

A Theology of Public Life

A Conversation with Charles Mathewes,
Associate Professor of Theology at the University of Virginia,
and author of *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge, 2007)

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Q: You begin your book by saying that the question of whether religious convictions should play a role in public life has already been resolved in the affirmative. So you focus on how religious convictions can be involved in public life. Given the popularity of books on the new atheism, so called, and the persistent secularist and separatist voices in the public realm, how can you be so sure?

A: That's a really good question. What I'm trying to say is that even the most strident atheist would acknowledge that religious voices are not going away. The attempts by various philosophers, over the past few decades, to offer a kind of rhetorical speeding ticket to those people who do speak in religious terms have been shown to be empirically futile.

Along with that, there's a philosophical argument that I find very convincing, made by religious believers and non-religious believers alike—religious people like Nicholas Wolterstorff and Chris Eberle, and non-believers like Stanley Fish and Jeff Stout, for example. They all argue that attempts to constrain speech in the ways that philosophers have wanted to do are not finally philosophically defensible.

Now along with that, I would cite, ironically enough, the rise of the new atheists and the stridency of their arguments. Not long ago, many people thought that religious voices were effectively constrained and were going away in our culture. Today, however, those thinkers now recognize that believers are not going to disappear, and they have to up the rhetorical ante in some ways either to contest them, which the best of them are trying to do, or to ridicule them into silence, which I think the worst are trying to do.

Q: Your book hinges, in part, on the distinction between a public theology and the theology of public life. Could you tell us a bit about what you see as a difference there and why it matters?

A: I think that, in the book, the distinction made between public theology and a theology of public life attempts to draw out--ironically--a space for a more effectively humble approach of talking about religious convictions in public life. This is ironic, given that what I call a "theology of public life" seems frankly more resistant to meeting its non-religious interlocutors halfway, whereas what I call "public theology" has always begun from the superficially more humble perspective of saying, "well, let's see if we can find a language in common that we can work out our views within, that is more inclusive than the

sectarian first-order Christian discourse, which we recognize turns you off." But I think that appearances here deceive.

What I take to be the project of a public theology is an attempt to offer a theological assessment of pre-given, pre-set public themes and concerns. This happens in a kind of latently apologetic manner, so that the argument is finally made that these themes and concerns will be seen to have been theological all along. Yet they are "theological" in only the most superficial sense, I think; public theology does not require those who have been concerned about such themes to change their views on those public commitments, but rather to recognize a kind of latent or tacit theological dimension to them.

I think that's a fine thing to do, in certain situations. But there is a problem with this project; the public theologians, so called, who do this—I'm thinking of people maybe in the past generation or so, but all the way back to Dewey, and in another sense to Hegel—have really tried to construct a relatively unified idea of "the public," which entails a relatively unified theological view without much attention to the distinctive theological positions and non-theological positions that populate the larger civil society. Historically, then, what most "public theologies" do, effectively, is present themselves as offering a lowest common denominator religious interpretation of public life, and thereby enroll as many people as possible in their views, with the ideal being a kind of unitary, theo-political vision.

That's why I want to trace this tendency back in one sense to Hegel, and in another sense to Dewey. Both of them argued—you still get this a lot, ironically more vividly in the more conservative religious views than elsewhere now—that the political community requires a strong theistic grounding for it to be healthy, in some abstract sense of "health." I take it that the project of "public theology" in some way descends, however distantly, from this project. The upshot of their project is essentially to generate a kind of theology of the political order that would include everybody within it. I think that that can sound humble, but in fact ends up being terrifically coercive, and all the more so for presenting itself as a kind of humble, "just trying to help understand you" sort of way. In my experience, when people say "now I'm just trying to understand you," they're really not—they're trying to redescribe your views in ways more palatable to themselves.

What I call a "theology of public life," in contrast, is an attempt to offer a very distinctive, frankly unapologetic, clearly particularistic account of how one interpretation of one tradition of Christian thought has thought seriously about the complexities and the challenges of public life for believers and for the better shape of the polity.

By being unapologetic in this way, it seems to me that anyone who undertakes this kind of theology of public life is immediately in a position of being compelled into a kind of *structural* humility; after all, there is no way they can delude themselves that everybody else is going to agree with this already, or that everyone can be brought into the conversation in the same way. Because of this, they're more liberated to talk in a more particularistic and rich (and quite honestly, a more realistic) way about how a certain set of religious beliefs can inform and shape and influence a certain set of believers in public.

Furthermore, they are disenthralled from thinking in a very presumptuous way that they're going to be able to speak for everybody. So they're both more pragmatic and less universalist, and so less materialistic at the same time. That's how I would draw that distinction.

One more thing I would say is that I was taken to task by Ron Thiemann in the seminar for relying on what is really a stipulative distinction here. I think Ron is completely right about that. That distinction really is stipulative, and in a way you could say that these two temptations are two poles, or these options are the two extremes, between which pretty much everyone who thinks about religion in public life fits; when they do in fact, they negotiate it by moving somewhere to the middle.

But that said, I do think there is a quite important distinction between those people who have as a goal a kind of communal theology that everyone will be able to agree with, and those people who think that what they're offering is a more modest attempt—an interpretation of how one's religious community might understand its own participation, and speak out of that participation in a way that invites others to see it from one's own perspective--all the while alert to the dangers of "identity-politics" or "sectarianism" that so many worry about. That distinction, stipulative as it is, seems to me an important distinction to draw. (And ironically, I was inspired to make this distinction, or to undertake a kind of "theology of public life" before naming it as such, by reading Ron Thiemann's own work!)

Q: You mentioned in your remarks at the panel that you're offering "an empirically realistic, civic republican, Augustinian theology of public life." Is there a way to briefly break that apart for us?

A: Yes, I think there is. Let me talk about empirically realistic first. I don't want to trumpet my own book, but in a way that I don't see anybody else doing, I try to take very seriously the research in the social sciences, broadly construed, over the past several decades about the nature of the effects and shape of religion in public life—particularly in the US, but also beyond that, in the so-called developed world.

There's an enormous body of literature on these matters that--as far as I can tell--hardly anyone in this debate has actually paid much attention to at all. There are fantastic historians, such as Mark Noll, particularly his book *America's God*; there are many fantastic sociologists on this, most notably Robert Wuthnow, whose *The Restructuring of American Religion* really needs to be given more attention by philosophers and theologians than it has yet received. He points out, for example, that up through the 1940s, most social services in the United States were run through churches; in other words, churches had a very vigorous social role to play. After the rise of the New Deal social services and related programs, involving the federal government of the 1930s and 40s, and then compounded by the development of the Cold War state, the churches lost that functional social role of being a central social conduit. Their finances suffered because people were not quite so eager as they might have been to invest in the churches once those functions shifted to the state. Their functional role in society atrophied; their experience of how to involve

themselves in public life changed. All these things happened. And that atrophy, Wuthnow argues, is what causes in part the cultural polarization you begin to see during in the 60s and 70s, but then increasing in the 80s and 90s between conservatives and liberals. Most divisions of churches are no longer denominational, per se, but rather it is now conservatives across denominational boundaries who are allied, and the same can be said for liberals. So that the readers of, say, the Jesuit journal *America* and readers of the Protestant journal *Christian Century* have a lot more in common with one another (despite the putatively Roman Catholic stance of the former and the mainline Protestant stance of the latter), than they do with their colleagues, in journals like, say, *First Things* or *Christianity Today*, who are much more conservative.

So, that's just one more example of a very large scale change in the way that religion operates in public life. But in none of my classes on religion and politics, theology, contemporary theological ethics, none of my training in graduate school, nor the training of anyone I've come across, does this book figure at all. Nor should I say, has it appeared in anyone's writing, it seems to me, who works on this stuff.

And that's just one example of what I'm talking about when I'm talking about an empirically realistic theological inquiry. Even in the 70s and 80s, there was really interesting work being done on the shaping of emotions in consumer cultures (by Arlie Hochschild), and the changing character of happiness and satisfaction (by Tibor Skitovsky), and more recently tons of stuff on how our societies are shaping our character by economists, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, historians--and none of this is getting into theology and ethics, which seems content to swim around in a very narrowly philosophical literature. Those works are important, but there's a great deal more out there to which attention should be paid. (Incidentally, the fact that you now have many people in theology taking their bearings from John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, and taking from that book the idea that you simply don't have to attend to this stuff at all--that's just compounding the disaster. Certainly Milbank wouldn't say that; he's read all that stuff and is gripped and, in a sense, compelled by it; that's why he wrote that huge book on it!)

Q: And the civic republican component?

A: Well, in many ways I've learned this from you, Erik [Owens], among other people: that there is this entirely different tradition of political thought, which we had been looking for in some ways, but that began to emerge in its fullness really in the 1960s and 70s with the recovery of this larger "civic republican" tradition. There are important moments in the historiography here we don't need to get into. But what is crucial is that "civic republicanism" is defined as a collection of political thinkers and actors who were concerned about the connection between the moral health of individuals and the political health of a political community, with the goal of true liberty for all. And it wants to argue that effectively you have to pay serious attention to the connection between these two. So it demands attention to both social structures and psychological formation. It's a very complicated connection, and it goes both ways. A corrupted polity will effectively corrupt its citizens, and corrupted citizens will effectively corrupt their polity.

This tradition takes the Greek and Roman thinkers as crucial, but also has as central figures Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Montesquieu, the American Founders, perhaps especially Madison, Constant, Tocqueville, in a way Mill, Arendt--it's a list of people who were, again, with some exceptions left off of my graduate school reading lists. And what a shame.

I take it that the tradition of civic republicanism is in some aspects a very attractive vernacular within which to think about Christian engagement with politics. But as I also say in the book, the civic republican tradition presents some real challenges to Christian political thought. You can't just simply fit it into a Christian view, for it is in many ways, a complexly non-Christian and anti-Christian account because it is connected to the "this-worldly" success of the polity. The classic example of this is Machiavelli's famous line that a prince must love his city more than his own soul. So it's a powerful language within which to think politically, though one that has its own dangers that we must be alert to.

Q: So this brings us to the Augustinian portion.

A: Yep. Well, when I'm talking about the Augustinian tradition, I am trying to talk about a tradition that, while it achieves its really essential crystallization in Augustine's own writings, is both visible before and after him in some complex ways. Effectively it goes back in some ways to earlier Christian thinkers--you can see versions of this, for example, in some forms in St. Paul--and definitely forward up to the 20th century in a complex line of largely Protestant thinkers, interestingly enough, up until the last decade or so. More recently you have begun to get some more Roman Catholic views; people who are for one reason or another dissatisfied with natural law accounts in some ways, and so are beginning to look again at Augustine as an interesting source for political thought.

But instead of talking about the kind of ideology that this tradition is often burdened with, I'd like to talk about, very briefly, the kind of content that this tradition might specifically communicate. So here I think that the central genius of the Augustinian tradition is captured in a roughly satisfactory way in the beginning of the *Confessions*—right in the first paragraph of the *Confessions*—where it famously says “you have made us with yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Father Hollenbach--who is a very sophisticated holistic natural law thinker--pointed out, and I think he's right on target here, concerns about the ideas expressed in this statement. He worries that what the Augustinian tradition does in general is forget about the distinction between nature and super-nature in complicated ways that are dangerous for thinking about the relationship between believers and non-believers—thinking about the relationship between this-worldly happiness and otherworldly theological fulfillment. These are the concerns, and they rely on a distinction between nature and supernature.

That's precisely why the concerns, no matter how lucidly expressed, can at times seem to Augustinian-minded people to beg the really relevant question. For Augustine's view, formulated quite succinctly in that very fundamental theo-anthropological maxim there at the beginning of the *Confessions*, is that there is no such nature/super-nature distinction.

Humans were created for and designed for communion with God. There is no natural this-worldly end alongside that that can be stated without the theological end absorbing it. So for humans to get right with each other, they need to get right with God first. This is, I take it, one of Augustine's central points; it's behind his whole discussion of pagan Rome's virtues, as nothing but "splendid vices"—a term, by the way, that I have not found yet in Augustine. He doesn't seem to have used it himself.

Also one of his fundamental views, very early on his career, first formulated in his *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, is that all the virtues are "forms of love." And because they are forms of love, they are forms of charity, Christian charity. That's a very audacious claim--it incorporates the whole of the moral life to the economy of grace that God inaugurates in election.

Now by doing that, the Augustinian tradition is different, say, from the natural law tradition; the natural law tradition, from an Augustinian perspective, wants to put boundaries around the particular region called the secular or the natural, and say that everybody can use the same vocabulary without remainder, without tension, without difference, without awkwardness in talking about issues that fall within that area--and then also quarantines for itself another theological area where theological claims can move about unmolested by non-believers' challenges. Augustinians don't want to buy that at all. They don't think it works. And their rejection of this distinction suggests to many natural law thinkers that their view is essentially--that is, structurally speaking--very arrogant. That is to say, natural law thinkers see that and think, wow, Augustinians are presuming that they have something to say that non-religious believers can't get without buying into their account. (This is, I think, a very crude way of saying some of what David [Hollenbach] was suggesting in his wonderful comments during the panel.)

Well, then I as an Augustinian reply that natural law thinkers effectively presume the same thing when they talk about things that are in the "supernatural" realm; it's just that they don't want to admit it. I mean, it's hard for me to buy the account that your moral views are not deeply affected by, shaped by your theological views. Not just deeply, but are immediately reflected and shaped by your theological views. And I just like to say that the burden of proof for natural law thinkers is really on their side—not Augustinians on this. Furthermore, the question of arrogance is a complicated one here; for after all, the lack of a boundary works both ways. And Augustine's theological claims are no more immunized from critique by secular thinkers than are secular views by critique from Augustinians. In other words, everybody's on all fours together.

The most useful Augustinian distinction is to point out that natural law thinkers say, "well, you know Augustine was very sympathetic to pagans, but also very harsh towards them. Whereas Aquinas was much more tolerant of them." Well, it's hard to know what to make of that claim. Of course, look at who (and when, and where) they were. I don't know that Aquinas actually ever ran across a non-Christian in his life. And if he did, they were Jews or Muslims. Augustine had been a non-Christian; he had first order experience of what it had been to try to live outside of the Christian narrative; and he knew and corresponded directly with many pagans who were unmoved by his urgings to become Christian.

It's not at all clear to me that for Augustine this was not a genuinely existential thing. That he knew what it was like to try to live as a pagan, that he knew what that was like from the inside. It seems to me that Aquinas did not; for him it was simply a matter of dealing with the very impressive philosophical system of Aristotle. Because of that, I think there's an important psychological distinction there. But of course, as an Augustinian, I *would* say that, wouldn't I?

Q: You argue in your book that the basic problem affecting humans is a kind of escapism—both from God and from one another—and, indeed, from creation as well. How does this theological claim inform your understanding of public life?

A: That's a great question. Let me just say quickly that my claim here about escapism is actually getting at something not just about politics, but about the whole shape of human life in general for someone like Augustine. In fact this seems to me *really* fundamental to at least one significant strand of the Christian tradition, and also to a vast collection of worries expressed in modernity about that tradition.

What I'm trying to say is that, in terms of the overall shape of human life as the Christian tradition construes it—at least from Augustine's vantage point--the human attempt to flee from other humans, and also from God, is the really fundamental characteristic feature of what sin is, and that our desire to control other people is really an offshoot of that. It's an attempt to treat them as objects so that we don't have to confront what it would be like to treat them as humans and be exposed to their claims upon us as humans. And the same thing can be seen in our dealings with God, indeed even more powerfully, more fundamentally with God, as regards whom our behavior is overwhelmingly manipulative in ways we would never be towards a person who is sensibly present to us in this world.

Clearly, I think, such a vision of human sin as rooted in "escapism" has a big shaping effect on what it means to think about how people involve themselves in public life. I have just picked up today a book by Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*. I don't know if you know this book, but the first edition of it, *Republic.com*, was fantastic. What Sunstein talks about is that political life today is increasingly set up so that you don't actually have to ever encounter, in a real powerful, unavoidable way, the views of people you disagree with. You can filter out news sources and points of view in your technological access to news. That is any views that really don't agree with yours, you can just filter them right out. You don't even have to encounter them to disagree with them. And Sunstein worked with some other thinkers, economists and psychologists, on the political effects of information polarization. That is, on the political effects of what happens when people don't have access to competing views. And of course that's quite devastating for the polity, for people's ability to understand what's going on in their world, and also to understand the range of options that are actually available to them. This is an old worry, going back to Mill and Tocqueville in the nineteenth century and in the twentieth thinkers like Walter Lippmann, Lionel Trilling, and even Reinhold Niebuhr; and it seems to be getting more and more worrisome every year.

Q: But it seems to me that your theological claim, in a way, militates against the story of declension that Sunstein says is technological in nature. Aren't you arguing for this Balkanization or escapism as a human condition, as opposed to a technological condition?

A: Oh, absolutely; I'm not making an historically declensionist argument. And I'm not accusing Sunstein of making a kind of really radically historic or radically reductionist claim that this is just a matter of what's going on right now, the globe is only going to pot or some version like that. That's just the grumpy old man argument that we get all the time from our relatives, but that we don't have to buy.

What I'm trying to argue, and using someone like Sunstein to do so, is that the particular configuration of technology and the polity today is allowing this perennial human temptation, this temptation to avoid one another, to manifest itself in this particular way in our contemporary public life. If we didn't have this, if we were all stuck in the age of ham radio, I'm sure we'd figure some other way out to avoid and/or instrumentalize each other, but it seems that this is the way this danger manifests itself today.

So yes, the point is that just avoiding each other is a perennial temptation. In a way, I kind of want to argue that the two centrally political thinkers with whom my views most resonate are Mill and Tocqueville—for both of whom the danger, in a large deliberative democracy such as the US (or most modern states), was in many ways the inability to come to terms with the many different views that could be offered and the potential silencing effect of the majority on the minority.

Q: One of the many compelling themes in your book revolves around citizenship, which you describe as a form of liturgy. Could you say a word about citizenship as liturgy?

A: As I tried to say in the panel session, the word "liturgy" in Greek really just means the work of the people, *leitourgia*. And in that sense, a sports team, a soccer team, a softball team, is a liturgy. Whether or not it wins games, it's still an attempt to do something collectively. And if you take those individuals out of that team, they are no longer a team—and you disaggregate them into a collection of individuals, you're not going to get a team, you're just going to get a cluster of people. They need to be working as a team.

In the same way, first of all, I take it that the people of a polity, any polity, if they work together for the good of their polity, are effectively engaged in a kind of collective work—a collective action. They are effectively constituting themselves as a polity, as the community of people who care about this community's eventual destiny, both for its eventual and for its immediate effects. So, in a naïve way, the language of liturgy is just a shorthand for talking about a political community.

But I also meant it, second, in a very theological way. It seems to me one of the great advantages of living in a liberal democratic state like ours, like any of the ones we have today by and large, is that these liberal democratic states really are designed around the recognition that nations inevitably have a kind of theologizing trajectory. There's a kind of entropy for political community that often ends in the nation urging its citizens to worship

the nation. By talking about political life in terms of liturgical dimensions, I'm trying to identify that theological dimension, and also make people aware of why they should be nervous about it.

In some ways, I agree with people like Bill Cavanaugh and Stanley Hauerwas; they want to say that modern political communities are really problematically theological. I think that's true in some ways. I don't go where they go with that, but I think they've identified a really powerful point that we should worry about. (Incidentally, I think that the great thinkers on modern politics, like Tocqueville and the American Founders and, I suppose, someone like Mill--complicatedly "liberals" all--would agree with them too; a thought that doesn't seem to be one that those who follow Hauerwas have really thought through fully yet.) And I think that someone like Augustine is an extremely good person with whom to worry about those temptations, because, especially with Rome, he had a very vivid sense of the theological pretensions of the *imperium romanum*. Much of his political thought was designed to attempt to teach his parishioners, and others, how to distinguish the proper claims of the polity upon them from the improper and even idolatrous claims. So this negative dimension to liturgy lets us be alert to the temptations towards idolatry that are latent in the political community.

Thirdly, I want to say that there is a way that in acting in the polity, believers, anyway, do have a chance to engage in a kind of iconic action, which is in important ways theologically dense, theologically rich. The will of God is as discernable in politics as it is, and is not, everywhere else. And so the idea that somehow divine presence is more visible in individual life than in political life is really a problematic vision. I don't think that it's one that works.

So by talking about the liturgy of citizenship what I'm really trying to talk about is the idea that political life has dangerous temptations toward idolatry, but also, in a way, it can be a locus of grace. It can be not only iconic but, as Hollenbach pointed out, sacramental, a way in which God's presence is visibly and palpably experienced.