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The Archbishop speaks, but who's listening? The dilemmas of public theology today

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ABSTRACT

The occasion of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, acting as guest editor of the leftist journal the *New Statesman* attracted much media comment. Most of this focused on Williams' criticisms of the right-of-centre coalition government's advocacy of the 'Big Society', intended to shift the balance of welfare provision away from the State towards the community and voluntary sector. Williams articulated some commonly-held anxieties about the direction of government policy, prompted by but not exclusively limited to calls for churches and other faith-based organizations to become vehicles of service delivery.

A closer examination of Williams' interventions into the debate on the 'Big Society', however, reveals it to be part of a tradition of public theology in which Christian teaching informs fundamental principles underpinning the nature of political participation and societal values. In this incident of a church leader and the media, therefore, we have an opportunity to explore in greater depth a continuing debate about the place of religion in what many are calling a 'post-secular' society, in which the phenomena of secularization and religious revival co-exist in novel and often contradictory ways. Similarly, whilst there is much evidence for the positive role of faith, there are many who would resist on principle any kind of religious involvement in the public realm. Public theology – in this instance represented by the comments of a major religious figure – must therefore learn to negotiate between the 'rock' of religious revival and the 'hard place' of secularism.

In considering the prospects for public theology more broadly, however, I also want to trace some of other major theological currents that might possibly inform the debate. The predominant tradition has probably been mainstream Anglicanism, but I will also identify currents in Roman Catholic social thought and post-liberal theology as other potential interlocutors in the debate about the Big Society. In particular, the concept of subsidiarity in Catholic Social Thought, and an emphasis on grass-roots ecclesiology within post-liberal theology, will be seen as having considerable potential for public theology in the future.

Finally, I will close with a question: who are the main proponents or bearers of 'public theology' in the UK? I want to argue that Archbishops are not the only public theologians, and to suggest that local faith-communities, and lay people, as well as politicians and public intellectuals, are also well-placed to contribute to the debate. I will consider four possible contributions as exhibited in the pages of Williams' edition of the *New Statesman*: the church leader, the praxis of grass-roots activism, the politician of faith and the public intellectual. They all represent different vantage-points from which theological and faith-based interventions might take place; but in closing, I will argue that the nature of a post-secular society may require public theology to undergo an 'apologetic turn' in order more effectively to communicate, defend and inform the role of religion in public life.

I. Archbishop Edits Political Weekly

In June 2011, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, appeared as the guest editor of the UK's leading leftist political journal, the *New Statesman*. His editorial contained some mild criticisms of the policies of the coalition government, but as often happens, even in the increasingly secular context of British society, this was sufficient to provoke significant attention from other parts of the media. Even today, it seems, when the Archbishop speaks, people – or at least the media – take notice.

In his editorial, Williams alluded to the government's proposals to reform the public sector and the welfare state, which represent a significant shift away from government funding towards private sector and voluntary provision. Whilst not as stark as the 'privatisation' of state services and utilities which took place during the Thatcher years of the 1980s, it nevertheless signals a significant political turning-point. Some of the public spending cuts are intended to reduce levels of government borrowing and debt in the wake of the collapse of global financial markets, but at least from the right-wing Conservative quarter of the coalition, they are also motivated by a desire to restructure the very way State welfare provision is funded and delivered.

The main signature policy of the coalition government – or at least the right-of-centre Conservative side of it – is the so-called 'Big Society' which amongst other things calls upon the community and voluntary sector (including faith-based organizations) to undertake many of the responsibilities traditionally undertaken by the State. But it's important to note, I think,

that the Archbishop's editorial was not particularly intended to focus on religion in the Big Society, but conceived much more as an intervention into the wider debate, and an attempt to draw out the wider moral argument.

So the Archbishop's criticisms need to be read not simply about the role of faith in the process of welfare reforms, and not even as a partisan intervention into questions of public sector administration. Rather, his comments were intended to touch on wider issues of democracy, political participation and citizenship: 'What he does show', said one sympathetic appraisal by Andrew Brown in the Guardian, 'is a profound vision of what politics might be based on, and what democracy is for.'[1]

Williams was as critical of the Left and the previous Labour administrations as he was of the Right-wing Conservative-dominated coalition. He tried to use his editorial – and other articles in the paper - to open up debate about the future of welfare and the respective responsibilities and demarcations between the State, the market and civil society in these changing political times.

It is perhaps therefore unfortunate that although there was much comment, the media response tended towards content such as 'Archbishop criticises government', setting in train a formulaic ritual of media exchanges following somewhat tired conventions of exhorting the Archbishop to stay out of politics and concentrate on 'spiritual' matters. In particular, it was

[1] Andrew Brown, Rowan Williams is not interested in party politics. Guardian (online), available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2011/jun/09/rowan-williams, accessed 14/06/2011.

unfortunate that Williams' discussion of the importance of global civil society, and an interview with the Foreign Secretary about ethical foreign policy, elsewhere in the same issue, were by and large overlooked, reinforcing the domestic and parochial nature of so much news coverage in the British media. So if Williams was attempting to break the mould of conventional political debate through his interventions, he was only partially successful.

Nevertheless, it interests me that a left-leaning periodical chose to invite a leading figure of the religious establishment to contribute in this way. Williams may be, according to the religious think-tank Theos 'arguably England's leading moral and religious leader',[2] but the reality is that any kind of public statement by a figure such as him takes place against a backdrop of the ascendancy of what might be termed the 'new atheism' and a vocal, insistent secularist lobby, which challenges the very legitimacy of any religious intervention in the public square. Faith leaders do not speak into an uncontested public sphere, therefore and do not necessarily command automatic attention or support. Yet Williams' comments clearly carried significant public weight – perhaps a sign of the residual influence of the Established Church – since coalition ministers felt obliged to defend Government policy. This juxtaposition of (growing?) resistance to any form of 'public theology' by church leaders, alongside a persistent and enduring expectation of the power of religion in the public square, is, I would argue, typical of what might be termed a 'post-secular' society, which paradoxically – and unprecedentedly - combines 'the continuing process of secularisation' with 'an increase in religious vitalisation'.[3]

[2] Daniel Gover, Turbulent Priests? The Archbishop of Canterbury in contemporary English politics. London: Theos, 2011, 20.

[3] H.G. Ziebertz and U. Riegel, Europe: A Post-secular Society? International Journal of Practical Theology

Williams' comments, the collection of other writers assembled in the same edition of *NS*, and the level of public interest that accompanied it, therefore allow us to glimpse some of the contours of current political debate, at a time of great economic, political but also cultural change. The debate about the 'Big Society' and Williams' deliberations about it,[4] perfectly crystallize questions of public theology in the UK today, and what role theologically-informed debate, and religiously-inspired activism, might play in public life.

II. Faith in the 'Big Society'

Firstly, however, what does the debate about the Big Society tell us about the state of politics in the UK, and how and why 'faith' is implicated? The Big Society has been described as 'a shorthand for developing a civic society where voluntary and non-governmental organisations take over the provision of care and services, previously entrusted to the state.'[5] In a speech on 19 July 2010, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, set out three main strands of the Big Society agenda:

• Social Action - the government will foster and support a new culture of voluntarism and philanthropy

• Public service reform - getting rid of the centralised bureaucracy and in its place giving professionals much more freedom, opening up public services to new providers like charities,

[4] As well as the New Statesman 13 June2011, see also R. Williams, How should churches respond to the Big Society, 23 July 2010, online, available at: http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2956 (accessed 11/01/2011).

[5] P. Donovan, Seize the day of the Big Society, in The Tablet, 29 January 2011: 11.

social enterprises and private companies so we get more innovation, diversity and responsiveness to public need

• Community empowerment - creating communities with neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny, who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them.[6]

Cameron's view could be summarised as rejecting the 'Big State' in favour of the 'Big Society'. We might see this as an attempt on Cameron's part to position the Conservative party back at the centre-right in terms of rediscovering a concern for social justice and compassion whilst maintaining a traditional scepticism towards excessive personal taxation, a centralised state welfare system and what are regarded as inflexible and wasteful public services.

One of the attractions of the Big Society is that it can be commended on both ideological and pragmatic grounds. The capacity of voluntarism to replace state welfare provision and to reduce public expenditure is one clear element of the austerity drive and renders the Big Society fiscally and financially timely. Yet some elements, not only in the Conservative party but across the political spectrum, see it as a way of renewing civil society, reducing state dependency and refreshing the vitality of the voluntary sector, in the form of so-called 'inter-

[6] Conservative Party, http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_Stories/2010/07/Our_Big_Society_Agenda.aspx (accessed 5 August 2010). See also M. Brown, The "Big Society" and the Church of England, General Synod CGS1804, available at: http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/structure/general-synod/agendas-and-papers/gs-paper-list/gs-1801-1850.aspx.

mediate institutions'.[7] So although The Big Society clearly taps into a particular strand of Conservative thinking, it is not intrinsically alien to certain traditions within the Labour Party or Liberalism.

However, there is widespread anxiety, in the voluntary and public sectors alike, that the Big Society is really an attempt to take the responsibility for welfare and care of the most vulnerable in our society out of the hands of the State into those of the voluntary and charitable sector – but that this is a redistribution of responsibility without real power or resources. That at best it is provision of a minimal safety net and an abandonment of any principles of universality or any commitment to achievement of greater economic and social equality via the workings of a functioning welfare state.

Religion also figures prominently in this controversial evocation of a vigorous civil society as integral to the reconstruction of communities. As public expenditure comes under increasing pressure, the role of the voluntary or 'third' sector assumes greater prominence: as stakeholders or partners in government initiatives, or even as an arm of service delivery. Faith groups are seen as rich in what is known as 'social capital': in human resources, the ability to forge networks, to mobilise resources, to espouse the values that foster altruism and community service.[8]

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[7] Within the opposition Labour party, the most prominent (and controversial) tendency was the so-called 'Blue Labour' faction led by Maurice Glasman (and now disbanded). Others on the communitarian left, such as Jon Cruddas, endorse its emphasis on intermediate organizations and localism as an antidote to statist and centralising tendencies within successive Labour governments since 1945. See M. Glasman, J. Rutherford, M. Stears and S. White (eds), The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox, London: Soundings, 2011 (e-book), available at: http://www.soundings.org.uk/.

[8] L. Bretherton, Christianity and Contemporary Politics, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 31-58.

No wonder, then, that from New Labour in the late 1990s to the current coalition, religious organizations have been at the centre of government's desire to appeal to the voluntary and community sector in this restructuring of the balance between the State, the market and local civil society. And in many places, that attraction is mutual. Addressing MPs in Westminster in December 2010, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland commented, 'The Christian Church has been working to create a Big Society for 2000 years ... It is my belief that the coalition allows a unique opportunity to explore the possibility of doing things differently."[9]

Although all major political parties have expressed interest in involving churches and other faith-based organizations in the delivery of public services, however, activists themselves see dangers. They fear co-option or instrumentalism, in which the outputs of such engagement are stripped away from the values and motivations of those providing it. Faith-based organizations may be regarded as providing 'warm hearts and safe pairs of hands' from government's point of view, but are seldom granted the independence to challenge or negotiate with their terms of engagement.[10] British Muslims, too, are concerned at the 'securitisation' of religion, in the way in which initiatives such as Prevent Violent Extremism often seem to cast local religious institutions as agents of social control or surveillance within their own communities.[11]

In other words, politicians like the ability of religious groups and organizations to mobilise in the community, to provide welfare services, to be rich in the social and physical capital of

[9] http://edinburghnews.scotsman.com/churchofscotland/Backing-for-39Big-Society39.6648962.jp

[10] Commission on Urban Life and Faith, Faithful Cities: A call for celebration, vision and justice, London: Church House Publishing, 2006, 66-74; 91.

[11] E. Bleich, Faith and State: British Policy responses to 'Islamist' extremism, in: R. Eatwell and M.J. Goodwin (eds), The New Extremism in 21st Century Britain, London: Routledge, 2010, 67-84.

professionals, facilities, meeting places and willing volunteers, but many of those on the inside argue that government doesn't 'get it' when they ask for greater flexibility to pursue alternative patterns of provision or freedom to challenge the language of outcomes and targets. One of the issues facing public theology in the UK, then, is the challenge of what we might term 'religious literacy', to echo Stephen Prothero's work from the U.S.[12] In the British context, however, this is not a debate about whether religion can be taught in public or state schools, but how to foster greater understanding across the growing gulf between an increasingly secular political class and much of the grass-roots community activity that goes on in the name of faith.

We can therefore perhaps begin to perceive the moral challenge to a very vision of the kind of society represented by the Big Society. Is the Big Society a pretext for government to abrogate responsibility for prevention of structural inequalities or social needs, and for welfare provision to become an ambulance service or sticking plaster for their long-term acute effects? It is these concerns that Rowan Williams articulated in his *New Statesman* editorial; but we may ask whether there was anything distinctive, and distinctively Christian, about his particular slant on things. A closer look at what he said will indicate that his argument did derive from clearly-articulated Christian principles; which then leads us to consider in more detail the kinds of threads that might inform a theological response to the Big Society.

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[12] S. Prothero, Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2007.

III. Theological Currents in British Public Theology

1. Anglican Social thought

Williams' editorial was essentially an attempt to articulate some of the human dimensions of public expenditure cuts, to speak on behalf of those who will be hardest hit. He spoke of 'the bafflement and indignation that the present government is facing over its proposals for reform in health and education. With remarkable speed', he continues, 'we are being committed to radical, long-term policies for which no one voted.' The editorial headline (not necessarily the work of the editor of course) reads, 'The government needs to know how afraid people are.' [13]

He argued for the necessity of underpinning shifts from central to local provision with a continued commitment to minimum standards of care and universal criteria of welfare delivery; an overarching, sustained and strategic attention to addressing basic social ills such as child poverty, educational inequality, poor housing and transport infrastructure, and so on. At its heart is a Pauline vision of community and mutuality in which, as Williams argued, "the poor" are not objects of charity but the measure of our collective aspirations to 'engage generously and for the long term in building the resourcefulness and well-being of any other person or group'.[14] Whilst the Church engages with the practicalities and procedures of 'secular' politics, therefore, its ultimate calling is visionary and performative: 'to model that notion of togetherness in which every voice and every gift is crucial.'[15] Williams advanced basic principles of interdependence and participation (what Catholic social thought would

[13] R. Williams, The government needs to know how afraid people are, New Statesman, 13 June 2011, 4-5.
[14] Ibid, 5.
[15] Rowan Williams, 'How should churches respond to the Big Society', Friday 23 July 2010, (online), available at: http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2956 [accessed on 11/01/2011].

term 'solidarity') as an antidote to the extremes of statism and individualism, in which the body politic is envisaged as 'a community of communities'.[16]

In that respect, far from being a political meddler, as his detractors often claim, Rowan Williams is doing no more than many of his predecessors in the post, which is to attempt to draw out the moral dimensions of political policy.[17] Much of this, I believe, derives from the paradoxical Establishment position of the Church of England that maintains a local, grass-roots, quotidian and incarnational presence alongside the nation's most marginalised comm.-unities with an ease of access to the very corridors of power.[18] So Williams is perhaps continuing that tradition of 'speaking truth to power' to which Duncan Forrester[19] used to refer, and which I regard as a significant – if under-estimated - aspect of Anglican social thought.

The Archbishop's comments in his editorial may also be seen as being in continuity with many of the hallmarks of Anglican public theology. In many respects, it is a return to the days of the 1980s when the Church of England comprised an 'unofficial opposition' to the monetarist policies of the Thatcher governments (1979-1991), in the face of a weakened and divided Labour party. And as recent research suggests, this is typical of the kind of public theology enacted by Archbishops of Canterbury for several generations. In his survey of in-

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid; see also Andrew Brown, 'Rowan Williams is not interested in party politics', 9 June 2011, (*Guardian* online), available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2011/jun/09/rowanwilliams [accessed 14/06/2011].

[18] See E.L. Graham, Establishment, Multiculturalism and Social Cohesion, in: M. Chapman (ed.), The Established Church: Past, Present and Future, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2011, 124-140.

[19] Duncan Forrester, Speaking Truth to Power, in: M. Halteman and A. Thomson, eds. Seek the Welfare of the City: Church and Society in Scotland and Northern Ireland, Belfast: Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland, 2002, 106-116.

terventions in public debate by successive Archbishops between 1980 and 2010, Daniel Gover argues that far from being driven by sectional interest, Archbishops' statements have advanced views which reflect the theological values of the 'common good' and a concern for the well-being of society as a whole.

Against charges that they might be compromising the integrity of Christian teaching in order to appear relevant to a secular pluralist public, Gover also maintains that their comments have been distinctively Christian and often counter-cultural – which might appear to go against the grain of the Church of England's Established status. The influence of international perspectives (especially around issues of development, trade justice and human rights) informed by Canterbury's links to Anglican communities in the global South was another striking feature, and one borne out, as I noted earlier, in Williams' editorial priorities in the *New Statesman*. Fundamentally, says Gover, these interventions are grounded in theologically-driven moral and ontological considerations: 'both in detailed policy debate and at times of national mourning or celebration, [the Archbishop of Canterbury] aims to open up politics to larger "ontological" questions of what it means to be human.'[20]

However, particularly in relation to the debate over the Big Society, there are important respects in which despite this continuity of public comment, the present Archbishop must attend to new challenges, both political and religious. Much contemporary Anglican social thought, especially around social justice and the welfare State, was forged in the 1940s, by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple. Temple's short work, *Christianity and*

[20] D. Gover, Turbulent Priests? The Archbishop of Canterbury in contemporary English politics, London: Theos, 2011, 19.

Social Order, completed in 1941, provided much of the moral underpinning for William Beveridge's Report of 1942 which itself formed the basis for the Labour government's social reforms after 1945 and the foundation of the Welfare State.

Beveridge and Temple set out not simply to address the effects or the symptoms of what Beveridge termed 'five giants' or social evils, of Want, Ignorance, Idleness, Squalor and Disease. Their vision sought to prevent their very causes, through a universal and non-discriminatory system that protected all citizens regardless of social status. And behind that vision was a moral and theological understanding of human nature as fundamentally social and mutual, embodied and manifested by the activities and institutions of the State.[21]

Writing in the early 1940s Temple could therefore very readily support a system of universal, nationalised welfare in the years of a command and control economy, and see the emergent Welfare State as the very embodiment of 'the common good'. As the debate over the Big Society reveals, however, in the seventy years since 1945 the balance between the State, civil society and the market in the delivery of welfare has radically shifted, and Temple's equation of the activities of the State with the realization of the common good may have to be revisited. In 2008 a report on the future of the Church and welfare provision, *Moral but no Compass,* anticipating the kinds of restructuring we are now seeing, challenged those in the churches who were lamenting the withdrawal of State involvement in welfare and would have nothing to do with the emergent reforms for fear that it would usher in a new 'contract culture' and the dismantling of the Welfare State.[22] The report called for new thinking on the

[21] For a reappraisal of Temple's work for contemporary society, see John Atherton, Christopher Baker and John Reader, Christianity and New Social Order: a manifesto for a fairer future, London: SPCK, 2011, esp. Chapter 4.
[22] A. Bradstock, F. Davis and E. Paulhus, Moral, But No Compass: Church, Government and the Future of Welfare, Chelmsford: Matthew James, 2008.

part of faith-based organizations to take account of the radical shifts that had occurred in economic and social policy over the past two generations, and especially the greater role envisaged for the market and the third sector. It argued for an incarnational presence that prioritizes compassion, service and solidarity alongside the most vulnerable as a practical (and performative) outworking of the Gospel. Out of this contextual, practical and responsive witness would come the right to influence the direction of debate and policy. Above all, this shows how the solutions of one era may not be those of subsequent generations; and that the ethical and theological commentary that emerges from the Churches on matters such as the future of welfare have to take account of changing economic and political realities as well as the teachings of the Christian tradition.

2. Roman Catholic social thought

A second theological strand in this debate comes from the Roman Catholic Church. Its leadership, especially Cormack Murphy O'Connor, Archbishop of Westminster, has entered the debate over the Big Society with enthusiasm, arguing that Catholic Social Thought and the Roman Catholic church, with its network of independent welfare agencies and historic involvement in church schools, have much to offer to a vision of a flourishing civil society based on principles of subsidiarity and association. It speaks to fundamental convictions concerning the social constitution of the person, and the notion – a theme prevalent in much 20th- and 21st-century Catholic Social Thought[23] - that the State exists to serve a healthy civil

[23] Since *Quadrogessima Anno* in 1931, CST has warned against excesses either of individualism or statism. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) argued that the well-being of the individual was neither to be found in the suppression of individual freedom via too much state control or of the isolation and atomism of individualism.

society and not the other way around.[24] Clearly, this has many resonances with Big Society thinking, which seeks to revitalize the intermediate networks and associations of local civil society in the face of centralizing State intervention and corrosive market individualism.

The principle of subsidiarity argues that the State or centralised bodies must not accrue to themselves functions or powers that are better accomplished by more localised or devolved agents. Yet alongside that, there is an insistence that a Christian commitment to social justice and social solidarity must also be upheld, and especially to ensure the promotion of robust social institutions that regulate and promote the common good.[25]

> 'The realization of the common good depends upon networks of relations being expanded until they are fully inclusive. That is, trust and concern are generated at every level until they become the true cement of society and its new source of social integration. It is only then that a strong civil society can seek to ensure that government is responsive to authentic human needs and exercises its powers to promote the flourishing of all, throughout their life course. It is only then that a real civil economy can develop, producing goods and services that meet genuine human requirements, because social solidarity is better than coercive regulation at "civilizing the economy".'[26]

[24] This was also present in Temple's attitude to the State. See Atherton, Baker and Reader, Christianity and New Social Order, pp. 75-78.
[25] Donovan, Seize the Day of the Big Society, 11.
[26] M. Archer, *Caritas in Veritate* and Social Love, International Journal of Public Theology 5.3, 2011, 273-295:275.

Roman Catholic leadership clearly regards itself and its tradition as having much to contribute to public debate about the Big Society, therefore. Yet it also recognizes that it cannot muster the kind of critical mass of personnel and resources, let alone the degree of political weight, at the disposal of the Church of England. In comparison to the Established Church, therefore, the Roman Catholic contribution to public theology – at least in the UK - is still relatively muted in the face of underdeveloped capacity.[27]

3. Post-Liberal Ecclesiology

A third strand of theological thinking about faith in the Big Society is worthy of mention at this stage. It draws not from mainstream or established churches, but from strands of what might be termed 'dissenting' traditions – but less from Protestant nonconformity than from radical Mennonite or Anabaptist theologies, derived from the writings of Karl Barth, Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank. It represents less the institutional reality of the Established Church, therefore, than a principled theological critique of the nature of Christian discipleship in late modern Western society. In its critique of the mainstream tradition's perceived accommodation with secular liberalism, it is perhaps the strand of contemporary thinking that has grasped most fully the challenges of 'post-secular' society and its implications for the nature of faith-based intervention and theological discourse in the public square.

'Post-secular' is a term that is increasingly used to delineate the relationship between religion and politics in contemporary Western society. Leading political theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, Jose Casanova, Charles Taylor and Talal Asad have noted how it represents a new

[27] F. Davis, Are you talking my language? The Tablet, 16 April 2011, 7-8: 8.

departure from the classic assumptions of modern liberal thought towards the role of religion in the public square. It begins with a revision of theories of secularization, in which modernity and social differentiation herald a decline of religious institutions and beliefs. Empirically speaking, the resurgence of religious activism around the world serves as counter-evidence to any forecast that religion is losing its public impact.

> 'The apparent triumph of Enlightenment secularization, manifest in the global spread of political and economic structures that pretended to relegate the sacred to a strictly circumscribed private sphere, seems to have foundered on an unexpected realization of its own parochialism [not least what other scholars term the 'particularism' of European secularism] and a belated acknowledgement of the continuing presence and force of "public religions".'[28]

What these commentators underplay, it seems to me, is the paradoxical and novel nature of the post-secular. It is more than simply religious revival or sociological revisionism, in that it consists of a unique juxtaposition of both significant expressions of secularism and continued religious decline (especially in Northern Europe), and signs of resurgent and enduring demonstrations of public, global faith. For the post-secular defies simple talk of a reversion of secularization, since religious observance and participation is still on the decline – at least in terms of its de-institutionalisation in much of Europe – and yet vigorously resurgent; maybe not in the same time and the same place all at once, but at least, as far as the West is concerned, vicariously via global diasporas and the impact of global politics.

[28] H. de Vries and L.E. Sullivan, Preface, in: H. de Vries and L.E. Sullivan (eds), Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World, New York: Fordham University Press, 2006, ix-xii: ix.

As Hent de Vries observes, this is thus a sign of the simultaneous pluralisation and homogenisation of our social, economic and cultural lives.[29] The impact of post-secularity may be found not in the mere resurgence of religion, but in the changing consciousness of its public significance. 'A society is "post-secular" if it reckons with the diminishing but enduring – and hence, perhaps, ever more resistant and recalcitrant – existence of the religious.'[30] I think that gets to the heart of the matter: according to the logic of secularism and secularization, this increased significance of religion should not be happening; and yet in its renewed sense of public prominence – for better and for worse – religion transforms both its own understanding of itself and its role, as well as, necessarily, provoking discussion about the attitude of the state towards religion, the nature of liberal democracy, of the 'public' and 'private' demeanour of its citizens.

The political tension at the heart of the post-secular, therefore, emerges from between a rock and a hard place: whilst the resurgence of religion is regarded by many as prompting a much-needed moral rejuvenation of secular society, for others the eruption of faith continues to represent a dangerous breach of the neutrality of the public sphere. How does a liberal, pluralist democracy square that particular circle?

> 'Neither the hope of further secularization or secularism – whether as a bulwark against or an enabler of religious diversity – nor, to be sure, a simple return to

[29] H. de Vries, Introduction: Before, Around, and Beyond the Theologico-Political, in: H. de Vries and L.E. Sullivan (eds), Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World, New York: Fordham University Press, 2006, 1-88: 1.

[30] de Vries, Introduction, 3.

> forgotten religious values can fill this void. If any post-secular thought and political theology of Europe and the West there may be, we do not yet know what it is.'[31]

It is my contention that mainstream public theology in the UK has yet to contend fully with these implications. For the time being, it is a third strand of theological thinking, which emerges from post-liberal and neo-orthodox thinking, that has succeeded in appreciating more than any other that extant models of Church and State and of Christian discipleship in the public square derived from Christendom, and represented by more mainstream strands of public theology, are increasingly untenable. Ideologically and pragmatically, the Church cannot afford to be co-opted by the State, either in terms of colluding with the conditions of service delivery, or of acquiescing to the liberal constitution of the secular state. This tradition protests against the lack of religious literacy on the part of government, its tendency to over-ride religious and cultural diversity – to objectify and reify 'religion' – its functionalist account of religion, the tendency of government bureaucracy to rob faith-based organizations of flexibility and localism, the risk of imposing state-run norms of professionalism and service delivery, as ways in which the State reduces religion – specifically Christianity – to just another arm of welfare, just another branch of local civil society.[32]

In contrast to what it sees as accommodationalist models, then, this brand of post-liberal theology and ecclesiology argues for the identity of the Church grounded in the particularity of its own narratives, rather than any kind of self-understanding derived from the temporal or secular social order. It also represents a challenge to the liberal secular state's insistence on the 'bracketing out' of faith from public life, or on an accommodation to the conduct of politics

[31] de Vries, Introduction, 67.

[32] L. Bretherton, Christianity and Contemporary Politics, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

according to secular rules of engagement. Rather, the church's task is to order its political life as a 'counter-performance' to the prevailing relationships between state, market and civil society, whereby political power is 'chastened' by an alternative reality. In practical terms, emphasis is placed on grass-roots activism of local faith-based organizations whereby a unique style of Christian political witness is forged.[33]

For all its theological weight, I am personally sceptical as to whether this strand of thinking can be termed 'public' theology at all. By relying on a narrative of faith drawn only from ecclesial self-description, it takes insufficient account of the doctrines of creation, incarnation or common grace, which would teach that God's self-revelation is (at least partially) available through reason and experience as much as Scripture and tradition. It fails to take account of the way Christian teaching, historically, has absorbed influences from pagan and secular sources.

It also falls short, in my opinion, in its understanding of the very nature of the public. Public theology in its more mainstream manifestations has also always insisted on the public nature of Christian witness, in contradistinction to trends which emerged after the Enlightenment to reduce religion to an essentially private and personal confession. This had two ramifications: firstly, public theology upheld an insistence that theology, and Christian vocation, was a matter of engagement with public issues, not simply private concerns; but it also represented an approach to theological reasoning itself, as something necessarily to be conducted *in public*, in the sense of being prepared to test its credibility and coherence in dialogue with non-Christian sources and interlocutors. 'Every theology ... has to meet the test of public recep-

[33] ibid.

tion', argues Max Stackhouse[34], who continues, 'if theology is to be trusted to participate in public discourse it ought to be able to make a plausible case for what it advocates in terms that can be comprehended by those who are not believers'.[35] Stackhouse has also consistently argued that such a stance casts public theology in the mould of Christian apologetics: of the faithful being prepared to 'give an account of the hope that is within you' (I Peter 3:15). There is something attractive in post-liberal theology's emphasis on a performative, intentional ecclesiology in which alternative visions of political life can be enacted in an authentically full-blooded Christian witness; but it falls short of a properly open and respectful engagement with the common concerns of public discourse. Whilst it acknowledges the challenges of the post-secular, its solution is to return to a pre-secular model of theological reasoning.

IV. Where are the public theologians?

I will close my consideration of the state of public theology in the UK by considering the question of who the actual bearers of public theology might be. In the small book on urban theology and public life I co-authored with Bishop Stephen Lowe, we talked about public theology as enacted by a number of different actors: faith leaders, ordinary people of faith who are also citizens, and political leaders who often struggle to mediate their personal convictions into an increasingly religiously non-literate and sceptical public space.[36]

[34] Max Stackhouse, God and Globalization, New York: Continuum, 2007, 84.
[35] Ibid., p. 112. See also Faithful Cities, 2006, pp. 13-15.
[36] E.L. Graham and S.R. Lowe, What Makes a Good City? Public Theology and The Urban Church, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2009.

It is interesting to see who serve as the bearers or exemplars of public theology in Williams' edited edition of the *New Statesman*. Faith leaders are certainly represented: not only Williams himself but the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks. Sacks extols the virtues of religious social capital, thereby pointing to the continuing significance of local practices of faith as the absolute well-spring of any religious engagement with the public square.[37] Also contributing is Ian Duncan-Smith, a conservative politician of Roman Catholic faith, whose own personal moral conviction has done much to drive thinking about the Big Society within his own party and the coalition.[38] Insofar as it is not necessarily in the mould of a more left-leaning, liberal and Statist tradition – such as much of Anglican and RC thought – his position is quite important for drawing in the more conservative evangelical, Pentecostal – often Black-majority – forms of Christian activism in Britain today.

But a word must also be reserved for another commendable breed of public theologian: the public intellectual, in the shape of the literary critic and erstwhile Catholic Marxist, Professor Terry Eagleton.[39] His voice has proved particularly trenchant and effective not only in political debate, but as – may I dare to say – a leading apologist for religion in the face of attacks from secularists and new atheists of the type of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Polly Toynbee and others. His criticisms are often hilarious, sometimes savage but always reasoned and profound. And although I haven't talked about it much, it seems to me in the face both of religious revival and continued secularism, as the gap between people of faith

[37] J. Sacks, If you're searching for the big society, here's where you may find it, New Statesman, 13 June 2011, 21.

[38] I. Duncan-Smith, We must change our broken benefits system – we owe it to the poorest, New Statesman, 13 June 2011, 18. See also http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/.

[39] Eagleton reviewed a book on the new secularism for Williams' edition of the NS: T. Eagleton, Who Needs Darwin? New Statesman, 13 July 2011, 58-60. See also T. Eagleton, Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

and those of none continues to widen, what we need more and more is public theologians and intellectuals who can also explain, articulate and comm.end the faith. Terry Eagleton is careful not to indulge in personal confessions of faith, but nevertheless demonstrates how theological discourse can be intellectually credible and politically transformative.[40]

V. Conclusion

The debate about the Big Society, although it may be driven by reactive measures to the financial crisis, does offer opportunities to rethink not only the future direction of welfare policy but the very place of religion in public life. But just as churches and other faith based organizations had to make tough decisions about how closely to work with government-sponsored schemes in the 1980s, so too the churches will now have to do some hard thinking about the extent to which we are willing, or even able, to adapt to the kinds of invitations currently being extended.

I've been making some observations on the 'Big Society' debate and the particular challenges it represents for faith groups. The future of welfare, and the shape of political and economic policy in the UK, has far-reaching implications for churches and other faith-based organizations in relation to their position in civil society, since they are right at the heart of much of the speculation about the future of public services. But beyond the immediacy of government policy, the debate also perfectly reflects the situation in which public theology must work in the UK today: some inherited features regarding the historic predominance of Christianity, not least in its traditions of the established churches of England and Scotland;

[40] See also C. Lamb, Red Christian, The Tablet, 13 November 2010, 14-15.

but against a context, familiar to all those in northern Europe, of increasing decline and secularism. This is complicated, however, by the growing realities of religious pluralism and the recovery of religious institutions and activism as decisive forces within areas of civic association, welfare and political mobilisation. Public theology finds itself increasingly, therefore, between that rock of religious revival and the hard place of institutional decline and secularism, and must find ways to inform faith-based interventions in the public square as well as justifying and defending the right of those who act in the name of religion so to do.