

Public Theology and the Modern Social Imaginary

Robert A. Kelly

“Public Theology” has become an important priority for Lutheran churches and theologians in North America over the past decade and is now an important part of the agenda of both the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.¹ At times our enthusiasm for Public Theology has overcome our caution about some of the problems involved in this project. In this paper I would like to examine some of these difficulties in the context of a modern or post-modern, secular, multi-cultural society using some insights from the analysis of the modern social imaginary put forward by Canadian political and social philosopher Charles Taylor. I would also like to use the example of modern secular multiculturalism as it is practiced in Canada as an illustration of both the problems and the possibilities of public theology in one specific context. Reflection on one unique context will give theologians from other unique contexts some ideas that they might develop in their own contexts.

Charles Taylor on the Modern Social Imaginary

Charles Taylor, professor emeritus of philosophy at McGill University in Montreal, has pursued a project of reforming modernity by better understanding its sources and development. The first, most comprehensive contribution was his 1989 book, *Sources of the Self*.² In 2004 he published an expansion of one portion of his 1999 Gifford Lectures³ on living in a secular age entitled *Modern Social Imaginaries*⁴—a term whose meaning will unfold as we proceed.

The analysis that Taylor puts forth in *Modern Social Imaginaries* can, I believe, help us understand the complexities of attempting public theology in a modern, secular, multicultural society influenced by the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the intellectual world within which public theology must be both formulated and heard in Canada.

Three Interpretations of Secularism

In the introduction to *A Secular Age* Taylor indicates three ways one can understand the nature of the changes related to the process of secularization. The first focuses on the significant institutions of a society. In a secular society it is no longer religious institutions that are central to a society’s understanding of itself. Rather it is the state that plays this role, and this state feels no need or desire for any sort of grounding in religious faith or some divine order. Religious institutions may

1. One of the formative statements is Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church: For the Life of the World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

2. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).

3. These lectures were later expanded and published as Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

4. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Public Planet Books (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

well exist—as they do in the United States and Canada—and may even be in some sense “established”—as they are in Europe—but religion is none the less considered part of the private rather than the public sphere. In this understanding, secularization is about emptying public spaces of references to God or ultimate reality. Discussion of important public questions is carried on according to a rationality that is considered “scientific” rather than religious. In this understanding of secularity it does not really matter how serious people may or may not be about their religious beliefs and practices since religion is private and not public. While individuals within a society might be quite religious, a society is secular because its institutions and important decisions are founded on reason rather than faith. Even the United States, whose citizens are so ostensibly religious in poll after poll, is secular in this sense.⁵

A second way to understand secularization focuses on the demise of religion and religious belief. Vestiges of religious rituals may continue as part of public life, but no one actually takes them seriously anymore, except perhaps in some circles as markers of political ideology. In this sense, what is central is the lack of religious belief or practice on the part of the majority of the population. Over time belief in God atrophies and people stop going to church. Eventually religion plays no significant role for the majority even as they carry out the traditional public ceremonies and private rituals.⁶

Taylor believes that there is also a third way to understand secularization that takes up themes from the other two. This third way

would focus on the conditions of belief. The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace . . .

. . . [T]he change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.⁷

As “one human possibility among others” religious commitments are by necessity private rather than public. The public sphere becomes a space where people who have made different choices about religion and other “lifestyle questions” negotiate their differences and attempt to discover sufficient common ground for a society to function. In such a space the criteria for public morality cannot be unique to any specific religion, but must still allow such uniqueness to exist.

If we look at all three of these ways to understand secularization we can see that the process not only affects public space and leads to diminished religious commitment and participation; it also changes the way that religious adherents think of themselves and their faith. For those Lutherans who hold that we are justified by grace through faith in such a way that a free choice of the human will to “accept Jesus as personal Lord and Savior and be born again” is not required, this third understanding creates serious questions not only about our political ethics but also about our core

5. Taylor, *Secular*, 1–2.

6. Taylor, *Secular*, 2.

7. Taylor, *Secular*, 3.

commitment to the doctrine of justification (a topic that I cannot take up here). As Taylor says, “Secularity in this sense is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place.”⁸ To pursue understanding of this third sort of secularity Taylor takes up the question of the “social imaginary.”

What is a Social Imaginary?

It is Taylor’s contention that the process of secularization that has led to modernity in Europe and North America has been accompanied by a change in the social imaginary of peoples in these societies. By the phrase “social imaginary” Taylor is “trying to get at something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode.” Rather, he means “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”⁹ Taylor uses the phrase “social imaginary” rather than “social theory” because (a) he wants to include the “images, stories, legends, etc.” through which ordinary people imagine their social existence, (b) he wants to look at the larger whole of society rather than just the smaller subset of those who work with formal theories, and (c) he wants to examine the common notions that make common practices possible:

Our social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other; the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices which make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice. This understanding is both factual and “normative”¹⁰

Three Aspects of the Modern Social Imaginary

Taylor dates the beginnings of the modern social imaginary to the theory of Natural Law set forth in the writings of Hugo Grotius and John Locke in the seventeenth century. Both develop a “social contract” theory of political society that Grotius bases on the nature of human beings and Locke on the entire natural order. In both cases the normative order of political society is derived from nature and is based on individuals coming together to form a polity. Since it is natural that humans work for the mutual benefit of one other, the whole purpose of society is to facilitate mutual efforts toward security and prosperity. Such security and prosperity can only be pursued in a polity where individual rights and liberties are defended and extended. This results in theories—and eventually in social imaginaries—that are profoundly different from older ideas that were based either in the idea of hierarchical complementarity within a great chain of being or in a notion of an ancient constitution of a people which goes back to some mythical time immemorial.¹¹ This change involved many new and changed notions, but three stand out as especially significant. These are the

8. Taylor, *Secular*, 3.

9. Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 23. Cf. Taylor, *Secular*, 171.

10. Taylor, *Secular*, 172. Cf. Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 23.

11. Taylor, *Secular*, 159–71. Cf. Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 3–22.

economy as an objectified reality, the creation and development of the public sphere and the idea of the sovereign people.

The Economy

The idea of the economy begins with the new understanding of God's Providence that comes along with Grotius' and Locke's understanding of order. In the eighteenth century the notion that human life is designed by a gracious God to produce mutual benefit became an important part of social theory. One way to understand this is in theories like those of Adam Smith in which an "invisible hand" guides selfish agents to produce mutually beneficial results. The invisible hand works because God has designed human actions and attitudes toward the general happiness. As a good engineer, God's efficient causation leads us to exchange advantages through interlocking causes. Thus the individual drive to accumulation of capital tends toward the mutual benefit of the whole nation. The economy is a metaphor of divine Providence, but it is more than a metaphor since "mutual benefit" came to be understood as the security and prosperity that enhance our pursuit of ordinary life in society.¹²

While as theologians we might question whether the economy should occupy a central place in our understanding of social life, we should take seriously the fact that originally there was a strong moral impetus toward just such a development. First, as Taylor points out, people in the eighteenth century believed that commerce and economic activity were a substitute for the nobility's continuing desire for military glory. It was also true that the first half of the seventeenth century had seen devastating wars fought over religion. It was hoped that commerce was the path to peace and order since it could redirect people from the lust for war to the much calmer and more constructive desire to make money. Even Kant believed that the pursuit of economic interests would eventually make war obsolete. Such a harmony is the natural way, the way nature itself is designed.¹³

Whereas the two changes we will examine shortly, the public sphere and popular sovereignty, both posit a collective agency, the understanding of an economy guided by an invisible hand is a denial of collective agency. Economic agents are all individuals acting in their own interest. Whatever is collective happens behind their backs, as it were, through the invisible hand. The assumption that the invisible hand acts as part of an objective system according to discoverable rules gives rise to social science as we know it today. It also creates an unresolved tension within the modern social imaginary between the sort of "individual-within-a-system" agency imagined for the economy and the collective agency of the public sphere and popular sovereignty. This double tension between the individual and collective and between the more scientific and the more humanistic remains within the modern social imaginary and gives rise to a variety of tensions we now face in public policy, in academia and even in theology.

The Public Sphere

12. Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 69–74. Cf. Taylor, *Secular*, 176–80. Taylor discusses the "affirmation of the ordinary" in Taylor, *Sources*, 210ff.

13. Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 74–76. Cf. Taylor, *Secular*, 180.

The second of the extrapolitical and secular spaces that are central to modern notions of society, and the one that is of most significance for public theology, is “the public sphere.” Taylor’s analysis of this development is influenced by Jürgen Habermas¹⁴ and Michael Warner.¹⁵ The idea of the public sphere begins in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a new concept of public opinion developed. Academic life in Western Europe had long been carried out in a single language, Latin, but in the eighteenth century this conversation extended beyond the universities into new types of publications and new venues. These exchanges in periodicals, coffee houses and salons came to be seen as the expression of the informed public opinion of a whole society.¹⁶

That such a phenomenon could appear to its participants as a common public sphere is on the face of it rather odd. The majority of the discussants never met face-to-face, yet whether arguing a point in a Stockholm coffee house, a Parisian salon or a Philadelphia newspaper, they imagined themselves as part of a single discussion. They believed that they were pursuing a common goal— informed, rational public opinion. What Taylor calls the “topical common space” of local and regional gatherings began to come together as the “metatopical common space” of participants in widely separated locales that were regarded as constituting the public sphere.¹⁷

This development relied on technological advances and entrepreneurs of new forms of print media, but there was also more at work. The political theories of Grotius and Locke were based on the idea that the polity was created by consenting individuals in order to pursue some pre-political good. It is not that an already existing people enters into a contract with a ruler (an understanding that might have existed in pre-modern political theories), but, rather, that the people is brought into existence by the act of consent and persists through continuing acts of consent. The way that continuing consent is formed, tested and applied is through discussion and argument in the public sphere. This is the means by which a populace can come to an opinion about public affairs. Informed people engage one another in critical rational debate and move toward some form of agreement. Both because it is the wise course to listen to informed opinion and because there is a moral obligation to “the people,” government is obliged to listen to the discussion in the public sphere and to base its policies and actions on the consensus that emerges through discussion in the public sphere.¹⁸

The modern public sphere is different from the sort of debate that occurred in ancient republics. There the debate was carried on by those who would make the final decision in the assembly as a prelude to making that decision. In the modern public sphere the discussion and the decision are separate from one another. The discussion is in this sense “outside” politics in that it is the informed public, not the politicians, who carries on the discussion. The politicians’ task is to listen to the discussion and to come to a decision based on what emerges in their refracting of the

14. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); ET of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1962).

15. Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

16. Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 83–84.

17. Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 83–84.

18. Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 86–88.

public discussion. Debate about and critique of the politicians' decision then take place in the public sphere. Thus the public sphere, while in this sense is "extra-political," is also the supervisor of and check on political power.¹⁹

In order to perform this function the public sphere had to be a relatively unstructured, extra-political association existing outside of and alongside the state. That people in the eighteenth century often referred to "the republic of letters" gives us a sense of how it was understood at that time. One might be a citizen of a particular state, but one had loyalties to informed, rational living alongside national loyalties. In Western Europe the church had existed for many centuries as an association that demanded some sort of split loyalties, but the public sphere is different—it is radically secular. Here Taylor is using "secular" in its original semantic field of words that express concepts of time. The public sphere assumes that society is about ordinary matters in ordinary time, not about ultimate matters in transcendent time. The discussion carried on in the public sphere has to do with the best ways to pursue the prosperity and security of contemporary society, not with the best ways to reflect celestial hierarchies or the best ways to remember and honor the laws given to us since time immemorial. The focus is entirely on the possibilities for common action in the present, and this focus has moral force since it is understood that the goal of common action is to extend the common good.²⁰ In addition, the standards for argumentation in the public sphere are those that are suited to a secular discussion of common action in ordinary life: common reason. As the modern social imaginary evolved from the eighteenth century to the present this more and more meant the sort of practical reason accepted in scientific discourse.

Popular Sovereignty

The third change that helped create the modern social imaginary is the shift from notions of hierarchy to popular sovereignty. As was mentioned previously, Taylor sees pre-modern societies as based either on notions of a chain of complementary hierarchies or on the idea of the ancient law of a people given to them in mythological time. The idea of complementary hierarchies can be seen, for example, in two writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchies* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*, in which he presents the hierarchies of heaven as a model for the organization of the church. This social imaginary was characteristic of feudal Europe. The hierarchies are complementary because both higher and lower have duties to one another and in an orderly society both fulfill those duties. The idea of the characteristic law of a people is something like the idea of a *Volksnomos* such as is seen in the Roman story of the two brothers Romulus and Remus. In this story Romulus sets the boundaries of the city and is "forced" to kill Remus when he transgresses those boundaries. This story is a caution to those who might consider breaking the ancient laws. An orderly society works within the bounds given to the people in their founding. The two ideas could work independently of or alongside each other in particular societies. In such social imaginaries the role of the people is to fulfill the pattern that has been set in heaven and/or given since time immemorial. The role of the ruler is to occupy the appropriate place in the chain and/or to embody the ancient law of the people.

19. Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 89–90.

20. Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 92–99.

With Grotius and Locke these theories began to break down. Part of the problem was that neither celestial hierarchies nor ancient laws had been able to prevent the disorder of the wars of religion that followed the Reformation. Another factor was that the old social theories had some difficulty in accommodating the new theologies of vocation in ordinary life characteristic of Luther and Calvin and the economic changes involved in the shift from feudalism to capitalism. In their place Grotius and Locke proposed theories that rested on a social contract involving the consent of the participants.

The new ideas did not immediately change the social imaginary. Both the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the beginnings of the American Revolution from 1775 and earlier took their rationale from “the ancient rights of Englishmen,” an idea that reflected both earlier theories. During the course of the American Revolution the rationale changed. In 1776 in the Declaration of Independence Jefferson made reference to the universal rights of humans and by the time of the composition of the constitution of the United States in 1787 the rationale was “We the people . . . , in order to form a more perfect union” War had forced a more radical notion to the fore. As it happened, the notion of popular sovereignty in the United Kingdom and the United States found a set of institutions inherited from older British forms of parliamentary representation that could quite efficiently accommodate and focus popular sovereignty. The legislature became the place where representatives elected by the people made the decisions that reflected the will of the people. Regular elections assured the populace that the representatives were attuned to informed public opinion. A new social imaginary that included such institutions developed.

The development of the new imaginary was much more difficult in France where parliamentary institutions were not nearly so well developed. Taylor believes that the complex idea of representation set forth by Rousseau also contributed to France’s vacillating between republic and monarchy until the twentieth century. Taylor also believes that it was Rousseau’s idea of representation that opened the door to ideas such as the vanguardism of Lenin, which in the end made the development of institutional embodiments of popular sovereignty so difficult for particular societies. The *idea* of popular sovereignty must come to be expressed through vital institutions that provide a generally accepted method for popular sovereignty to function as a system of government.²¹

Today modernity assumes that a polity will in some sense be based on the consent of the people. The people, after due deliberation in the public sphere, come to a conclusion about the best course of action to take to enhance the security and prosperity of the commonwealth. It is then the moral obligation of the polity to implement the will of the sovereign people. Of course in practice the government of the day or other powerful elements of society will often try to gain the consent of the people through propaganda and manipulation, but within societies where the modern social imaginary is dominant even propaganda and manipulation must be carried out as if it is the voice of the people speaking.²² The desire to substitute propaganda for genuine public discussion also corrupts the public sphere.

21. Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 109–41.

22. An excellent guide to the process is Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, CBC Massey Lectures, 1988 (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1989).

Public Theology in the Context of Modern Social Imaginaries: The Example of Canada

Granting that Taylor's analysis is at least partially accurate, modern social imaginaries raise significant complications for public theology in societies where some form of modern social imaginary is dominant or is coming to be influential. To talk about these complications I would like to use the example I know best, Canada, supplemented with the example I used to know best, the United States as refracted through California. Using Canada as an example introduces two distinct characteristics that are important for the discussion of public theology. First, Canada is a secular society and, second, Canada is a self-consciously multicultural and multilingual society.

Modern Canada as a Secular Society

In the early history of what is now Canada, there were churches that were at least *de facto* and perhaps *de jure* established (I say "perhaps" because even in their earliest beginnings the people who became Canadian expressed a great love for ambiguity in law). In Francophone Quebec the Roman Catholic church exercised great influence and in the Anglophone colonies the Church of England in the beginning enjoyed an initial monopoly of government subsidies and the exclusive right to perform marriages. This establishment could not survive the immigration of the early 19th century, but it was still assumed until recently that Protestant and Catholic were the only religious options. Some relics of that establishment still survive. For example, in the province of Ontario where I live there are two tax-funded school systems, "public" and "separate." The "separate" schools are Roman Catholic and operate with their own boards²³. The public schools were originally Protestant and now serve everyone who is not Catholic, and this is all based on the constitutional compromise that allowed the Canadian confederation to come into being in 1867.

Remnants aside, though, since the 1960s Canada has become a thoroughly secular society. During what was known as the "Quiet Revolution" in Quebec attendance at mass dropped from around 80% to less than 20% and the influence of the Roman Catholic church declined accordingly. In Anglophone Canada the process had begun somewhat earlier and was not so drastic since the number of Protestant churches and the presence of Catholic and Orthodox churches had never allowed any one church an influence equivalent to that of the Catholic church in Quebec. Still the final result was the same. As recently as the 1980s the churches of Canada could have a profound impact on the foreign policy of Canada, especially regarding questions such as Canada's relations with South Africa under apartheid. Today the almost unanimous opposition of mainline Canadian churches to Canada's military presence in Afghanistan has no effect whatsoever on the government in Ottawa.

As with so many other social factors, Canada stands somewhere between Western Europe and the United States in its secularity, but is a bit different from either. Canada has no *de jure* established church as various European countries do, though it is probably less secular in certain ways; Canada has no *de jure* separation of church and state as the United States does, though it is probably more secular in certain ways. Many of the people whose grandparents practiced Christianity no longer do so, though they can get quite worked up if someone wants to substitute a turban for the traditional dress headgear of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

23. There are other private and religious schools, but these do not qualify for tax support.

Canadian secularism works somewhat differently in Quebec than in other provinces. In Quebec recently there was a scuffle about Muslim women wearing the *niqab* or *burka* while voting.²⁴ The discussion had similarities to the French argument about wearing the *hijab* in secondary schools. That is, in Quebec there is a defensiveness about secularity similar to what one finds in France: this is a secular society and we must fight to keep it so by limiting public displays of religion. This is part of a much wider debate on what it means to be Quebecois, including an approach to the weight given collective, cultural rights over individual rights that is distinct in North America. It may also be a symptom of residual anti-clericalism directed against the former influence of the Roman Catholic church in public life. In other parts of Canada, Muslim women wearing distinctive clothing may face racism or other forms of discrimination, but the official position is that it is a matter of personal choice based on private religious preference that has no public meaning.²⁵ Secularity is maintained not by defending it as the only public ideology, but by drawing a clear line between what is public and what is private.

Charles Taylor himself has recently borne the brunt of Quebec's distinctive approach by serving as a member of the two-person commission appointed by the Quebec provincial government to study the "accommodation" of ethnic minorities and recent immigrants in Quebec. The public hearings held by the "accommodation commission" demonstrated the deep divide in Quebec society between the advocates and practitioners of multiculturalism on the one side and the descendants of the original *habitants* on the other. At some level the old-line Francophones were voicing ethnocentric sentiments that might be heard in parts of Anglophone Canada, but it has not occurred to any other provincial government to empanel such a commission.

We should also note that, though there are Evangelical Protestants in Canada and have been since the Second Great Awakening, nothing like the so-called "Christian Right" in the United States has developed in Canada. Some of the large American organizations have tried to infiltrate Evangelical churches in Canada and have some influence in certain churches, but they have as yet no national traction. Social life in Canada is consistently more "liberal" than in the United States. Prime Minister Stephan Harper is himself a conservative evangelical, but even as leader of the Conservative Party of Canada he has not overtly brought his religion into the political sphere.²⁶

Modern Canada as Multicultural Society

Multiculturalism became a part of Canadian life in the 1970s and was officially adopted by laws passed in 1981 and 1988. Canadians debate endlessly whether this was a good idea or not and whether it worked or not. Whatever one's position in those debates, no one denies that Canada today is a mosaic of many cultures, languages and religions each with a claim to be heard in the

24. For the Quebec provincial election of 2007 see <http://www.cbc.ca/quebecvotes2007/story/2007/03/23qc-niqab20070322.html>. For the 2007 federal by elections in Montreal see <http://www.cbc.ca/montreal/story/2007/09/06/qc-niqab0906.html>.

25. A question has been raised very recently in a Toronto sexual assault trial in which the judge required the complainant to remove her *niqab* while she testifies. The ruling has been appealed. See <http://thestar.com/article/580790>.

26. Some believe that Harper's pro-Israel position is rooted in his conservative Christianity, but he has not used such a rationale publicly.

public sphere and all Canadians agree that their mosaic approach to these issues is different from the American melting-pot approach.²⁷

Canadian society today is deeply affected by the fact that not only are many people whose grandparents practiced Christianity no longer doing so, but also by the fact that many people who practice religions other than Christianity have come to Canada and they and their children and grandchildren are now fully Canadian. Today in Canada there are more Muslims than there are Lutherans—quite a few more in fact. Islam has passed Judaism as the second largest religion after Christianity in Canada. The numbers of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and people who practice other religions has grown significantly and continues to grow.

Almost all of this growth is from immigration. Canada is now, as it has been throughout its history, dependent on immigration for population and economic growth. In the 2006 census, out of a total of just over six million first-generation Canadians, 15% were from China or the Chinese diaspora and 10% from India, Pakistan or the East Indian diaspora.²⁸ This is a significant shift in sources of immigrants for Canada, which can be seen by comparing these numbers with second generation Canadians, 54% of whom report European origins, with nearly half of those from the British Isles.²⁹ In the city of Toronto (which welcomes about 69,000 immigrants every year) 49% of the population was born outside of Canada and over one third of the population speaks a language other than English in the home. Among Toronto's almost three million people, 116 languages are spoken by at least 10 people and about 7000 people speak a language with less than 10 speakers. We can assume that along with languages come cultures and religions.³⁰

To give you a concrete example of what that means I can point to my own institution, Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, which is a federated college of Wilfrid Laurier University, a publicly funded provincial university in Waterloo, about 100 kilometers west of Toronto. The University was originally Waterloo Lutheran University, but the church could not afford to maintain a comprehensive university and so WLU (without the seminary) became provincial in 1973 and changed its name to honor Canada's first Francophone prime minister. Just last Spring, one of the classrooms in the Seminary building, which is the one building on campus still owned by the church, was dedicated as the University's Multi-faith Prayer Room with both the President/Vice-Chancellor of the University and the Bishop of the Eastern Synod of the ELCIC present and participating. It was equipped with appropriate plumbing so that those groups who practice ritual cleansings before prayer could do so. The room is bare of religious symbols, but each group which uses the room has a locker where they can keep their symbols to place when they are actually using

27. Do not infer from this that Canada is free from racism. There remains significant racism directed first of all against aboriginal Canadians, but also against Afro-, Indo-, and Asian-Canadians. The prejudice against Muslims which has infected many Western countries also affects Canada. Anti-Semitism also continues to be an issue.

28. Statistics Canada, *Canada's Ethnocultural Mosaic, 2006 Census* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2008), 10, [Http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/analysis/ethnicorigin/pdf/97-562-XIE2006001.p](http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/analysis/ethnicorigin/pdf/97-562-XIE2006001.p).

29. Statistics Canada, *Mosaic*, 9.

30. City of Toronto website: http://www.toronto.ca/toronto_facts/diversity.htm. Accessed April 4, 2008, 11:39 AM. Toronto *Star* website: http://www3.thestar.com/static/PDF/20071230_ID06.pdf. Accessed April 4, 2008, 11:55 AM.

the room. The seminary is hosting the multi-faith prayer room because the public university was unable to negotiate the intricacies of inter-faith protocol. The University was not sure how it could both maintain its secular, Enlightenment values and also address the needs of a growing segment of its student body. The Seminary offered its space as a way for both the values of secularism and multiculturalism to be honored. As a part of this effort the seminary also hosts a regular “Abrahamic Forum” where Jews, Muslims, and Christians gather to discuss issues of mutual interest and importance. What was once seen as the last bastion of Lutheranism on an increasingly secular campus has in actuality become the multicultural, multireligious enabler.

Questions for Public Theology in Such a Context

The story of the Multifaith Prayer Room, I think, illustrates at least one possibility for Christian public theology in a contemporary secular, multicultural society, namely the opportunities inherent in the biblical call to hospitality as a public mandate. It also illustrates at least one problem, for there were theological students who objected that the role of Christians in relation to those who practice other religions ought to be evangelization rather than hospitality. This possibility/tension pair grows out of the nature of Christian theology itself. I would like to discuss a tension that grows out of the practice of public theology in the context of a secular, multicultural social imaginary, namely, the place of Christian theologians in the discussions of the public sphere.

What Taylor presented in *Social Imaginaries* was something of an idealized portrait of the public sphere as it existed in the eighteenth century. In such a public sphere quite clearly the place of Christian public theology will be different from what it was prior to 1700, but there will still be a role for Christian theologians who can learn to speak the language of secular discourse. Particularly in a multicultural context, theologians will have the same access to the public sphere as any other cultural group. Our point of view will not always carry the day, but we will be able to speak our piece in the public dialogue. In instances where Christian theologians can make alliances with scholars of other religions or of no religion our voices might well be amplified. We would need to present arguments that count as public rather than private in a secular society. We could not argue points from Scripture or other purely Christian sources but would need to develop arguments using a rationality generally accepted as objective, but a functioning public sphere could not by definition exclude any who have a rational, informed, publicly accessible argument to present.

We would, as stated, need to learn to express our views in the language of and using the canons of argumentation acceptable in the public sphere, and herein lies a tension for Christian theologians. At the basis of whatever insights we might offer in the modern public sphere is the belief that God is uniquely revealed in the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth and in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. As specifically Lutheran theologians we also base our theological and moral claims on the belief that human life is affirmed and redeemed in the unconditional promise revealed in the cross as God’s inmost heart. We also believe that the public sphere is itself part of God’s good creation and a unique gift of God’s justice for the preservation of life. None of these beliefs are publicly accessible to empirical observation or practical experience and therefore none of these bedrock assumptions count as reasons in the public sphere.³¹ How is it possible for a Lutheran theologian to make public claims that do not assume the Gospel even when one believes (as

31. This is why a church producing statements on social issues for members of congregations is a very different task than doing public theology or being a public church. The standards for what counts as rational are different.

Lutherans do³²) that the public sphere has its own integrity as part of God's creation? Yet, if we are to enter into public conversations in a secular, multicultural society, we must learn how to make our claims in a way that they can be heard as having some universal, rational validity that can be understood and potentially accepted by practitioners of other religions and of no religion. There is a serious tension here. That may be why some Christian ethicists such as Stanley Hauerwas have despaired of making such public arguments for Christian ethics. As alluring as such positions can be, I do not think that we as Lutheran theologians have the luxury of following Hauerwas and others of like mind. It might well be that the Gospel forces us into a countercultural position, but a Lutheran, Gospel-based counterculture is one, it seems to me, that must remain paradoxically fully engaged with the world and the public sphere.³³ In order to be so engaged as public theologians in societies where the modern social imaginary is influential we may be called to walk a difficult path of discovering rational, scientific arguments for moral, political and economic positions that we have taken on the basis of faith commitments. This might well be a problem that does not lend itself to a prior, theoretical solution, but one that must be worked through in each specific instance where a theologian or a church is called to make a contribution to public discussion of an important topic.

That is how it might work in an ideal public sphere. The actuality of the modern public sphere in Canada as in many parliamentary democracies is somewhat different. At some point in the last century or so, those who see themselves as the natural governing class realized that it would benefit them and what they thought best for society if they used the developing techniques of advertising and propaganda³⁴ to convince the supposedly sovereign public to support their policies. This is not to say that political parties were at one time paragons of honesty and transparency and have somehow become corrupted—not in the least! It is to say that technological changes in communications media and in techniques of public relations have made not just a quantitative difference from the past, but also a qualitative difference.³⁵ The result is that the public sphere is not simply a place where informed people discuss the best course of action for the practice of ordinary life using reasoned argumentation, but a space where competing propagandas jostle with

32. Here is one place where Lutheran theologians and churches may have an advantage over other Christian theologians, especially in the generically Reformed atmosphere of North America. We do not believe that our task is to Christianize society. The "Christ transforming culture" (to use H. Richard Niebuhr's term) assumption which drives American Protestantism in particular, it seems to me, is behind the problems many conservative Evangelicals have in alienating large segments of the population through their public theology.

33. I have argued this point more fully elsewhere. Cf. Robert A. Kelly, "Lutheranism as Counterculture? The Doctrine of Justification and Consumer Capitalism," in *Justification in the World's Contexts: Documentation No. 45* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2000), 209–12; originally published in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 24, no. 6 (December 1997): 496–505.

34. For a discussion of the impact of technique/technology on society in general see Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson, introd. by Robert K. Merton (New York: Vintage Books, 1967) and Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980). Ellul applies this analysis to propaganda specifically in Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Random House, Vintage, 1973).

35. On how changes in media impact society see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 2d ed., reprint, 1964 (New York: New American Library, Signet, 1966) whose insights are extended in Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Elisabeth Sifton Books (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

ideologically weighted entertainment for the allegiance of an increasingly ill-informed audience. In Canada this situation is exacerbated in that our media landscape is dominated by our larger neighbor to the south. Except for the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) the majority of programs shown in Canada are produced in the United States. Cable and satellite provide direct access to the big American networks and cable news providers. In Canada we are free to watch Fox News, but not Al Jazeera.

The consequences for public discourse of any kind in the United States and Canada were summarized quite well in 2005 by Thomas de Zengotita in *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It*.³⁶ In a world so saturated by media that are fundamentally just different entertaining mechanisms to get us to watch commercials, our attention span for serious issues has become shorter and shorter. Even more disturbing for any practice of public theology is that we are not just a society of watchers. We have all become performers, so that what we present to the world is a representation, an image of ourselves. The public sphere is not just dueling sound-bites, it is dueling images of sound-bites.

The point that de Zengotita is trying to make can be illustrated by my experience watching the conventions of the two American political parties this past summer. I have made it my policy to watch the CSPAN coverage, which we receive in Canada on CPAC, the Parliamentary Channel. CSPAN simply shows everything that happens on the podium. There are no anchors, no commentators, no experts. Four years ago I discovered that one gets a very different view of the convention than one would get on network or cable news channels. Of course convention speeches are themselves often exercises in spin and propaganda, but on CSPAN one gets the convention. On network and cable news one gets a great deal of the commentators' image of the convention and very little of the convention itself. Watching the commentators one is told what is really happening and what it really means. At the same time the channels are dueling with each other for viewership and so the glitzy technology, emotional images and created crises are pushed to the fore. The actual convention recedes into the background and the notion that the viewer might be allowed to think for him or herself is out of the question.

In such a context it is entirely possible that no matter how high the quality of our public theology and no matter how skillfully we put our arguments, there is actually no one listening. If no one is listening, then what we produce cannot be *public* theology. I want to make clear that the fear I am articulating here is not just that we fall might victim to the rush to the least common denominator that inevitably occurs when a society's communication media are dominated by the need to make a profit through selling audiences to advertisers. Certainly the sort of religion and politics that often appears on TV is a problem, but the problem I fear is far deeper. The problem is not just that the place we might claim in the public sphere is occupied by others; it is that the sort of space for public discourse that public theology might once have claimed no longer exists. Not only has the audience been attracted to others who are more entertaining, but the place from which a serious theologian might address an audience is gone, thus making anything like public theology impossible in the North American context.

36. Thomas de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005).

I wish that I had a good solution to this problem, but I do not. It is a much more difficult issue than the question of how we argue using secular reason. It is just possible, at least in North America, that there is no public capable of hearing what a public theologian has to say. Even in the recent presidential campaign in the United States the majority of people did not vote for one well-argued set of policies over another well-argued set of policies. The majority voted for an image of hope and some nebulous something labeled “change” after eight years of incompetence and prevarication (which, of course, the majority had voted for four years previously). Serious discussion of public issues finds little if any room on network or cable television and less and less room in fewer and fewer newspapers. What is a theologian to do?