

## Author Meets Critics: A Theology of Public Life

Response by **Ronald Thiemann**  
Bussey Professor of Theology  
Harvard Divinity School

BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE  
BOSTON COLLEGE, CHESTNUT HILL, MASSACHUSETTS  
OCTOBER 11, 2007

1. *Appreciation.* I'm pleased and honored to be a part of this discussion of Charles Mathewes' new book. *A Theology of Public Life* is a learned, erudite, and creative contribution to current discussions about religion's role in public life. In contrast to many books that deal with this subject matter Mathewes' book is resolutely theological in outlook – eschewing the tired clichés that often cling to works in this genre – and offering the reader a robust, bold, and thoroughly Augustinian theology of public life. This is an important book that deserves the attention and scrutiny it will surely receive. I congratulate the organizers of this symposium for recognizing the significance of this book by launching this public discussion. I will admit from the outset that the book engages many issues on which I have written extensively and that I found myself in broad sympathy with much that Mathewes has written. At the same time this is a book of strong arguments that demands careful reading and equally strong engagement. So it is from a deeply appreciative and sympathetic perspective that I offer my critical remarks this afternoon.

2. *Public theology/Theology of public life.* So what exactly is “a theology of public life?” Mathewes makes clear at the outset that it is *not* a “public theology,” for “public theologies are,” he remarks, “self-destructively accommodationist” because “they let the ‘larger’ secular world’s self-understanding set the terms and then ask how religious faith contributes to the purposes of public life, so understood.” As the author of two books which might well be considered “public theology” this sentence, which appears on the first page of the book, obviously caught my attention.

Leaving aside for a moment the sweeping nature of this claim, I want to inquire further into the distinction Mathewes' draws between "public theologies" and his own "theology of public life." A theology of public life seems to be just that: a Christian theological interpretation of public life directed not to nonbelievers but to believers. It is, Mathewes' claims, "unapologetically particularistic" and employs the first-order discourse of Christian faith to urge Christians to be engaged in public life precisely as Christians. It thus involves both a "theology of faithful Christian citizenship" and "an ascetics of such citizenship."

This is an important project, to be sure. But I must admit that the distinction between a public theology and a theology of public life still eludes me. It may be that Mathewes intends this definition to be purely stipulative – that is, a public theology just *is* "self-destructively accommodationist" and only such self-destructive theologies should be called "public theologies" whereas non-self-destructive theologies should, like Mathewes' own, really be called "theologies of public life." But it seems Mathewes means much more than that. He seems to be saying that theologies that have "as their primary interlocutors non-believers skeptical of the civic propriety of religious engagement in public life" are "public theologies" (and therefore self-destructively accommodationist) whereas theologies that address primarily "Christian believers unsure of the religious fruitfulness of civic involvement" are non-self-destructive "theologies of public life."

But if I apply this distinction, for example, to my own work I remain confused about it. It is fair to say that the one book I actually call "public theology" is the one most addressed to a Christian ecclesial audience. It has as its sub-title "The Church in a Pluralistic Culture" and includes chapters on biblical narratives, Christian discipleship, Christian identity, and worship and public responsibility. It is also fair to say that my book *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* is primarily directed to "non-believers skeptical of the civic propriety of religious engagement in public life" and therefore seems to fall under the stipulative definition of suspect "public theology." Obviously I don't consider either book to be "self-destructively accommodationist" and since the latter also includes extended discussions of both "faithful citizenship" and "pilgrim discipleship" (topics Mathewes also takes up) I remain confused about where my work falls in Mathewes' typology.

I want to be clear that this isn't just a grumpy quibble. Rather it goes to the heart of questions about the function of theological discourse in public settings. When we theologians write books we do indeed have a primary audience in mind for our writings. If the primary audience is ecclesial we can take certain things for granted: the audience will be familiar with Christian language and Christian practices so we don't have to go into extended explanations of such things. If the primary audience is "secular" then we may have to take more time to explicate particular Christian claims simply to bring that audience along. But care in explaining Christian discourse and practice to those unfamiliar with it doesn't seem accommodationist to me; it simply seems sensible and courteous. So the distinction between public theologies and theologies of public life continues to elude me, so I hope we can spend some time talking about this point in our discussion. Is the distinction equivalent to the distinction between "apologetic theology" and "dogmatic theology?" At times Mathewes seems to say yes, but since he himself spends many pages engaging in interesting and respectful debate and discussion with secular political theorists, I'm not sure how the distinction applies even to his work in practice. But more about that in the discussion, I hope.

3. *Augustinianism reconsidered.* Part I of the book is a bold, often brilliant, reconsideration of Augustine and the Augustinian tradition as the basis for a Christian theology of engagement. My basic reaction to this part of the book is simply admiration. It is a skillful critical appropriation of Augustine in the service of the construction of a dogmatics of public life. As such it contributes both to Augustine scholarship and to discussions of religion and public life. Indeed, it is a wonderful primer of Augustinian concepts to which I will happily send students who want a basic orientation to the key themes in his theology.

4. *Liberalism reconsidered.* Part II of the book "The Liturgy of Citizenship" begins with a consideration of liberal political theory. Here some of my disagreements with Mathewes' approach become more obvious. Like Mathewes I have been a sharp critic of what I call "classical liberalism" precisely for its narrow and dismissive attitude toward religious belief and practice. But Mathewes' rhetoric in treating liberalism seems to me unnecessarily and

uncharacteristically harsh and dismissive. Liberalism, he writes, “constructs religious believers as the unspoken ‘other’ against which ‘we’ define ourselves. On its picture, for example, America is split between decent, right-thinking liberal moderates who are content to let others do what they want, so long as they can sip their lattes, flip through the *New York Times*, and zip to the organic market in their SUVs; and psychologically corseted redneck rubes who mutter darkly about black helicopters and UN conspiracies and pause from stacking school boards, propagating patriarchy, and promoting creationism only to bomb abortion clinics and field-strip their M-16s.” Provocative rhetoric indeed – and perhaps amusing in its own way. But it seems to run strikingly against the grain of the very Augustinianism in which human selfhood itself is described as created for communion with others, as characterized by “openness to others” and shaped by the virtues of faith, hope, and love. But Mathewes continues in this rhetorical vein as he characterizes liberalism as fixated on the modern problem of totalitarianisms of the right and the left. “Driven by this anxiety, liberal theorists marginalized all those who opposed liberalism as reactionaries or relics of the past, a crotchety old lunatic fringe of back-country wackos who should be ignored, or better, put on cognitive reservations until they die off.”

This issue is important to me and it goes to the heart of how Christians should comport themselves in public discussions. The Augustinian virtues suggest to me that Christians should engage the others for whom God has created us to be in communion not only with respect but with an ethic of generosity. That means to my mind giving our opponents more than just the benefit of the doubt; rather it means construing their arguments in the best and strongest way possible so that our arguments engage them at their best and not in some diminished caricature. This seems to me to be both a theological and an ethical obligation, especially for those who stand in the Augustinian tradition that Mathewes so beautifully portrays for us.

Mathewes clearly wants to stand between secular liberals and those whom Jeffrey Stout has called “the new traditionalists.” Mathewes’ criticisms of Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank, both here and elsewhere, are sound and useful in distancing himself from those more sectarian and exclusivist projects. His discussions of communitarians, civic republicans, and agonistic democrats are nuanced and respectful and engage in genuine “critical

appropriation” of positions he finally opposes. I remain puzzled as to why liberalism does not receive the same kind of treatment.

One of the differences between my own views and those of Mathewes may go to the distinction he draws between believers and unbelievers and thus between theologies of the public and public theologies. For myself the believer/unbeliever distinction is far more ambiguous than sharp, far more blurred than distinct. On this question I take my stand beside one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most famous theological polemicists, Karl Barth. Barth was relentless in his critique and rhetorical bluster against those Christian theologians whom he believed undermined the fundamental witness of the Christian faith. A brief glance at Barth's harsh dismissal of his protestant colleagues Emil Brunner and Friedrich Gogarten during the early years of the Third Reich reveal a theological polemicist without peer. But when it came to the nonbelievers – the atheists and agnostics – Barth is remarkably fair and generous. In his extraordinary excursus in Volume III/2 of *The Church Dogmatics* “Dionysius vs. the Crucified” Barth gives one of the most extraordinarily insightful treatments of a figure whose anthropology he comes decisively to reject, Friedrich Nietzsche. Even as he critiques and rejects Nietzsche's philosophy he is able to evoke the power and beauty of the work of this ultimate opponent of cruciform Christianity. In so doing he exemplifies an attitude toward unbelievers that he first articulated in his little book on Anselm: *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*. “We can start,” Barth writes, “from Anselm's astonishing recognition (put into the mouth of Boso) that what the believer and the unbeliever are meaning and seeking in their questions is exactly the same ... Thus Anselm gives credit to the unbelievers to the extent that the *ratio* of faith which they lack and for which they ask is one and the same *ratio* that he himself is seeking ... Anselm assumed his own ground, the ground of the strictly theological (we would nowadays say dogmatic), to be likewise a ground on which the ‘unbeliever’ could quite well discuss and would want to discuss.” My own Lutheran Augustinianism resonates deeply with Barth here and my own efforts to address skeptical non-believers in my public theology follows Barth's own reading of Anselm's theological procedure. “The unbeliever's quest is not simply taken up in any casual fashion and incorporated into the theological task but all the way through it is in fact treated as identical with the question of the believer himself ... What question of the unbeliever could be new to him and what answer could he give him save that

which he gives to himself?" Having seen liberals such as John Rawls dramatically change their views of religion as they struggled honestly simply to understand what Christians and others were saying, leads me to believe that even unbelieving liberals stand in solidarity with Christians, particularly those of us in the Augustinian tradition.

*5. Unique contributions of a Theology of Public Life.* The second half of *A Theology of Public Life* is a wonderful meditation on the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love and constructs a powerful theological model of Christian citizenship as faithful, hopeful, and charitable. There is much in every chapter to commend. This will be a book I will read and re-read and also assign to my classes. The notion of Christian asceticism, of faith as a spiritual practice, of disconsoling hope and disciplined vulnerability, of cruciform communion and enduring love all resonate deeply with my own most profound Christian theological convictions. But rarely have they been articulated with such beauty and power.

That I why I continue to lament Mathewes' tendency to contrast his own theological position so sharply with those of his secular colleagues. Even in this beautifully constructive part of the book there are in my opinion too many contrasting asides directed toward both secular and religious "others." Is it really true that there has been a "general failure" by intellectuals in our times "to present a picture of evil and our implication therein that can comprehend the profundity and complexity of the challenges [of evil]?" Surely the recent work of Susan Neiman, Richard Bernstein, Cornel West, and Terry Eagleton to name just a few on the persistent character of "radical evil" provides strong evidence that secular intellectuals have given extensive attention to this problem. There is much that Christian theologians can learn from these secular intellectuals. Indeed, I know of no more powerful account of the meaning of Christ's crucifixion and its implications for hope than that provided by the neo-Marxist, postmodern, unbelieving, secularist Eagleton in his *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*. "Once suffering is conceived in an instrumental or consequentialist way, it ceases to be redemptive, rather as a gift ceases to be truly a gift when one is thinking of a return. This is another reason why Jesus' crucifixion is genuinely tragic. If this death was a mere device for rising again in glory, then it was not more than a cheap conjuring trick. It was because his death seemed to him a cul-de-sac, as his despairing scriptural quotation on

the cross would suggest, that it could be fruitful ... Only by accepting the worst for what it is, not as a convenient springboard for leaping beyond it, can one hope to surpass it. Only by accepting this as the last word about the human condition can it cease to be the last word ... It was precisely this bereftness, savoured to the last bitter drop, which in a classically tragic rhythm could then become the source of renewed life.” I know of no theologian, not even Augustine, who could have said it better.

In conclusion I want to begin where I started with deep and genuine appreciation for Chuck Mathewes book. In a time when many of us write tepid prose for somnambulant readers, *A Theology of Public Life* addresses important issues in vivid and provocative language. It makes for good reading and even more importantly for bracing instruction in the practices of Christian ascesis in public life. And for that I am genuinely grateful.