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Public Theology and Ministry

Theology and ministry are more obviously "public" in those countries in which there is an established church, a common and official confession, and a ministry which attends to all ceremonies related to "hatching, matching, and dispatching." Yet theology and ministry have a vigorous public role in American and Canadian life. Although theology is generally considered a part of the intellectual work of communities of commitment, no community of faith would consider its theological work simply an in-house matter. Each expects its work to have a "public" character by being intelligible in common discourse and by its engagement with contemporary culture and issues. And although one can speak of ministry in terms of service to the communities of faith, ministry is also service by the communities of faith to society and the world. Both theology and ministry have a public character and expression.

But how good are we in the churches and theological schools at doing public theology and ministry? An impressionistic survey of the last generation might go something like this. Back in 1952, during an upsurge in religious commitment, President Eisenhower uttered his well known aphorism: "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what that is." New congregations were being founded across the U.S. (one every 54 hours at the peak, it is said), church construction was booming, neo-orthodoxy was in vogue in the seminaries, and clergy knew what was expected of them. Theology and ministry kept busy in church, explicating the faith and sharing new insights from biblical and reformation studies. And just as the new churches being built made a visual impact on the landscape, theology and ministry moved rather easily in and out of the public sector. There were giants in the land in those days, both in theological schools and in certain pulpits. Major metropolitan newspapers reported on Monday what had been said in sermons by outstanding preachers the day before (at least the *New York Times* did). That sounds rather quaint today.

The 60s marked a shift to a different kind of public role for theology and the churches, and that shift has made a lasting impact. During or after the 60s

there arose departments of church and society in major denominations, the making of social statements by church conventions, and a host of theological movements with a public consciousness: theologies of hope, liberation, and feminism, and a new activism of the conservative evangelical movement—which may not be as new as it seems, since some see its beginnings as early as 1968.

The activism of conservative evangelicals is one of the most interesting developments, and it has received the endorsement of the White House. Back on March 6th President Reagan spoke to the convention of the National Association of Evangelicals at Columbus, Ohio, and said that "Americans are turning back to God," and the turning point, he is reported to have said,

coincided with the 1980 presidential election.

The religious views of presidents are not decisive. But the statements of Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan are telling of the kind of public theology and ministry considered appropriate by a large segment of the public at particular moments. And for all their differences, the statements of these two presidents probably have something in common. Both the respectable Protestantism of the Eisenhower era and the so-called conservative evangelicalism of our own could become—in spite of intentions to the contrary—captive to the culture, or at least to a major dynamic within it.

Those who provide leadership in congregations and denominations which claim to represent the historic expression of catholic and evangelical Christianity will have to give thought to ways of doing theology and ministry in public which are convincing and articulate for our times and the future. It is necessary for such leaders to do theology and ministry in away that is consistent with their own commitments about the nature of the Christian faith within the contexts of pluralism and secularism, and they must do it well. This issue of the journal makes a contribution toward that effort.

The essay by *David Tracy* opens the discussion by dealing with the question of the role of theology in public life (the academy, church, and general culture); theology, he says, helps us ask the kinds of questions which all reflective human beings ask, and he sketches out a model for critical correlation in interpreting the Christian tradition and contemporary experience. *James Sellers* surveys three major ways in which Christianity in America has become engaged in ethical issues: (1) evangelical Christianity, which calls for a "Christian nation," (2) the social gospel movement, and (3) neo-Puritanism, which asserts the relevance of the religious and the integrity of the secular. *Randolph Nelson* offers a perspective on social ethics in which the Christian tradition (including Scripture), experience, and culture provide the data out of which decisions are made and actions taken in regard to particular social issues. *Bruce Birch* takes up the issue of what role Scripture can play in public theology. He indicates options proposed by various traditions and then makes a proposal of his own, which takes the whole canon seriously (critically assessed in all its diversity), and which recognizes that the Bible is the church's book—which recognition puts the church under the radical imperative of God's Word to do theology "in but not of the world." *Paul Sonnack* provides a diagnosis of the American setting and offers a prescription. Since America has no established religion, and since it values religious freedom, conditions favor religious individualism and privatization.

Public theology and ministry, he says, must have ah authorization within theological resources, and the doctrine of the two kingdoms offers such an authorization, rather than quietism and privatization. *Lance Barker* proposes that social pronouncements, such as the recent Roman Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on peace, are expressions of the ecclesial identity of the churches which make them, and serve a ministry of "societal guidance." He proposes a model by which congregations and church bodies might go about the process of societal guidance on the basis of their ecclesial identity and social realities.

The Resources section contains three essays. *Eugene Kreider* describes a "triangle of affections" which constitutes the current religious scene: religious pluralism, mainline

denominations, and contemporary religious movements (the so-called "cults"). It is the latter to which he gives most attention, asking what the new movements mean concerning religion in America, and what the appropriate responses might be when persons join these groups. *Bruce Malchow* examines Old Testament law codes concerned about social justice, and then he goes on to an analysis of the motivations which would impel persons to keep these codes which lead to justice. Finally, *Vítor Westhelle* has written the Texts in Context essay on portions of the letter to the Romans which appear in the ecumenical lectionary during the late summer and fall of this year.

A.J.H.