

Speaking of God in public: 'Which God? Which public?'

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Introduction

I suppose I had better be honest from the outset. The questions in the title are more title than questions, or at least more questions to make a point than to be answered with any sense of absolutism. After all, talking of God is about dialogue and a true dialogue will enable the exploration of questions. Ideas will rebound and we will learn more about self and other. In this context, I hope we will learn a little more about God and God's good creation.

That, you may feel, is a rather unfortunate position from which to begin and I shall understand if some of you wish to leave now. After all, surely when speaking of God in public we want a degree of certainty – don't we? It is the case that we need clarity and we need to be certain, but not to the extent that we have ceased to be open to change, open to the endless possibilities of transformation that conversation should bring about. So I want this evening to pay some attention to the twin pillars of this series; that is, speaking **about** God **in** public. Alister McGrath, in his book *Mere Apologetics*, says that the fundamental principles for Christians speaking of God in public are "what they always have been:

1. Understand the Christian gospel.
2. Understand the context within which you are doing apologetics.
3. Develop apologetic approaches that are faithful to the gospel and build on the 'common ground' or 'points of contact' with the cultural context."¹

Which God?

We need, as much as possible, to be clear about our belief in God. That, I think, is a given in the task of speaking about God. But there is a caveat already. Our encounter with God will change us, and we shall learn more and more about God and our belief will need to be rearticulated as our encounter goes on. Seeking to understand the nature of God is vital, not

¹ McGrath, Alister E., *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Sceptics Find Faith* (London: SPCK, 2016, originally printed in the USA in 2012), p. 35.

simply because we endeavour to learn more of God, but because we seek to grow in ever-closer communion with God and with one another. We seek to know more of God, for God's very nature teaches us something about our nature. From the classical Old Testament formulation that we are made in the image of God, to the proclamation of the New Testament epistles that 'Jesus is Lord' – in both of those statements we find formulations for how we speak of God in public. We find in those definitions some basic points about how we trust each other, care for each other and live in the creation God has made.

Which public?

As to the other pillar of this series, we need to be clear about the public space into which we are speaking, the public of which we are a part. The greatest mistake the Church can make is to believe that the community in which it is planted has not changed, and never will. That we need to remind ourselves of that mistake speaks volumes. Being clear about 'the public' is vital because we need to be alert to the nature of the contexts in which we live and have our being. Context is all – and so listening to our contexts enables us to be faithful, to be authentic, to be honest – and of course to learn more of God's creation. God has, after all, arrived in a place long before we do.

Having posed two questions, we must not treat them as if they were self-contained spheres of life, as if somehow God belongs in one place and the public belong somewhere else. Belief in an incarnational God is endlessly public, not because we parade our piety before our neighbours, but because of what we believe about God and God's presence in the world. Moreover, for all that we might be told about the decline of the Church, religious belief continues to attract public comment. Whether this is the courts being asked to rule on the wearing of religious symbols, or the admission policies of Religious Schools, or the words of Jesus appearing on the sides of London buses.

The Statement of the Methodist Conference on the Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice – Called to Love and Praise – makes it clear that: "If we are to answer the fundamental questions about the Church, it is necessary to reflect first on

God's relation to the world and his presence in it."² An understanding of God will shape all manner of activities for the Christian; our understanding of God will shape our view of the world, or the public in our title. Simple as this point is to make, diverse beliefs in God and a range of understandings of the nature of God will result in diverse approaches to engagement with public life. Here are two examples.

A tale of two obituaries

In one week in September 2016 there appeared in the pages of *The Times* two obituaries of men who had been shaped by belief in God. The first, on 5 September 2016, was that of the Right Revd David Jenkins, former Bishop of Durham and son of a Methodist minister.³

Jenkins, you may recall, was frequently nicknamed the "unbelieving bishop." Although he professed a deep and life-long faith in God, he said that "being a bishop, expected to repeat official dogmas framed for another age, brought him "nearer to atheism" than anything in his life, and he found the quarrelsome certainties of his critics repellent." Many people struggled with his willingness to consider seriously the claims of atheism and his public suggestion that the account in the Bible of the virgin birth was symbolic, rather than literally true. The obituary reports that he "welcomed women who believed they had a vocation to ordination, homosexuals who did not regard their orientation as sinful and questioners who doubted that the whole Bible was literal history."

The second obituary, the following day, was that of the Revd Tim LaHaye, who was described as the "bigoted leader of America's religious right, who influenced Reagan and the Bushes and made a fortune from apocalyptic novels."⁴ The article begins: "Among the many groups that the Rev Tim LaHaye abhorred were homosexuals, feminists, liberals in favour of gun control and abortion, liberals generally, Jews, the UN, Catholics, people who believed that the world was more than 6,000 years old, Methodists, communists, Darwinists and anyone who read Harry Potter." The article gleefully condemns LaHaye's views as bigoted

² Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes., *Called to Love and Praise: The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999), para. 2.1.1.

³ Subsequent references to this article are taken from: *Obituary: The Right Rev David Jenkins*. Available online: www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-right-rev-david-jenkins-f6vhtsc8t [accessed 10 May 2017]

⁴ This and subsequent references to this article are taken from: *Obituary: The Rev Tim LaHaye*. Available online: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-rev-tim-lahaye-nq5rgqfwh> [accessed 10 May 2017]

and absurd, but reflects a rather grudging admiration for his sheer confidence in espousing them. In 2003, the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals described LaHaye as the most influential active Christian leader in the US, which (the author suggests) must have really annoyed Billy Graham.

These two obituaries reflect two men whose faith shaped their own lives and the lives of those around them; two men who spoke publicly and frequently about God; two men whose relationship with the gospel and with the world resulted in strikingly different views of the points of contact between the gospel and the world. The latter should not distract us too greatly (at least today); there will be a divergence of views. Such divergence can, of course, appear to muddy the waters of any public comment the Church seeks to make, and I do not want to underestimate how difficult that can be.

David Jenkins and Tim LaHaye represent two very different approaches to these points of contact between the gospel we seek to proclaim and the social context in which we live and move, and pray.

David Jenkins chose to immerse himself fully in the cares and concerns of the world and was willing to question what he called “official dogmas” of the Church in light of this experience. He famously clashed with Margaret Thatcher over the plight of miners in the north east, whom he often joined on their marches during the strike. His sermon at his enthronement at Durham included a plea for the miners and for the unemployed, and received a spontaneous round of applause from those assembled in the cathedral. His obituary remarked that: “The Church authorities apologised to Ten Downing Street for Jenkins’s blunt words, but the miners’ families, devastated by the costs of the lengthy strike and the threats to close down the mining industry, never forgot that here was a bishop prepared to be unpopular with the powerful and to speak out in public.” When speaking out, he did so as one grounded firmly in the love of God and in the world that God so loves. This grounding meant that he was unafraid to question the teachings and traditions of the Church, often in a very public space. His obituary notes that: “Jenkins believed it was his missionary duty to encourage questioning thought about faith and to welcome the transformation of human life achieved by science.”

LaHaye, on the other hand, stood in many ways as a fierce critic of the world around him. Despite being a key influence in the realm of American politics, he nevertheless created a careful distance between his faith and the things of this world – a distance perhaps encapsulated in his focus on the rapture and the “Left Behind” series of novels that sold over 60 million copies. His default position appears to have been in opposition, rather than alongside.

Both approaches, of course, generated an enormous response. Jenkins was nothing if not controversial, but one “admiring Scottish engineer wrote to say that they were all now discussing the nature of the Resurrection in the pubs at Rosyth.” LaHaye founded the American Coalition for Traditional Values, one of the most influential lobby groups in America. Politicians knew that his endorsement would bring with it the votes of millions of American Christians.

We see from the briefest of overviews of those two individuals that what we claim about God influences not only the life of a follower of Christ, but the totality of the world view. So the following chorus will simply not do:

You can weigh an elephant’s auntie,
you can weigh a pedigree flea,
but you can’t weigh up all the love that Jesus has for me, me, me,
that Jesus has for me.⁵

It is not the bit about the flea I object to – I think that is rather good – my objection is the reductionism to a dangerous obsession with me, me, me. God is about more than me; God, you might say, is public. At one point during his episcopal ministry, David Jenkins made a speech at the General Synod of the Church of England about the nature of belief. The speech was part of a wider debate about church order, in the particular case of the ordination of women. He (and others, I am glad to say) were concerned to avoid

⁵ Brown, Chris., *You can weigh an elephant's auntie* © 1988 Oxford University Press.

reductionism in the life of the Church. He was anxious not to reduce God to an exhibit in an argument. He was anxious to avoid reductionism of engagement with society, and reductionism in our understanding of how God calls human beings into closer communion. It is worth, just for a moment or two, noting what he said.

He addresses the question (underpinning other debates): “Is our God worth believing in?” and goes on to explore the ‘physical miracles’ of the incarnation and the resurrection.⁶ He argues that if the Church insists on the ‘divine laser-beam’ type of miracle (a “directly divinely induced transformation of the physical”) then we are portraying a God who is “at the best a cultic idol and at the worst the very devil.”⁷ A God who “prefers a few selected worshippers to all the sufferers of our world” is not worth believing in.⁸ So, he is at pains to stress that it is not that God *cannot* operate a ‘divine laser-beam’ but rather that God should not be pinned down to a certain type of miracle. “We are always wanting to pin God down by getting things cut and dried and decisive. God is always wanting to set us free to share in the mystery and the suffering of creation, freedom and redemption.”⁹

What might disturb our patterns of church life is that being faithful to tradition means acknowledging God’s activity in the world today – that God continues to produce “miracles of collaboration and transcendence.”¹⁰ Yet, and again this is vital to the nature of the Church, God is not triumphalistic and does not have a triumphalistic Church. We must not claim or behave as if we know exactly what God is like and what God wants. “There is a church of God but there is no God of the church... He identifies himself with us and saves us, but he is sovereign, free, glorious and mysterious.”¹¹

As you can see from Jenkins, in asking the question, ‘Which God?’ I have laid myself something of a trap. ‘Sovereign, free, glorious and mysterious...’ do not lend themselves as being overly open to definition. Then again, perhaps that is something of the point. We

⁶ Jenkins, David E., ‘The Nature of Christian Belief’, in *God, Miracle and the Church of England* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1987), p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7

could lay claim to all manner of definitions; holy, merciful, omnipotent, loving, gracious, consubstantial, the list could go on and indeed attention to classical understandings of God is important in the field of theological development. However, in understanding the Christian gospel as we embark on the task of speaking of God we are, I hope, conveying something of the vitality of the conversation. Speaking of God will not be easy, offering defence of the faith is not going to be a simple task. Not because of a hostile world – it might be, not because no one is listening – I think people are listening. It is a curious and a consuming task because as Jenkins puts it: “Above all we need to pray very earnestly that God will, of his very great mercy, spare us the ultimate humiliation and horror of discussing him and deciding about the ordering of a part of his church in ways which deny his mystery, his freedom, his infinite openness and his incredibly suffering love.”¹²

I want now to turn (more briefly) to the other question, ‘Which public?’

It is a question that requires yet more caution. St Catherine of Sienna writes: “If you want to be truly pure in soul, you must avoid passing any judgment on your neighbours as well as idle gossip about what they might have done. You should see nothing but God’s will in everyone. You should not judge people in any way, and you should not be ready to condemn them, even if they are open sinners. Instead, you should feel compassion for them and pray for them, and not feel superior to them or blame them.”¹³

Because of what we believe of and know of God we start from the basis that we are standing on holy ground. That all humans are made in the image of God – and that, therefore, brings with it all sorts of challenges (or do we mean difficulties?). There are challenges when we are confronted by activity that is so profoundly ungodlike, so demeaning of human care, so void of dignity that we struggle to have any understanding at all of anything made in the image of God. But that is not the area of attention here, vital as it is that the Church pays more attention to issues of theodicy. My concern here is that we take seriously McGrath’s point that it is important that we understand the context within which you are doing apologetics. Paying careful attention to our varied contexts is vital if we

¹² Ibid., p. 9.

¹³ From *Consecrated Spirits*, ed. Felicity Leng (Paulist Press, 2011). Quoted in *The Tablet* (29 April 2017), p. 18.

are first going to understand a particular public, and second have anything to say that is of value, impact and worth. Our credibility will in no small part be defined by our ability to understand and to engage. Our willingness to leave the place of familiarity so as to learn more about the unfamiliar will determine how credible we are. There is at the very least something of a non-conformist heritage to rediscover here. We might think of Silvester Thorne, minister of City Temple and Liberal MP who declared in 1911 that his task was not to follow John the Baptist into the wilderness, but Christ into society. For many he, and people like Hugh Price Hughes, spoke of the social engagement of nonconformity at its very best.

Engaging and interacting with the ideas of our culture – rather than standing in confident opposition to them – necessitates a certain vulnerability. Miroslav Volf uses the metaphor of embrace to speak about engagement, interaction and welcome – he explores Paul’s invitation to the Romans to “welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Romans 15:7).¹⁴ He suggests that God’s welcome entails: “(1) the mutuality of self-giving love in the Trinity (the doctrine of God), (2) the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross for the ‘godless’ (the doctrine of Christ) [and] (3) the open arms of the “father” receiving the “prodigal” (the doctrine of salvation).”¹⁵ The calling upon the Church, therefore, to extend the welcome of Christ, involves “the will to give ourselves to others and “welcome” them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, [which] is prior to any judgement about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity.”¹⁶ True engagement, true embrace, necessitates a willingness to question ourselves and to be changed and transformed. Volf argues that “a genuine embrace cannot leave both or either completely unchanged.”¹⁷

It was in 1974 that the Conference noted; “The question is not: ‘Have we the resources to teach others what we know of Christ?’, but, ‘Have we the grace to receive what he wishes to teach us through Christians who in many languages and a bewildering variety of

¹⁴ Volf, Miroslav., *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 28-9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

churchmanship proclaim him as Lord?”¹⁸ That point was made by Colin Morris in the Report of the Overseas Division to the Conference. It was addressing the willingness (or lack thereof) of the Conference to learn from what we would now call partner churches. The question might now be asked: ‘Have we the grace and the skill to receive an understanding of God’s creation that is present in a bewildering variety of disciplines and social contexts?’ Indeed, have we the ability not simply to hear from the scientist and then add a theological text as if that is somehow making a Christian comment, but rather have we the ability to take what one might call the raw experience of human beings and give some thought to how God is present and what the gospel might require us to observe, what Christ calls us to do and be in response?

In one of his Holy Week Lectures this year, the Archbishop of Canterbury observed: “... what we are to become as a nation is at this time especially open to choice and decision, and thus what the church has to show in itself and point to in its advocacy and example (and the church is of course all of us, not the institution) is the extravagant, gratuitous love that is the Kingdom of God and which when even palely absorbed into human society is the root and flower of human flourishing.”¹⁹ And that was before we at least knew about the General Election. The tone of the campaign to date, the apparent suspicion of public office, and the apathy towards the local elections would certainly seem to suggest that we might have to wrestle with some pretty basic questions about society. Yet, we wrestle with the task because the cross on the ballot paper is not the only cross in the world.

Prof Graham Ward observes that: “The church is hardwired into the world; that is where it works out its vision and its mission, however that vision and that mission are interpreted. Whatever action the church undertakes, whatever proclamations it makes, is located in the world’s times and spaces, its histories, its societies, its cultures, its languages, and its

¹⁸ Cited in *Bullet-Point Belief: The Best of Colin Morris*, ed. Rosemary Foxcroft (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2007), p. 137.

¹⁹ *The Archbishop's 1st Holy Week Lecture: 'Are we together for more than we can get out of it?'* Available online: <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5853/the-archbishops-1st-holy-week-lecture-are-we-together-for-more-than-we-can-get-out-of-it> [accessed 10 May 2017]

ideologies.”²⁰ To put it rather starkly, now is the only moment we have in which to name God.

To some extent the Church, any local church, has a problem if it needs to be too explicit in asking ‘which public?’ Rather, the question will be ever-present as the community of those who follow Christ take seriously the context in which they live and work and – crucially – pray. If we need to spend too long on answering the question we may very well be failing in the task of ensuring that we are immersed in the world which God has made. The Church is, after all, in the business of celebrating God’s presence with God’s world. In our Eucharistic worship we are offering to God the whole world of creation. As if that were not enough, when we speak of the world we are expressing our belief that the world is one. So, when we speak of the world we are making some clear points about the interdependence of human life, and that has a profound impact on how we order our economies, our care for the environment, the production of food, education, social care, gender equality, human dignity – the list goes on. The public, we might say, is all that God has created. The church’s neighbourhood is quite simply God’s neighbourhood.

It may be that this second question is more complicated, or difficult, than the first for the simple reason that there is no narrow definition of the public. There is an expansive community in which and with which to speak of God. That, however, does not mean that we are so immersed in whatever political or social issues are grabbing the headlines. To return to Graham Ward: “... insofar as the church is a public and material manifestation of that which transcends the world – the operations of God in Christ with respect to redemption – the church’s actions and speech address the world from a point beyond it. The church speaks and acts *in the name of*. And so the politics of Christian living in the world both reflects and critiques the values, emphases, and trajectories of its histories, its societies, its cultures, its languages, and its ideologies.”²¹ We speak of God in public because that is where God is. And we speak of God in public because God cares for God’s good creation and

²⁰ Ward, Graham., *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (London: SCM Press, 2009), p. 24.

²¹ Ibid.

our speaking is to proclaim some of that reality. Our speaking has the possibility to enable the celebration of the human race, made in the image of God.

To conclude

An exploration of some concepts of God was the theme of Hugh Price Hughes' final sermon, preached the day before he died. Of all the points he makes in the sermon it is perhaps the last which is of greatest interest for us in the task of speaking of God. Hughes articulates the reality of our place as sons and daughters of God. You cannot get much more basic than that. You cannot say anything much more profound about our fellow humans than our belonging one to another in the image of God. I am not sure he would have understood any of our anxieties about defining the 'public.' Hugh Price Hughes simply immersed himself in whatever topic required attention. Why would the Church not speak to inform civic life? To put it in the words of another Superintendent of this Circuit, Neville Ward would have said 'Do you see what I see? Endless possibilities!' And that merely after a walk around this small part of God's neighbourhood. For Hughes, the Forward Movement, indeed the totality of his ministry, was underpinned by a theology rooted in the Wesleyan tradition. For him his theology was an expression of evangelicalism, orthodox, catholic and sacramental life all renewed by the holiness tradition. In short because of the God whom he encountered, his work, our work, is expanded by a concept of the Kingdom of God that is considerably greater than the Church, even his beloved Methodism.

We should perhaps recall the advice he offered to young ministers in response to one approach (with which we might resonate): "We are in perplexity, we cannot go on." He responded, "There is no cause for dismay, but feed upon Christ in your heart and go on studying and thinking. At this moment Christ is nearer and more real to me than you are."²² So the prophetic pioneer gives a hint for how we do any of our tasks – feed upon Christ, and from that food we shall have a new knowledge of God and something with which to offer food to others.

²² Hughes, Dorothea Price., *The Life of Hugh Price Hughes* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), p. 657.

A former probationer in this Circuit, Kenneth Wilson concludes his book *Learning to Hope – The Church and the Desire for Wisdom* in a tone that Hughes might not immediately recognise – but with a theological truth with which I think he would concur, and one which we need to give expression to: “You can’t keep a good God down, can you? You can try but no; he is risen! He is risen, indeed! If only we believed it, life would be so much more fun.”²³

²³ Wilson, Kenneth., *Learning to Hope – The Church and the Desire for Wisdom* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2006), p. 131.