Chapter Two

The Power of Lies and the Lies of Power

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The present political and social context—the context of webthink, Twitter rants, cyberdemocracy, and eGovernment—is engulfed in intellectual turmoil, making this a kairos moment for the public theologian to stand up courageously for factual truth, evidence-based reasoning, self-criticism, and fairness in judgment. Theologians can thank the scientific community for maintaining a rigorous reverence for factual knowledge that complements faith’s thirst for ultimate truth.

Here is the problem from the scientist’s point of view: “This new and open model [the Internet] has given anyone with web access a global platform to propagate information that is mistakenly or intentionally false. This is especially problematic when it comes to scientific information, which is critical to rational policy-making in areas like health, environmental protection, and national security, and at its best is often misinterpreted by the lay public.”1

The post-truth political island defended by Washington, DC, is awash in a sea of public communication influenced if not dominated by the webmind. The webmind is deluged by a relentless flood of worldviews, claims, counter-claims, disinformation, and fabricated lies disguised as facts. Inside the webmind we find a free-for-all. “Former distinctions between state, civil society and citizenship are becoming increasingly blurred. The political landscape is one of a ‘mixed polity’ in which models from the legacy of modernity coexist with postmodern novelties to form a welter of jurisdictions, networks and domains, some defined in terms of recognized territories, some defined in formal institutional terms, some based on interests and affinities, some constituted online, but many defined in hybrid terms.”2
Here is the good news: No one is marginalized in the era of cyberdemocracy with its inescapable pluralism. During the increasingly effete modern period, believers were excluded from the public square, sequestered in a ghetto of subjective perspective, arbitrary authority, or private opinion. Now, because of pluralism, the public square may be opening up again to religious contributions. A politically sober church should ready itself to engage in this communications free-for-all with a rational and prophetic message that, due to its own inherent integrity, has a good chance of gaining rightful attention. Further, courageous religious leaders should offer aid, comfort, and support to scientists who defend evidence-based facts against current threats to psychic peace and social stability.

Despite the disarray and unreliability of electronic media, people everywhere ask existential questions to which theologians can in non-authoritarian ways tender meaningful answers. This makes public theology pastoral and apologetic right along with being prophetic. I assign to the public theologian five tasks: pastoral, apologetic, scientific, political, and prophetic. Each requires of the public theologian argumentation that appeals to general human experience, relies upon demonstrable fact, argues reasonably, divorces itself from ideology or advertising, and edifies all sincere parties in the conversation. All persons of goodwill—critical thinkers who may be atheists, agnostics, or scholars within various religious traditions—should find the present situation one that calls for a shared dedication to truth.

The concept of public theology is best articulated by University of Chicago’s David Tracy, who states the obvious: “All theology is public discourse.” As reflection on faith, theology dare not limit itself to the private musings of clerics in the sacristy or seminarians in the pub. Theology by its very nature is openly shared, transparent, and available in the church, the academy, and the wider society. “Theology is distinctive among the disciplines for speaking to and from three distinct publics: academy, church, and the general culture.” In short, theology is public discourse on the implications of the faith that takes place where the entire world can overhear. Here is the constructive proposal I set before us: Public theology is conceived in the church, reflected on in the academy, and meshed with the world for the sake of the world. Specifically, in the present context the public theologian can remind all three publics that allegiance to reason and truth is necessary for sanity. The public theologian should defend truth and fact in alliance with scientists and others who demand integrity in public discourse and policy.

Theologist Lisa Stenmark helps set the agenda for the public theologian committed to both truth and fact: “The role of truth and fact in public life is similar to that of justice—it is a threat to politics, but it is necessary for the stability of the world that makes politics possible.”
PUBLIC THEOLOGY IS CONCEIVED IN THE CHURCH

For Christians, theology is conceived in the Church when interpreting biblical revelation in light of critical reason in ever-changing cultural contexts. For Dharma disciples among Hindu and Buddhists and adherents of other great faiths such as Judaism, Islam, Taoism, and Confucianism, the equivalent of theology is drawn from a lengthy tradition that has garnered wisdom and insight over millennia. More importantly, each of these axial traditions share one item essential for the present situation, namely, the idea that truth is grounded in what is transcendent, eternal, even divine. The judgment of the temporal in light of the eternal provides leverage. Leverage is gained by a commitment to a source of truth independent of the historically specific context within which one must render judgments. It is not necessarily the content of eternal truth that obtains here; rather, what matters is the religious morality of knowledge. Truth has an eternal valance despite any and all ephemeral claims. Religious voices bring the deep past to bear on the present shallow cacophony of communication and miscommunication.

At the historical origin of most living religious traditions we find an originary experience with transcendence articulated symbolically, sometimes in one or more written texts. For Christians this original symbolic articulation is found in the Bible, whereas for Taoists it’s found in the Daodejing and related documents. David Tracy labels this original instantiation, the classic. What we designate as theology begins with the task of interpreting the classic. The term classics may be “defined as those texts which form communities of interpretation and are assumed to disclose permanent possibilities of meaning and truth.” All theology, whether ancient or contemporary, is hermeneutical in the sense that it consists first and foremost of an interpretation of one or more classics. “My thesis is that what we mean in naming certain texts, events, images, rituals, symbols, and persons ‘classics’ is that here we recognize nothing less than the disclosure of a reality we cannot but name truth.” By faith, but it is not a rigid once-for-all literal truth. We affirm that the classic is embedded in the truth, while that truth must undergo constant interpretation and reinterpretation for it to be grasped. Among other things, this process of ongoing interpretation makes the classic porous to contemporary input while maintaining intellectual continuity and stability.

Tracy’s point is that theology is inescapably hermeneutical. We see this clearly in religious activist resistance to cultural hegemony, even to empire. Helene Slessarev-Jamir explains how

in response to the multiple forms of injustice and violence unleashed by empire, prophetic activists in various religious traditions construct meaning and vision by weaving together the present-day stories of people who are suffering from injustice with stories taken from their textual traditions. This weaving
together of multiple stories results in the creation of new, context-specific ethical and theological scaffolding that draw on ancient religious texts, the legacies left by earlier justice activists, and stories of pain and suffering told by those living on the margins. 9

In order to gain conceptual leverage against the dominant culture, the person of faith interprets and reinterprets his or her classic foundation. Such an ongoing interpretative process works with the necessary assumption that this classical foundation is grounded in transcendent revelation, that it abides in truth.

This hermeneutical thrust of theology is by no means parochial. It does not confine the theologian to thinking solely within his or her church. The public theologian turns to the general human quest broadly and deeply.

When today’s theologian turns to the present cultural context, he or she does not merely take existing public discourse as it is self-described. Rather, the theologian subjects contemporary discourse to existential analysis. The theologian asks: What are the existential questions smothered or expressed in what is being said? With specific reference to the contest between truth and untruth, might there be an underlying commitment to truth coming to expression in the face of an imminent threat? Is it the case that the human psyche is frustrated in a setting where trust in the truth has been set aside? Unless public discourse presupposes a commitment to truth, public discourse remains untrustworthy and community responsibility dissolves.

If we the citizens are forced to believe things we suspect are untruthful, it makes us uneasy, restless, maybe even hostile. However, if we find we can trust what is being said to us, we feel we share an authentic relationship to our surrounding society. To feel alienated by untruth is to be subject to heteronomy, at least according to Paul Tillich. We yearn to feel attuned to what can be shared as truth. And truth sharing elicits a sense of autonomy, of person-in-community. The theologian yearns for even more, for theonomy. Theonomy is the anchoring of the social fabric in eternal truth over against the turmoil of ephemeral untruths.

Thonomy connotes ultimacy. “Heteronomy asserts that [humanity], being unable to act according to universal reason, must be subjected to a law, strange and superior to him. Theonomy asserts that the superior law is, at the same time, the innermost law of man himself, rooted in the divine ground which is man’s own ground: the law of life transcends man, although it is at the same time his own.” 10

The human psyche, whether in its individual or social expression, cannot find meaning in life without trusting the truth, without an orientation toward what is ultimate. Truth comes in a package with ultimacy, trust, joy, and meaning. Recognizing this, the theologian attempts to cut under contemporary rhetoric to identify the existential questions implicit in cultural dis-
course. One task of the theologian is to critically analyze the battle being fought by truth against untruth and then address the underlying existential crisis.

Tracy’s theological method of mutual correlation begins with this assumption. What, if anything, is the meaning of the whole? What, if any, is the significance of such positive experiences as a fundamental trust empowering the fact that we continue to go on at all, as distinct from all our other trusts? What is the significance of such profound negative experiences as a fundamental anxiety in the face of no specific object (No-thing) as distinct from fear in the face of some specific object? What is our primordial response to finitude, to contingency, to death as our own most destiny, to radical oppression or alienation, to joy, love, wonder and those strange experiences of a consolation without a cause?11

PUBLIC THEOLOGY IS REFLECTED UPON IN THE ACADEMY

“Public theology,” according to Paul Chung, “is a theological-philosophical endeavor to provide a broader frame of reference to facilitate the responsibility of the church and theological ethics for social, political, economic, and cultural issues. It investigates public issues, developing conceptual clarity and providing social-ethical guidance of religious conviction and response to them.”12 Just where will this “theological-philosophical” investigation of “public issues” take place? The academy? Today’s universities are culturally dominated by scientists. Might the scientific community aid in formulating the agenda of the public theologian?

In the academy—in universities, R&D corporations, bio-techs, National Institutes of Health, and such—we find scientists, lots of scientists. Today’s established scientists are strongly committed to social justice, gender equality, racial equality, freedom of inquiry, and the peer review process for maintaining academic integrity. These are values that scientists and progressive theologians share with equal passion. “Christian faith demands that every theologian affirm the world and thereby pay heed to the legitimate demands for justice in society and for intellectual integrity in the academy.”13

Today’s establishment scientists also perceive that they are in a war not of their own choosing. It’s called the War against Science or the War on Science. “A vast war on science is underway, and the winners will chart the future of power, democracy, and freedom itself,” blusters Shawn Otto.14

Who are the perceived enemies of science? The first enemy is the one we are dealing with in this chapter, namely, the surrounding culture, which has grown to accept false claims, alternative facts, and the failure by governments to listen to scientific counsel while underfunding crucial areas of research and development. Scientific American sounds the alarm: “Scientists around the country are nervous as hell. There seems to be a scientific happen-
ing in Washington, DC, and our government’s relationship with facts, scientific reality and objective truth has never been more strained.” In addition to Washington, other enemies include pseudo-science, media tolerance for alternative facts and outright propaganda, Islamic theocracies that restrict academic freedom, fundamentalist or creationist Christians who deny evolution and deny climate change, the relativism in deconstructionist postmodernism, and such. It would seem to me that public theology conceived in the church, reflected on in the academy, and meshed with the world, should become a natural ally to scientists during this War on Science. Radical Orthodox theologian John Milbank sees it this way: “A correct Roman Catholic view, proclaimed since the time of the Church under persecution, is that truth should be freely pursued, since all knowledge points toward God. Coercion into understanding defeats its own object, since the divine truth freely shines out everywhere. There is no question, then, but that the Church is on the side of free scientific enquiry.” Might warrior scientists accept religious leaders as their allies?

More needs to be said, especially about the relationship between eternal truth and temporal fact. Axial religious belief in general and Christian faith in particular presuppose as well as espouse eternal truth. Nothing less than the truth—confidence in the full truth—will quench religious thirst. The yearning for theomorphous depth precipitates in the theologian self-examination, self-criticism, willingness to be corrected, and willingness to yield to the authority of what is genuinely true. One would expect, therefore, a natural affinity between the religious mind and the scientific mind, which respects facts, evidence, data, honesty, transparency, peer review, and theory revision. It is no accident that in Western Europe the momentum leading to the scientific revolution was sustained by clergy who doubled as laboratory experimenters.

Like the scientist, the academic theologian is already experienced in subjecting his or her belief system to scrutiny, to critical review in the academic arena. This is required if theology is to be public, contends Tracy. “The word ‘public’ here refers to the articulation of fundamental questions and answers which any attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible person can understand and judge in keeping with fully public criteria for argument.” The Sitz im Leben of the scientist and the theologian already overlap in the academy. It would take only a small step for the theologian to side with the scientist in the war against fake news, alternative facts, and denial of climate change.
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PUBLIC THEOLOGY IS MESHE WITH THE CULTURE FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD

Public theology has pastoral and apologetic responsibilities, which primarily benefit the church internally. Public theology also takes on a prophetic responsibility aimed at benefiting the wider culture. The prophetic includes projecting a vision of a just, sustainable, and participatory society that emulates the Kingdom of God along with rendering public judgment when empirical society falls short of this vision. "It is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order," Walter Brueggeman reminds us.19

This means that Christian theology is already impelled from within to serve the public beyond church or academy. "Theology has to be public to actually be theology," writes Brazilian theologian Júlio Paulo Tavares Zabatiero.20 The systematic theologian belongs in the public context, argues Fuller Seminary ethicist Hak Joon Lee: "Public theology advocates for a constructive public role for religious discourse in a pluralistic society, neither suppressing religious expressions nor dismissing democratic values such as human rights, tolerance, and equality."21 This implies that all five tasks of public theology—pastoral, apologetic, scientific, political, and prophetic—are public, open, transparent, and subject to extra-ecclesial evaluation.

Internal theological agendas double as public agendas. The value of this is that theological reflection in public can provide illumination if not guidance in a pluralistic context, which, among other contributions, affirms the indispensable role of loyalty to truth in social unity.

Unless our society presupposes a commitment to reason and truth, averred Plato, we end up in mania. In other words, we go crazy. The body politic can avoid chaos through one of two means, either a democratic reverence for reason presupposing truth or rule by tyranny, by imposing a sacrificium intellectus (a sacrifice of intellectual integrity) through bullying. Both natural science and Christian theology thrive in democratic societies because of their assumptions: Science relies on the verifiability of facts, and faith relies on the divine promise of finally seeing the truth beyond the glass darkly. "Truth cannot contradict truth," said Pope John Paul II.22 The scientists and theologians in our society must nourish themselves daily on a fare of truth, or else they'll go crazy. This chapter prescribes a constructive public theology that includes the articulation of a truth-commitment as its contribution to the wider body politic.
As we transition from theology in the academy to theology in the extra-academic public, however, we must take into account the subtle analysis of Lisa Stenmark. We cannot simply step from the academy into the wider public, she says. In the academic context, Stenmark charges, misleading assumptions are made regarding just what science is and what religion is. Too frequently in the university setting it is assumed that science is neutral, impartial, objective, and free of ideology. In contrast, religion is assumed to be subjective, perspectival, and traditional. A closer look will demonstrate that science is more perspectival than is taken for granted, and the theological articulation of religious belief is more rational than is taken for granted. "Not only is science not a neutral, tradition-free framework, even if it were, that kind of objectivity is not the best way to make public decisions. The notions of neutrality and objectivity distort religious reasons, by expecting them to be couched in neutral terms, and suggest that people be disingenuous about their reasons for taking the positions they take."23 If scientists insist that they and they alone have a patent on fact and the sole right to determine truth, they will not only distort religious claims but deny themselves an ally in their war against untruth. In short, the Science and Religion Dialogue (SRD) currently taking place within the academy is insufficiently prepared to influence public policy outside ivy-covered walls.

On the one hand, this leads Stenmark to advise both science and religion to stay out of politics. "Both religion and science need to be kept out of politics. This is not to say that scientists or people of faith cannot participate in politics, or in public discourse, but it does mean that their truth claims cannot be given special weight as a matter of course. Religion and science play a very limited role, in part because their truth-telling, authoritative status makes them destructive to public discourse and judgment."24

On the other hand, Stenmark affirms that both science and religion contribute to the larger society through worldview construction and maintenance. "Religion and science each have important responsibilities for worldbuilding and world-maintenance. . . . Religion infuses the world with meaning, transforming it from a place we merely cohabitiate into a world we share. . . . Religion and science are both truth-telling institutions, and pillars of truth are also pillars of political order."25 Here, Stenmark makes my point very well.

Regardless of the content of their respective truth claims, both religion and science emit an unequivocal commitment to truth. The devotion to the very notion of truth itself is essential to the worldview of a culture that finds itself bonded politically. What is at stake is not the parochial defense of the content of one’s truth claims, whether in science or theology. Rather, what is at stake is that the public at large—the body politic—needs to take loyalty to
truth as foundational for public policy formulation. This is a concern that both scientists and religious spokespersons share, usually with considerable passion and commitment.

PUBLIC THEOLOGY INCLUDES POLITICAL AND PROPHETIC THEOLOGY

In this chapter I have elected the term public theology, rather than its sibling, political theology, even though the public theologian should take up a political task. As of this writing, one prominent school of thought lays patent to the name political theology, and it peddles its wares in a respected journal bearing that name. My difficulty with this particular approach to political theology is that it is committed to description without prescription. Vincent Lloyd, an editor of the journal Political Theology, says his approach provides “an analysis of the role of religious concepts in political theory and practice—without Christian presuppositions.”26 The editorial task of this otherwise fine journal is to examine the explicit or implicit religious background to political movements, ideas, and practices. This editorial aim makes a very valuable academic contribution, to be sure. Yet, without a specific Christian or other transcendent theological commitment, it precludes either raising an ideal vision or rendering prophetic judgments against any existing political order.

I find myself more closely aligned with Jürgen Moltmann, for whom the term political theology designates “theological reflection on the concrete political practice of Christianity.”27 Or John Cobb, who contends that “political theology calls on the church to think politically. This entails understanding itself and its thought in the concrete socio-historical situation perceived on a global scale.”28 Such a political theology takes us beyond description to prescription. It entails that the theologian should lift up a vision of a just, sustainable, and participatory society and, when needed, to render a prophetic judgment against the current order. Advocacy and resistance are precluded.

Among other things, the visionary and prophetic components to political theology require standing for truth in the public domain. Standing for truth entails transparency, honesty, and a willingness to put things right. Standing for truth entails laughing at nonsense, disavowing pseudo-science and quackery, demanding accountability on the part of public leaders, prosecuting scam artists and corruption, and applauding integrity whenever it becomes visible. It sometimes requires speaking truth to power, just as the prophets of ancient Israel spoke to their kings.
CONCLUSION

In light of the social turmoil stirred up by the post-truth forces at work in the both the webmind and the government, I recommend Christians and other religious leaders pledge allegiance to the scientific community when it prosecutes public policy on behalf of truth and fact. I further recommend the construction of an authentic public theology that includes a prophetic demand for truth, transparency, and responsibility.

I have proffered the following definition: *Public theology is conceived in the church, reflected on in the academy, and meshed with the world for the sake of the world.* Such a public theology can and should be prophetic because it measures today’s world situation against the eschatological standard of the Kingdom of God. The prophetic public theologian announces God’s promise of a new creation with a future justice that judges today’s injustice, a future truth that measures today’s untruth.

REFERENCES


NOTES


3. David Tracy, The Analogical Imagination (New York: Crossroad, 1981): 3. Sebastian Kim and Katie Day recognize seven identifying marks for public theology: public theology: is (1) incarnational, i.e., it addresses concrete rather than abstract matters; (2) fluid, i.e., it escapes the confines of church and academic institutions to mesh with specific publics; (3) interdisciplinarity; (4) dialogical; (5) non-authoritarian, i.e., it recognizes that authority is a social construction mediated through social processes; (6) global; and (7) performed, i.e., it engages in praxis beyond mere reflection. Katie Day and Sebastian Kim, "Introduction," A Companion to Public Theology, eds., Sebastian Kim and Katie Day (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017): 1–21, at 10–17.


8. Tracy, Analogical Imagination, 108.


11. Tracy, "Role of Theology in Public Life," 232.

16. Postmodernist philosophers contend "there is no such thing as objective truth, and any claim of objectivity is suspect," whines Shawn Otto. "Postmodernism created the intellectual ammunition being used in the war on science to confuse the public." *War on Science*, 172. Fear on the part of scientists regarding alleged relativism in postmodern thinking may be unfounded. What needs to be sorted out is the relationship between fact and meaning, between supra-contextual fact and strictly contextual meaning. "Meaning-making practices ought to be understood as located within specific contexts. This is not giving up universalism for relativism. In fact, the universal versus relative dualism is a false one. . . . Both universalism and relativism ignore living contexts: one suggests the same everywhere, regardless of context; while the other suggests anything goes, again regardless of context. A contextual understanding of meaning-making suggests that meaning evolves from within living human communities over time, and that these meanings in turn materialize in social relationships, institutions, and human-Earth relations." Whitney A. Bauman, "Meaning-Making Practices and Environmental History: Toward an Ecological Theology," *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Science*, eds., James W. Haag, Gregory R. Peterson, and Michael Spezzo (London: Routledge, 2012): 368–78, at 370.
24. Ibid., 8.
25. Ibid., 158.
26. Vincent W. Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology* (Stanford CA: Stanford Academy Press, 2011): 12. Speaking on behalf of the journal Political Theology is Julie Clague. "We present articles by: Muslims, Jews and Christians, and by scholars young and old. Theologians and specialists in the study of religion are accompanied by historians, philosophers, ethicists, anthropologists and political scientists. A number of contributors are active in the area of interreligious dialogue and interfaith relations. Some are grassroots activists. The aim is to maximize the expertise and experience gathered around the table, so that a constructive and honest conversation and debate can take place." Julie Clague, "Political Theologies Ten Years after 9/11," *Political Theology* 12:5 (October 2011): 645–59, at 651.