

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 1 • CHAPTER 5

What is the Relationship of Public Theology to Philosophy and History?

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The title of this article will scare some readers, but there is no reason to be afraid. When I taught philosophy, I encouraged my students to keep a “washing machine list” of big scary words in philosophy, just like “washing machine”! Every discipline has its particular technical vocabulary, and philosophy is no different. Central to any list of important philosophical terms is the word “philosophy” itself. There are many different definitions of philosophy, but, following Kalsbeek, I conceive of philosophy as a discipline that discerns the structure of creation and describes systematically, that is, in logical order, what is subject to that structure.¹

In this definition, the word “creation” signals that we are

¹ L. Kalsbeek, *Contours of a Christian Philosophy*. Readers should note that there is a variety among Christian philosophers. I am consciously using a reformational definition which is the approach to Christian philosophy I find most helpful, although I draw on all such work.

approaching philosophy from a Christian perspective, and this makes all the difference in the world. Indeed, in the 20th century, we witnessed and are heirs to a remarkable renaissance of Christian philosophy, including figures like Herman Dooyeweerd, Dirk Vollenhoven, Elaine Botha, Calvin Seerveld, Alvin

Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, C. Stephen Evans, Bill Alston, etc. Other Christian scholars who have done remarkable work in philosophy are Anthony Thiselton, Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur and many others. Recent decades have also witnessed a noteworthy flourishing of French Catholic phenomenology, which wonderfully ranges across exegesis (Bible), theology, and philosophy.² Key figures here have been Jean Louis Chrétien, Jean Yves Lacoste, Jean Luc



Ivan Albright, *The Philosopher* (1922)

² See Bruce R. Ashford and Craig G. Bartholomew, *The Doctrine of Creation: A Constructive Kuyperian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 90–93, for an introduction to these thinkers.



Jacob Jordaens, *The Thinker*

Marion and Emmanuel Falque. Central to each of these thinkers is their intentional foregrounding of Christian vocabulary and structures of thought. For example, when I taught philosophy of language, I would use Chrétien's extraordinary book, *The Ark of Speech*, in which the title "ark" refers not to arc, i.e., trajectory, but to Noah's ark! Thus, when it comes to Christian philosophy, the reader nowadays is spoilt for choice. But what does this development in *philosophy* have to do with public theology?

As a discipline, the best efforts in public theology draw upon both Christian theology and Christian philosophy. One without the other yields a reductionist approach that stunts and distorts one's exploration. The importance of theology is evident. But what about philosophy? Consider that, as soon as one engages in public theology, one inevitably encounters inherently philosophical questions such as: What is a society? What are its main components? How do societies develop? In other words, one encounters the need for a philosophy of society, i.e., a sense of the structures and God-given norms for society in the creation. In addition, as one engages in public theology, one confronts the question

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of how we know about such things so that we can trust the results of our knowing process, the central question of a philosophical subdiscipline known as *epistemology*. One will also need a detailed understanding of what it means to be human, what in philosophy is known as *anthropology*. There are many aspects to philosophy, but these three are central, namely:

- *Ontology* is the nature of the world around us.
- *Epistemology* is how we know the world so that we can trust the results of our knowing process.
- *Anthropology* is the nature of human beings.

Any serious examination of the public dimensions of our lives will need insights into these three areas. If one doesn't consciously reflect philosophically on these elements, one will unwittingly adopt some regnant secular conception, a path that, alas, far too many scholars follow.

It is important to note that we are here talking about *Christian* philosophy and its importance for public theology. A moment's reflection will alert the reader that the gospel has a significant influence on how we view the world around us, how we know the world truly, and our view of what it means to be human. Thus, if public theology is to be Christian, it is vital to draw on or develop Christian insight in these foundational areas.

What is the relationship between such philosophy and theology? Both are foundational disciplines in public theology. "In Christ" theology focuses on the gospel and the revelation of God in the Bible, whereas "In Christ" philosophy looks outward, focusing on the nature of the world as God's creation. If public theology

is to be faithfully Christian, it will need theology to ensure that it operates out of the gospel and the beliefs central to it. At the same time, it will require the insights of philosophy as it immerses itself in the granular nature of public life again and again. A theological way of

explaining this would be to say that theology attends to *special revelation* especially, whereas philosophy attends to *general revelation*, God's revelation of himself in his world. Public theology, therefore, draws upon both disciplines, yielding richly textured patterns and conclusions.



William Holman Hunt, *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple*

The reader may well ask, but what about other subjects? Will not public theology also need subjects like sociology, psychology, economics, history, and so on? The answer is yes, indeed. Public theology is inherently interdisciplinary and will need to draw from a range of different subjects and specialisations. However, some disciplines are *foundational*, whereas others are not. We have argued that theology and philosophy are foundational disciplines for public theology. Another foundational discipline is *history*.

I remember well when Mike Goheen and I wrote our *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview*. The final chapter has a series of short discussions on what a Christian worldview looks like in different areas of life – such as business, politics, sports, art, scholarship, education and the home. What struck me when writing these is that you cannot do so without history. Imagine, for example, if you are writing about the significance of *the home*. The ways in which family life, domesticity and the home operate have developed in many different ways in various cultures over thousands of years. When we explore Christian teachings about the home, we will make all sorts of mistakes if we assume that a home in the Bible is precisely the same as it is today. Because we live in God's creation, there will be important continuity, but there will also be differences, and good public theology will need to know the difference and be able to work out positive and distorted developments of the home. Or take business as another example. How we conduct business differs radically from those of the agrarian communities in which the Bible came into existence. We live on the other side of the Industrial Revolution and now amidst the communications revolution. One cannot begin to approach a Christian perspective on business today without a sense of the changes that have taken place.

When we are able to grasp the history of any given dimension of public theology, we gain insight into various ways that dimension has been corrupted or misdirected by idolatrous ideologies or practices. With such cautionary knowledge in hand, we can go back and find healthy historic models and develop those models forward for the present.

Indeed, no matter what area of public life we are attending to, an indispensable component will be the ability to tell the story of its development, i.e., of its *history*. And it should be noted such a telling will not be neutral. It will back one into, at a deep level, one's view of history and God's providence, and in business and economics, for example, one will need to track *and evaluate* the Industrial Revolution, capitalism and socialism, and the Artificial Intelligence revolution we are undergoing today.

Thus, the best public theology operates out of the fruitful interplay of theology, philosophy and history. Moreover, as a multidisciplinary discipline and practice, the challenges are immense. In order to bear fruit worthy of the gospel, we must collaborate with one another to address matters of import in public life today. The challenge is to collaborate with *integrality*, deeply and genuinely bearing witness to Christ in the way in which we operate. This will inevitably be the way of the cross, but it will also be the way of glory and a wonderful way of serving our neighbours.

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Samuel Colman, *The Rock of Salvation* (1837)