

PUBLIC THEOLOGY: PRESUPPOSITIONS, PUBLICS, AND A TENTATIVE PROPOSAL

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The Lilly Summer Fellows Program on “The Religiously Affiliated University/College and the Public Theology of Their Students” provided the opportunity for twelve participants from varying Christian backgrounds to discuss the topic of ‘public theology,’ specifically within the context of our given institutions of higher learning.¹ Our discussions, sometimes groping and frequently animated, revealed a broad spectrum of presuppositions about the nature, arena, and possibilities for the conduct of public theology. The assigned readings and presentations initiated much dialogue and raised a number of questions about which a consensus at times was not forthcoming.

This paper addresses several continuing areas of ambiguity identified by the participants in the seminar. In particular, this paper attempts to clarify my own presuppositions about the topic, to identify more determinative aspects of the ‘publics’ with whom I am in dialogue and the parameters of dialogue which they present, and to propose possible strategies for extending public theological dialogue in these contexts. As such, the paper does not claim to be directly applicable to others whose approach to the project of public theology is characterized by differing presuppositions and contexts. However, it is my hope that any clarity brought to my own situation may prove useful for others.

The discussion is divided into three parts. The first focuses on the ‘theological’ aspect of public theology by identifying my presuppositions about the topic, establishing a working definition of public theology, and proposing a model of public theology for subsequent discussion. The second part concentrates on three particular ‘publics’ who constitute my major dialogue partners. This discussion offers preliminary observations concerning the conduct of public theology in these arenas. The third part weaves together various threads of the previous discussion and offers a proposal for a new basis for public theological dialogue.