

What is public theology?

David Bromell¹

Visiting Fellow, Centre for Theology and Public Issues
University of Otago, May 2011

This paper addresses a set of four related questions.

- What is the proper task of ‘public theology’?
- Does public theology have a valid claim to be taught and practised as an academic discipline in a state-funded university?
- If public theology is a legitimate academic discipline, is it necessarily theology of the Christian sort?
- What do we mean by ‘public’, anyway?

From religion to theology

Religion is the primary form of culture through which humans explicitly express some understanding or other of ultimate reality (variously conceived) in its meaning for us. By way of contrast, metaphysics, at least as traditionally understood, is a branch of philosophical inquiry that thinks about being as such, or reality in itself.

In other words, religion is a human, culturally constructed response to an existential question: What does ultimate reality mean for our own possibilities of existing and acting authentically as human beings, in relation to self, others and the whole (‘world’)?

We express some kind of existential self-understanding implicitly through how we live, decide and act; i.e., through all our other (non-religious) cultural systems. Religion, however, is the primary cultural system through which humans have expressed an explicit understanding of ultimate reality in its meaning for us.²

Theology is critical thinking about the meaning and truth of religious self-understanding (faith) and life praxis (witness). It is thus a second order of reflection—it involves ‘standing back’ from claims made or implied by religious faith and witness and critically assessing: (1) what they mean; and (2) whether and to what extent any reasonable person might accept these claims as true, and in what sense. Theology as critical thinking proceeds by means of evidence and argument that are relevant to the kinds of claims religion makes.

¹ David Bromell has a PhD in Systematic Theology from Otago (1990). He is a Principal Advisor in the Ministry of Social Development and a Senior Associate of the Institute of Policy Studies, School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington.

² My understanding of religion and of the task and branches of theology is heavily indebted to Schubert Ogden. See especially Ogden 1986, 1996, 2010. Ogden in turn drew on the work of Clifford Geertz in developing his understanding of religion as a cultural system.

As defined by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking:

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness (*Defining critical thinking*).

What makes theology distinctive as a discipline is that it pushes beyond describing and analysing the history and meaning of religious faith and witness (religious studies), to critical assessment of claims to validity expressed or implied in religious faith and witness. This includes analysis and assessment of whether the metaphysical and ethical implications of those claims are true, and in what sense. Theology thus presupposes but is distinct from the related disciplines of philosophy (especially metaphysics, ethics and philosophy of religion) and religious studies.

Theology is *logos* about *theos*, however *theos* is conceived. Christian theology is critical thinking about data provided by Christian faith and witness. Of course, theology can also be Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist, and so on—in which case, it is critical thinking about data provided by Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist faith and witness respectively.

Theology and the university

By legislation (Education Act 1989, Pt 14), universities must have all of the following characteristics:

- they are primarily concerned with more advanced learning, the principal aim being to develop intellectual independence;
- their research and teaching are closely interdependent and most of their teaching is done by people who are active in advancing knowledge;
- they meet international standards of research and teaching;
- they are a repository of knowledge and expertise; and
- they accept a role as critic and conscience of society.

By convention and by legislation, the academic freedom and autonomy of tertiary educational institutions are to be protected and enhanced. This includes, for example:

- the freedom of academic staff and students, within the law, to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions;
- the freedom of the institution and its staff to regulate the subject matter of courses taught at the institution; and
- the freedom of the institution through its chief executive to appoint its own staff.

Defining theology as second-order, critical thinking about the meaning and truth of religious faith and witness is consistent with the characteristics of a university and has at least three implications.

1. A religious body should not expect to determine or influence the subject matter of courses. A university is a place for open inquiry and open debate, where the best argument wins until someone develops and presents a better argument.
2. A religious body should not expect to determine or influence the appointment of staff. Indeed, it is not necessary for a theologian to identify personally as Christian, or to affiliate with a Christian

church, in order to do Christian theology. Equally, one need not identify as Jewish to do Jewish theology, or as Buddhist to do Buddhist theology, etc. Without the prior faith and witness of a religious community or some sort of other, however, there would be nothing to reflect on, no data with which to do theology. (As second-order reflection, theology is, in a sense, a parasitic activity.)

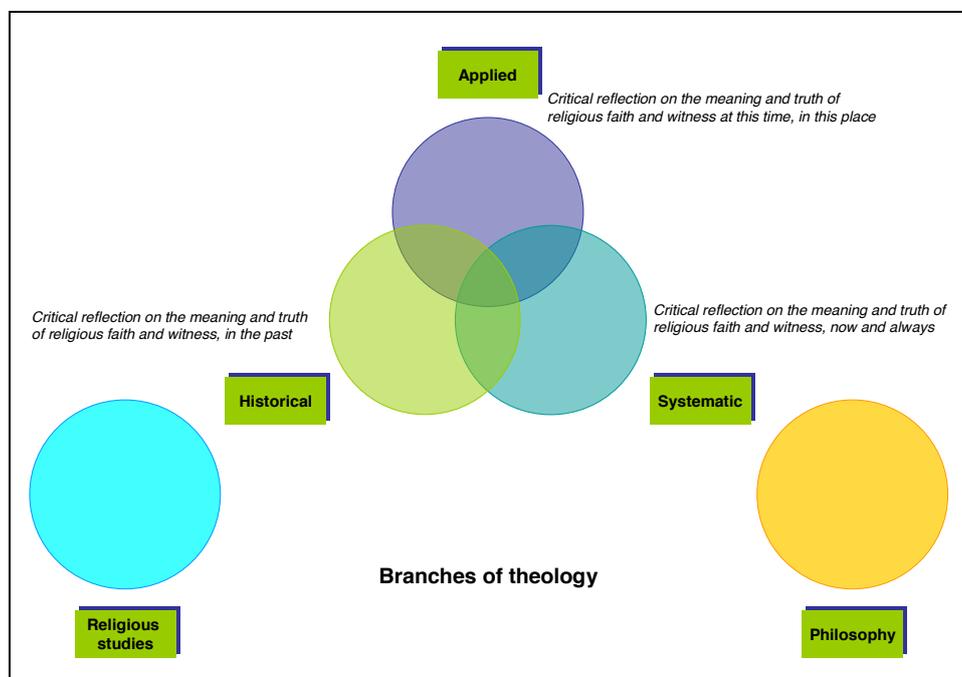
3. While theology is an academic discipline that can properly be taught and studied in a university, there is no reason why *Christian* theology has any special claim to be taught in a public university, as distinct from a private training establishment.³ Where theology is practised and taught as critical thinking about Christian faith and witness in a university context, we might expect, therefore, that it will be taught and practised to the highest academic standard, and in a non-sectarian manner that does not promote the interests and views of any particular faith tradition or community.

Branches of Christian theology

Christian theology as an academic discipline is commonly organised in three branches, for practical as well as theoretical reasons (see Figure 1 below).

- Historical theology, including biblical theology (sometimes called biblical studies), is critical thinking about the history of faith and witness; i.e., what it has been in the past.
- Systematic theology is critical thinking about the meaning and truth of Christian faith and witness, in terms of its theoretical credibility, now and always.
- Applied theology, sometimes called practical theology, is critical thinking about the meaning and truth of Christian faith and witness, in terms of its practical credibility at this time, in this place.

Figure 1: Branches of theology



³ By law, a private training establishment must be registered, however, before it can provide an approved programme or training scheme, regardless of whether the establishment or any of its students receives financial assistance out of public money appropriated by Parliament (Education Act 1989, Pt 18).

Public theology is a form of applied theology. It reflects critically on the ethical and political implications, here and now, of claims expressed or implied in religious faith and witness, and does so in the public sphere, in publicly accessible ways.

In writing on the creation of public value, John Benington defines the public sphere as “the web of values, places, organizations, rules, knowledge, and other cultural resources held in common by people through their everyday commitments and behaviours, and held in trust by government and public institutions” (Benington 2011, 43). He argues that while at one level, ‘the public’ comprises, or relates to, or affects the whole community, ‘the public’ is less given than something continuously created and constructed:

Part of the role of government is to take the lead in shaping and responding to people’s ideas and experiences of the public, of who we are, and what we collectively value—what it means to be part of, and a participant in, the public sphere, at this moment in time and in this place/space, and what adds to public value and what detracts from it. This involves a constant battle of ideas and values, because the public sphere is heavily contested territory, and there are many competing interests and ideologies in play (ibid.).

Conflict of ideas in the public sphere

The importance of doing theology as critical thinking about the truth, as well as the meaning, of religious faith and witness is underscored by the conflict of ideas in a liberal democratic, secular state. New Zealand’s population is religiously diverse and becoming increasingly so. Data from the 2006 Census of Population and Dwellings show that:

- just over half (51 percent) of the usually resident population identified, at least nominally, as Christian—down from 61 percent in 2001
- those declaring ‘no religion’ comprised almost a third (32 percent) of the usually resident population, up from 30 percent in 2001, with an additional six percent objecting to answering the question
- Islam is New Zealand’s fastest growing religion, although Muslims comprise less than one percent of the usually resident population (36,153 individual responses in 2006)
- of people born overseas who affiliated as Hindu or Muslim in 2006, almost half (50 percent and 48 percent respectively) had arrived less than five years prior to 2006.

New Zealand has no official or established religion, and the state seeks to treat all faith communities and those who profess no religion equally before the law (Human Rights Commission 2009).

If it is to be taken seriously, public theology therefore has to offer more than an interpretation of principles, values or insights from scripture and tradition applied to contemporary questions of public life. After all, why should policymakers accept these principles, values and insights as worthy of consideration and application, particularly when they conflict or at least compete with other people’s principles, values and insights?

A ‘confessional’ approach to public theology (‘We believe *X* and therefore think you should do *Y*’) is special pleading and a form of ecclesiastical bullying in academic drag. In relation specifically to Christian theology, presenting particular claims merely as advocacy in the interests of a cultural sub-group is, moreover, inconsistent with claims to universal truth that are intrinsic to monotheism and the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In other words, it is internally incoherent.

Public theology is critical reflection, not witness. First, it engages in critical thinking about the meaning and truth of claims expressed or implied in religious faith and witness. Having done so, it employs *relevant evidence, reasoned argument and resonant rhetoric* to engage with competing claims and conflicting ideas in the public sphere. This means using relevant evidence and argument to position claims to validity:

- in relation to everything else we know to be true
- in relation to competing claims
- within the sum of public life, taking account of inter-dependencies and intended and unintended consequences.

This does not mean that everyone has to adopt the same form of reasoning, or the same kind of rhetoric and mode of communication. Any claim to validity needs to demonstrate, however, whether and to what extent a reasonable person might accept it as true, and in what sense.

What public theology is ... and is not

Public theology is more than keeping and speaking ‘the faith’ (however defined) in the public sphere, on matters of public life. It is different, for example, from a Sunday sermon that discusses some matter of community concern. It is different from position papers published by the various churches’ public questions committees and social service agencies.

One might hope, of course, that historical, systematic and applied theology inform the churches’ preaching, teaching and advocacy on public questions. However, a scholarly article, lecture or university seminar or forum in public theology is a different sort of exercise from a religious sermon or a faith community’s advocacy on a matter of public policy.

Public theology as a form of applied theology is not a direct expression of faith and witness. It is second-order reflection that thinks critically, at this time, in this place, about the meaning and truth of claims expressed and implied by religious faith and witness. It focuses in particular on the ethical and political implications of religious self-understanding and life praxis.

Clearly, public theology is not an easy option for students (or teachers) who want to do something ‘practical’ and less intellectually taxing. It is a properly academic discipline that draws on intellectual resources in philosophy and religious studies, and is grounded in historical and systematic theology and the broader field of applied theology. For the most part, public theology is a subject to come to at the conclusion of one’s theological studies, rather than at the beginning.

What is public theology? It’s critical thinking, with others, about religious faith and public life.

References

Benington, J. 2011. From private choice to public value? In *Public value: Theory and practice*, ed. J. Benington & M. Moore, 31–51. Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Defining critical thinking. 2011. Accessed 23 February 2011 from:
<http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/defining-critical-thinking/766>

Human Rights Commission. 2009. *Statement on religious diversity*. 2nd ed. Wellington, NZ: Human Rights Commission.

Ogden, S. 1986. *On theology*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Ogden, S. 1996. *Doing theology today*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International.

Ogden, S. 2010. *The understanding of Christian faith*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.