but the critical last step of the praxis process is a self-reflective step. For every practical engagement, there will be positive and negative consequences for the actions chosen, and so there needs to be reflection on whether the action performed is effective, life-giving, and perseveres.<sup>16</sup> The implication of this is that this way of doing theology, and in particular a theology

<sup>15</sup> Duncan B. Forrester, "Politics and Vision," *The Bible in Transmission* Autumn (1999): 1–4.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher D. Marshall, *Compassionate Justice: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue with Two Gospel Parables on Law, Crime, and Restorative Justice* (Eugene, OR.: Cascade Books, 2012), 126–127.

seeking intelligent action, is iterative. The insights and new personal stories gleaned from reflecting upon the action taken lead not into stopping, but rather to engaging with the process again and again in light of these insights.

Identifying a logical series of steps in a process such as this has a number of distinct advantages. Firstly, it aids those who are struggling with how to respond to a situation to initiate some form of considered agency, and to move beyond being paralyzed in their response, or taking some form of ill-considered action. Moreover, the process pays attention to the context that the situation being responded to exists within, alerting the participants in the process that the appropriate solution may need to address wider, underlying concerns as well as the immediate concerns of those suffering. Another potential advantage is the possibility of collaboration across the different steps of the process where individuals and groups with particular skill sets might focus on a particular step in the process. Finally, the iterative nature of the process recognises that life goes on and compassionate engagement is a long-term activity.

Against this, though, there are a number of dangers or pitfalls that such a process might introduce. The first of these is that the process itself can become oppressive, forcing people to serve the process rather than *vice versa*, and perhaps becoming idolatrous in some ways. Secondly, human life is inherently “messy” and it may be the situation being encountered doesn’t necessarily fit the steps of the model exactly, so some flexibility in implementation is needed. Thirdly, it is possible for people to get stuck at a particular point in the process for both positive and negative reasons. For example, the emotional effects of the personal narratives, the sheer enormity of the wider context, and the desire to have more information before formulating a plan of action can all cause the process to break down, as can the struggle to find a starting point when multiple steps all demand attention simultaneously. Finally, it may be that either action and reflection is overemphasized, rather than both forming an holistic whole, leaving action without reflection and reflection without action.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, in many cases one simply does not have the time to go through a considered and sometimes lengthy process when called to act compassionately; the need is urgent. However,

17 Green, *Let's do Theology*, 25–27.

the continual use of a process like this and a commitment to practise faith seeking intelligent action moves the practitioner towards unconsciously practising reflective action in much the same way that practising virtues such as prudence, courage, faith and love leads to them becoming inherently part of the practitioner. This offering of something distinctively gospel to the world is also at the heart of public theology, and it is to that subject that we now turn.

## PUBLIC THEOLOGY

The “classical” definition of public theology, if something as relatively young as the named discipline of “public theology” can have such a definition, would be Duncan Forrester’s understanding that public theology is

theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church, or its proper liberty to preach the

Gospel and celebrate the sacraments. Accordingly, public theology often takes “the world’s agenda”, or parts of it, as its own agenda, and seeks to offer distinctive and

constructive insights from the treasury of faith to help in the building of a decent society, the restraint of evil, the curbing of violence, nation-building, and reconciliation in the public arena, and so forth. It strives to offer something that is distinctive, and that is gospel, rather than simply adding the voice of theology to what everyone is saying already. Thus it seeks to deploy theology in public debate, rather than a vague and optimistic idealism which tends to disintegrate in the face of radical evil.<sup>18</sup>

Here the world sets the agenda for public theology, but this cannot be the only impetus for this kind of theological engagement, for within the world there are issues and concerns that the world itself is blind to. What is at the heart of public theology is a community of faith, informed by Scripture and Tradition, which is committed to reading the “signs of the times” and acting for the common good for society.<sup>19</sup> For example, if we are thinking theologically about compassion in the context of public theology, we’re thinking of how our

18 Forrester, “The Scope of Public Theology,” 6.

19 Max L. Stackhouse, “Civil Religion, Political Theology and Public Theology: What’s the Difference?,” *Political Theology* 5, no. 3 (2004): 284.

understanding of compassion might be offered in distinctive and constructive ways in order to enrich wider society, to help restrain evil and violence, and promote the building of communities of reconciliation.

Christopher Marshall argues that this exercise in public theology bases itself upon two faith-based assumptions.<sup>20</sup> Firstly, that if Jesus Christ is Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that are in them, then there is no sacred/secular divide, and that theological voices are faithfully required to speak in all contexts of the world. As Kathryn Tanner puts it, theology must be comprehensive as it explores what it means to be human beings in relationship with God, for if God is the Lord of everything then no aspect of the world, no matter how ordinary, is exempt from being understood in relation to faith.<sup>21</sup> Following on from that there is a second assertion that supposes that Christian beliefs about God, and about human nature and destiny, and the values that arise from these, are so true that they should shape public policy and life.

What this means, however, is that public theology exists within a contested space. On the one hand, our current liberal democracy argues strongly for access to public space available under principle of democratic participation, and preserves that in a variety of legislative forms, even if it doesn't always feel like that for faith-based communities.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the message being conveyed needs to be both credible and intelligible to a wider public that no longer holds to Christian theology and its sources as authoritative, unique or a public truth.<sup>23</sup> We shall return to this point later when we talk about public theology and language.

The definition of "public" is multifaceted. For example, David Tracy identified the "public" divided into the three spaces of church, academy, and society each of which are locations for both an accessible and coherent account of Christianity in its cultural context, and for theology to revise

20 Chris Marshall, "What Language Shall I Borrow? The Bilingual Dilemma of Public Theology," *Stimulus* 13, no. 3 (2005): 12.

21 Kathryn Tanner, "The Difference Theological Anthropology Makes," *Theology Today* 50, no. 4 (1994): 567.

22 Human Rights Commission, *Religious Diversity in New Zealand: Statement of Religious Diversity*, 2nd ed. (Wellington, N.Z.: New Zealand Government, 2009); Human Rights Commission, *Freedom of Religion and Belief* (Wellington, N.Z.: New Zealand Government, 2010); New Zealand Government, *Human Rights Act 1993*, §82.

23 Marshall, "What Language," 12.

itself in light of that context.<sup>24</sup> Others would have similar configurations, with another three-fold public being the state (local government, national government, state welfare), civil society (charities, faith communities, voluntary bodies), and the market (business, finance, corporations). In some cases, "public" is just used to mean anything outside of the church or secular in nature.

This commitment to a common good by public theology is shared by other approaches such as civil religion and political theology. Each is concerned in their own way with what Max Stackhouse identifies as:

[t]he goal of finding a more inclusive, genuinely ecumenical and catholic way of identifying a valid, viable inner convictional and ethical framework on which to build the moral and spiritual architecture of our increasingly common life.<sup>25</sup>

Public theology should not be subsumed into either civil religion, which desires the creation of symbols or structures that express the core values of a community cultivated into a set of norms by which all must conform, nor a political theology where

religion is infused by a particular political ideology, and theology becomes the servant of politics. Rather, argues Stackhouse, public theology seeks to critique and reform the values that underpin civil religion, while at the same time rejecting the utopianism of political theology. It does this because it is realistic about both the potential for reform as well as the abuse of power and the establishment of self-interest. Public theology may use political and social theories, but those should seek to serve society, not the other way around.<sup>26</sup>

Public theology is thus in some ways a reformist movement, rejecting the conservatism of civil religion as well as the revolutionary thrust of political theology because it is realistic about what might be achieved at any one time. But one must be careful that this is not an impotent realism, for as Elaine Graham and Frances Ward assert:

the task of living within a pluralistic and fallen world will generate questions, anxieties and challenges to which the gospel must be seen to respond; and that the credibility of Christian truths must be argued in ways

24 Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, 160.

25 Stackhouse, "Civil Religion", 277.

26 *Ibid.*, 284.

that fulfil prevailing standards of intellectual coherence.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, a key question for public theology is how to communicate in a credible and intelligible manner the riches and insight of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the variety of publics found within the contexts of church, state, civil society, the marketplace and the academy. Furthermore, whether a public theology has anything particular to offer to the world also depends upon the theological foundation that underpins this task, which raises questions about the depth of theological understanding present in the community that is attempting that task. It may be that the first task of public theology is to address the public of the church, to seek to educate and inform that community of faith as to the dimensions and features of their own theology, to show the implications and trajectories of that faith, and then as Douglas Hall argues have made it their own. Thus, while public theology is primarily for the *polis*, the city and public world, rather than the *ekklesia*, the church, theology for the church also plays an integral role in supporting that engagement with the *polis*.

This connects to Stackhouse's description of public theology as having a two-fold movement whereby the top-down source of revelation provides the norm, but that norm is realized through the personal convictions present in the community of faith.<sup>28</sup> The narratives and examples of compassion and justice found in parables such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son are received from their scriptural, revelatory source, but at the same time the norms found in those sources are impotent until worked out through the personal convictions of people in the contexts where they work, live, play and worship.

This, in turn, raises the question of what form this dialogue between faith and agency should take, and in particular how this vision of compassion should be communicated. Should one take a "common-currency" approach where the God-talk is muted in an attempt to find some common ground with other groups through the use of a common secular discourse, or should one attempt to "out-narrate" other competing narratives within the public square by offering a "distinctive discourse" rooted in the language of faith?<sup>29</sup> This comes back to the question

of credibility and intelligibility of what is being offered by public theology to the wider world.

Perhaps, as Marshall comments, following Robert Gascoigne, one should not introduce God too early to the conversation as it may act as a barrier to being heard, but at the same time not leave God out so much as to lose the Christian identity of one's message. Therefore, "Christians must be able to speak the language of political discourse effectively, albeit with a foreign accent."<sup>30</sup>

### SO WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US...?

So where does this leave us, in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century? The world is a rapidly changing place. Yet, as the Teacher in Ecclesiastes remarks, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1.9). Indeed, there is much that is not new under the sun: bad things happen to good people; good things happen to bad people; people argue about who is "good" and "bad"; and people have to live in these kinds of situations.

Being human in this world is to experience pairings of great joy and great sadness, of blessing and curse, of wellbeing and distress, each of which generates a variety of responses.

Contextual and Public theologies together remind us of some key themes. The first is that an awareness of context is not optional, but is an essential part of being involved in theology and ministry. It is present in the theology we inherit through Scripture and Tradition, including our ecclesiology and own denominational history, and we would be well to study the past and to mine the riches of the treasures of Scripture and Tradition as they have wrestled with faithfully living in their everyday worlds, often seeking answers to the same questions we have today.

Moreover, context is present in the theologies we create, the way we attempt to grapple with the infinite God and to bring our finite understanding of that into something that is credible and intelligible to both church and the wider world. If Christ is Lord of all then we will have to learn to not only read the "signs of the time" but also to be able to speak and act in them.

Secondly, we work in that space between our experience of the past and the present and we need to maintain a healthy dialogue between the two – to balance both. It is too easy to put your emphasis on one at the expense of the other. Too much emphasis

### AN AWARENESS OF CONTEXT IS NOT OPTIONAL

27 Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, 139.

28 Stackhouse: 291.

29 Marshall, "What Language," 14–16.

30 *Ibid.*, 17.

on the past and you will fail to hear the voices of those you need to serve in the present, to marginalise their and your own experiences, and to become irrelevant – albeit in the well-meaning kind of way. But if you put too much emphasis on the present you run other risks – of leaving behind the riches and resources of the past and failing to draw upon them; to become enamoured uncritically with the spirit of the age, whatever that might be, and become adrift from that which underpins the faith. It's a delicate balancing act, and one that requires that you listen humbly to the voices of past and present before speaking yourself.

And all of this is tied to this ongoing process of praxis, of critical reflection upon the faith learning to considered action, and also of living out the faith in the world shaping that theological reflection. And this will mean paying attention to the many contexts we find ourselves in – working to understand and unpack personal and communal experiences of God and world, of understanding how our cultural context shapes our faith and how we might shape our message to that context, and how the social locations of ourselves and those we're called to love as serve as Christ shapes how we might do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God (Mic 6:8). It will also mean a lot of hard work, of courageous word and deed, and a deep resting in Christ for the journey.

The good news of Jesus Christ is embedded in and speaks to our contexts of the everyday world. Whether we call it contextual or public theology, we are still called to love God and our neighbour in the world which will require us to do much of what those theologies embody. Love God. Love our neighbour. In our context and public world. That is our theological imperative.

**STEPHEN GARNER** is Head of the School of Theology at Laidlaw College. With a background in computer science and theology, his research focuses upon theology in dialogue with science, technology and new media, as well as religion, media and popular culture. A central theme to Stephen's research and teaching is that theology must engage with the everyday communities we find ourselves in, seeking to offer something distinctly gospel to church and world. He served for four years on the Interchurch Bioethics Council and is currently co-convenor of the PCANZ Leadership Subcommittee. Stephen is married to Kim with four children and they worship at Massey Presbyterian Church.

## RELIGION'S PRESENCE IN THE PAST

28-29 AUGUST 2015

The significance of religion in studies of the past has been a contested notion in the wider historical enterprise. This Symposium explores the implications of religious history for historiography, the significance of religious factors in wider events, and the place of religion in social and cultural history.

### KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:



**DAVID BEBBINGTON**  
Stirling University, UK.



**PETER LINEHAM**  
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