Introduction: Life in the epilogue, during the world

A mirror for Christian citizens

What has Washington to do with Jerusalem? This book aims to answer this question. It provides Christian believers with one way to understand why and how they should participate in public life. It does so by offering a broadly Augustinian ''theology of public life,'' a picture of Christian life as it should be lived in public engagement.

The title foreshadows the argument. The book studies ''public life,'' not simply ''politics.'' ''Public life'' includes everything concerned with the ''public good'' – everything from patently political actions such as voting, campaigning for a candidate, or running for office, to less directly political activities such as serving on a school board or planning commission, volunteering in a soup kitchen, and speaking in a civic forum, and to arguably non-political behaviors, such as simply talking to one's family, friends, co-workers, or strangers about public matters of common concern.[1] Furthermore, this study is undertaken as a ''theology of public life,'' not a ''public theology.'' Typically, ''public theologies'' are self-destructively accommodationist: 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. In contrast, a theology of public life defines ''the public'' theologically, exploring its place in the created and fallen order and in the economy of salvation.[2] Hence, whereas public theologies take as

1. See Shapiro 1990: 276, and Stiltner 1999.
2. For an analogous contrast between a theology of nature and a natural theology, see Schreiner 1995: 122.

their primary interlocutors non-believers skeptical of the civic propriety of religious engagement in public life, this theology of public life takes as its primary audience Christian believers unsure of the religious fruitfulness of civic engagement; and it argues to them that they can become better Christians, and their churches better Christian communities, through understanding and participating in public life as an ascetical process of spiritual formation.

Yet while Christians are its primary audience, all persons of good will who are interested in public life can read it with profit. Non-Christians will find explications of (what should be) the rationale for many of their Christian fellow citizens' public engagement, so they may use this book as a Baedeker, a dictionary to a language that many of their interlocutors employ; and they may also find that the book's theological analysis illuminates the structures and patterns that form (and deform) public life in advanced industrial societies. Furthermore, readers in other traditions may find help of a different sort; because the book offers an unapologetically particularistic approach that speaks to public matters without assuming that all its interlocutors share its local categories, they may find useful provocation, viable support, and a suggestive model for analogous projects undertaken from within their own perspectives.

"Unapologetically particularistic" is key: using the first-order vernacular of Christian faith, it argues that Christians can and should be involved in public life both richly as citizens – working for the common good while remaining open, conversationally and otherwise, to those who do not share their views – and thoroughly *as Christians* – in ways ascetically appropriate to, and invigorating of, their spiritual formation, not least by opening their own convictions to genuine transformation by that engagement.

Such a project involves two distinct undertakings. First, it entails a theology of faithful Christian citizenship, which will unpack how the basic dynamics of faithful Christian existence promote Christians' engagement in public life during the world and inform their understanding of the shape and purpose of such life. Second, it offers an ascetics of such citizenship, an analysis of how that citizenship should be lived by Christians as a means of training them in their fundamental vocation as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, particularly considering those forces – material, structural, institutional, cultural, and intellectual – that mis-shape our engagement in public life today.

For many centuries there was a genre of political writing called the ''mirror for Christian princes,'' wherein potentates could see what they should be striving to emulate as ''godly rulers.'' This book is a mirror for Christian citizens. In public engagement, Christian believers do not seek simply to do the right thing; they also undertake a properly ''ascetical'' engagement with the world. Interpreting and endorsing that ascetical engagement is my ultimate aim here – a task captured in the phrase ''during the world.'' Explaining this will take some time.

Why (and which) believers need a dogmatics of public life

The book builds upon previous debates on religion's role in public life, but does not contribute to it. It assumes that those debates have by and large ended, and that what we may call the accommodationists won, and the ''public reason'' advocates lost.

This was not supposed to happen. Once upon a time, the consensus (or near-consensus, anyway) was that religion was declining, increasingly marginalized, and in any event simply a mask for ideological debates more properly about material interests. Hence, most thinkers believed, religious convictions should be translated into a more properly ''public'' vernacular before entering the public sphere. A small minority – a faithful remnant, if you will – insisted that public life should accommodate particularistic religious voices; but they too were seen as relics, merely of antiquarian interest.

What a difference the last few decades have made. Each premise of the ''public reason'' argument has proven false. Quite clearly, religion is not, *pace* expectations, going away. Against predictions of inevitable secularization – and the concomitant marginalization of religious believers, languages, and arguments – sociologists, political scientists, and historians have shown that in modernity religion can and does remain vital in both private and public life, even as it changes its character.[3] Furthermore, religion *qua* religion seems often quite ''functional'' in modern societies. Given the substantial

3. See Asad 2003, Berger 1999, Casanova 1994, C. Smith 2003b. For a rival account see Norris and Inglehart 2004. For a good discussion of the mesmeric power that the ''secularization frame'' still has over the knowledge classes, from government bureaucrats to academics to journalists, see Cox 2003.

changes – some would say precipitous decline – in both the quantity and the quality of associational life, religious associations are increasingly important on purely secular ''civic'' grounds; church basements may just save us from bowling alone.[4] Finally, religious engagement is inescapable; much of our public life consists of debates concerned with the proper boundaries of religion, the ''political legibility'' of religious believers' concerns (Bivins 2003: 10).[5] The sociology behind the heretofore dominant ''public reason'' argument about religion in public life has simply been wrong. Furthermore, alongside the sociological evidence, philosophers have argued convincingly that there are no good normative reasons generically to constrain religious voices' participation, *qua* religious, in public life. They argue that such voices best contribute to public life when left to determine for themselves – on grounds determined by their own particular, local conditions – how precisely to frame their arguments.[6] Such philosophers see us entering an age of ''post-secular'' public discourse, in which the unapologetically robust use of patently particularistic languages will provide a genuine basis for a real dialogical openness (Coles 1997: 8).

But so far these thinkers have made this case only partially, from the perspective of the public sphere. Such civic arguments are important, of course. But faithful citizens must be convinced to act and speak in explicitly faithful ways. A theological case must be made to encourage civic action by such believers; and no one has yet tried to make it.

There are many believers who could be swayed by such arguments. They seem invisible in recent discussions about religion and public life, discussions that make much of divisions among and within religious communities; but that is because of a methodological mistake. The many recent taxonomies, in the United States and outside it, of believers' attitudes towards politics are too finely grained: they underplay the fact that most believers are

4. See Elshtain 1995, Sandel 1996, Putnam 2000, Verba *et al.* 1995, Bivins 2003, Casanova 1994, Hart 2001, Mahmood 2005, Mathewes 2002b, Macedo 2004 and Gibson 2003. I thank Erik Owens for discussions on these matters.
5. See Hunter 1990, Layman 2001, and Uslander 2002.
6. See Placher 1989, Jackson 1997, Wolterstorff 1997, Eberle 2002, Thiemann 1996, Connolly 1999, Perry 2003, Weithman 2002, Ochs and Levene 2002, and J. Stout 2004. For more social-scientific arguments to this effect, see Post 2003 and C. Smith 2003a.

more committed to their faith than to any political program flowing from their faith, that they recognize that asymmetry of commitment, and are comfortable with it. These believers populate crude categories like ''religious right'' and ''religious left,'' ''crunchy cons'' and ''progressive orthodox,'' in considerable numbers; in fact they make up the large majority of Christians – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant or Evangelical Protestant – in the developed world (and beyond it) today.

But by sorting them into those groups, we miss what they all fundamentally share – namely, a common sense of the obscure distance, and yet obscure connection, between their religious beliefs with their civic lives. Such believers are unseduced by the sharper (and false) clarity of right-wing religious ideologues, because they seem too immediately tied to a concrete political program; nor would they accept similarly rigid left-wing theologies, were any on offer.[7] Religious beliefs, they realize, do not typically translate immediately and easily into political behavior, and anyone who says otherwise, they suspect, is doing more salesmanship than theology.

To some this suspicion looks like hesitancy, and the hesitancy looks like it is anchored in tepid believing. And many of these believers' faith is all too frail. (More on that in a moment.) But the frailty of their belief does not cause their political hesitancy. If anything, the causality may go in the opposite direction: their hesitancy may be partly to blame for the tepidity of their faith. For they realize that there is *some* connection between their faith and their civic lives. Many of them are deeply interested in finding ways to render intelligible to themselves and to their neighbors the meaning and implications of their putative religious commitments. But the only models for faithful engagement they see are much too

7. This is most pointedly so for Mainline Protestants; see Wuthnow 2002 and Wuthnow 1997: 395: ''the percentage of evangelicals who want mainline Protestants to have more influence is higher than the percentage of mainliners who want mainline Protestants to have more influence.'' But it is also true for Roman Catholics and Evangelicals; see Hollenbach 1997, C. Smith 1998 and 2000, Bramadat 2000, Noll 2002, G. Hughes 2003, and Steinfels 2004 (especially the essays by Murnion, and Leege and Mueller). It may seem odd to group Protestants and Catholics together, as well as mainliners and evangelicals, but it is practically accurate; significant ecclesial, political, and even theological differences no longer map onto denominational differences, but instead transect the denominations. For more on this see Wuthnow 1988.

tightly tied to immanent political agendas, and so they hesitate to engage their faith in civic life. Hence they judge that faithful engagement means a quite tight connection between belief and action, between faith and works; and from the works they can see, they judge that the faith that funds them is not worthwhile.

Can these bones live? Less likely resurrections have occurred. For such an event to occur, they need a better model of faith as a way of life, and a better model of how that faith may guide public engagement. That is what this book offers.

Still, their resurrection will not be an easy one. No resurrections are. To be precise, any attempt to encourage these believers towards richer engagement faces two large problems.

First, such believers are among the last adherents to the "public reason" view. They assume that public religious action is inevitably expressed in absolutist and intolerant fashion by the self-appointed spokesmen of the religious right and (again, however rarely seen) religious left. Because they find such action both civically imprudent and theologically impious, they think that religion should stay out of public life.

It may be that some readers of this book share this worry. So the following is directed as much at you as at such believers: no necessary connection exists between the public use of thick religious discourse and intolerant intellectual, cultural, or theological positions, or between "thin" modes of speech and open-minded and conversational ones. After all, the most visible case of religious believers accepting a Rawlsian etiquette of restraint in public life is precisely in the superficially secular "family values" strategy of quite conservative religious organizations; the 1960s United States civil rights movement was saturated with overt religious rhetoric; and anyway, the Roman Catholic Church's statements – some apparently "liberal," some "conservative," and all expressed in a largely undefensive, dialogical tone – are often welcoming and stern at the same time.[8] Furthermore, and speaking of the USA in particular, evidence suggests that such believers' hesitancy about explicitly religious engagement, out of concern for rising theologically inflected intolerance, has actually amounted to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Their shunning of religious rhetoric in public has

8. See Hertzke 1988.

permitted, and perhaps encouraged, the rising prominence of more strident and intolerant voices in public speech. It is not that there was no religious discourse in public until the ''religious right'' introduced it; to the contrary, the ''religious right'' was quietist from the 1920s until the 1970s, and its current activism was provoked by concerns about the ''loss of our culture'' after the successes of progressive movements, themselves typically saturated with often strident and intolerant religious discourse, up to that point. What has actually happened in the last few decades is that those religious voices attuned to the complexity of religion in public life have effectively ceded the rhetorical high ground of thick discourse to extremist and often reactionary (whether right-wing or left-wing) voices. Culture, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and bad theology drives out good.[9]

These voices' self-imposed silence is much to be regretted, for without them public life seems doomed to an ever sharper and more damaging polarization. The changing religious demographics of North America and Europe over the past several decades suggest this. Some scholars have argued that immigration will transform American religion into more pluralistic, eclectic, and tolerant forms than any society before. Others, less sanguine, see immigration as important, but not because it will make American religion more diverse and eclectic; after all, the large majority of immigrants to the USA are and will continue to be conservative Christians, from Africa and Latin America – hardly obvious candidates to revolutionize religion in the USA, at least in the way that the starry-eyed prophets anticipate. Meanwhile, Europe faces the emergence of ghettoized immigrant populations who have been excluded from the national cultures into the public sphere, and the rise of reactionary ethno-nationalisms (often with a religious patina) in response.[10]

In short, believers' alienation from civic-religious engagement will end only when they stop reinforcing the extremists' monopoly on religious discourse by shunning such discourse, and instead take it up again. Speaking civically, today we need to cultivate the public

9. See Hofrenning 1995, Apostolidis 2000, Harding 2000, Hart 2001, McCarraher 2000, R. L. Wood 2002, and Marsh 2005.
10. See Eck 2001 and Wolfe 1998 for the optimistic view; see Gardella 2003, Jenkins 2002, Nicholls 1989, and (implicitly) Noll 2002 for the more pessimistic one.

discourse of religious citizens, not further constrain it. Thoughtful secularists and sincere believers can agree that we need, not *less* religion in public, but *more*, of a richer kind – for such believers would be a welcome addition to civic discourse.

Any attempt to encourage such believers towards a richer religious engagement with civic life faces a second problem: these believers are often, to be frank, lousy believers. Their grip on Christian faith and life – or rather, Christian faith and life's grip on them – is often quite anemic, sadly confined to a mere spirituality. Many churches have become deeply co-opted by the therapeutic ethos of the culture, leading to declining membership and looser commitment even among those who remain. These churches, and their believers, are perceived, not without reason, as collaborating with these social trends, rather than offering any real resistance to them. They are in deep need of reformation, of a new Great Awakening – indeed, of any awakening at all.[11] Provoking these believers would have a powerful effect, not only on our common public life, but also on their own religious belief; but in this case, the cause of the improvement is indistinguishable with the improvement itself.

Yet all is not lost. Despite the many correct criticisms that thinkers from H. Richard Niebuhr to Stanley Hauerwas have leveled against those believers' ways of believing, we need not despise the noise of their solemn assemblies. For latent in their religious convictions is a sense that their beliefs should shape the way they live in this world. Even now they profess a deep commitment to justice, genuine community, and respect for others, albeit emerging most of the time in vague moral pieties – what Nancy Ammerman calls "Golden Rule Christianity." Furthermore, they have developed a particularly rich "style" of civic participation, one built on a strategy of stewardship and "bridging," creating spaces in which the events that constitute civil society – the town meetings, small groups, soup kitchens, and campaign rallies – can happen. Latent in their convictions are powerful motives for a style of public engagement that is both theologically profound and civically

11. See Fowler *et al.* 1999, McGreevy 2003, C. Smith 2005, Wuthnow 1997 and 1998a, Witten 1993, Hout *et al.* 2001. In Europe, see Gill 1999.

constructive.[12] Nor could this be easily changed, for it is wired into their churches' very being, and not just a bit of software in their minds. It is part of their *habitus*, too deep-rooted and organic to be painlessly or easily exchanged for another style of engagement. Theologies of the latter sort – often on offer by the received churches' harshest critics today – are hydroponic, unrooted in the lived realities of these churches' traditions. As such, such criticisms are symptomatic of our consumer societies' identity politics, which offer little more than the bad faith of a too-easy particularism. Real particularism is an achievement, the realization of a distinct character that can take a lifetime to develop; it cannot be simply purchased and put on instantaneously, like a pair of pre-faded stonewashed jeans, or a mass-produced "antique-looking" vase from Pottery Barn. At least these churches' style, in having a real past, offers the possibility for a real, concrete, future particularism – even if it too often fails to deliver on its promise.

Furthermore, while such critics attack the style, the style itself is not the problem; the problem is the absence of a theological rationale for it. These believers continue to volunteer and engage in civic activities at rates higher than other citizens (and particularly more than overt secularists and more rigid theocrats), but they lack a theological rationale for their civic engagements – an explanation for why they, as Christians, and members of these churches, should do this. They suffer from what Charles Taylor has called "the ethics of inarticulacy": a way of life guided by moral convictions whose articulation is blocked by its adherents' incapacity to express their metaphysical and theological background. And such activity must be complemented by some rationale, if it would be an intentional and organic part of a church's life, and handed on to new generations of the faithful.[13]

Such a theological rationale should explain why such Christians should care about public life, how they should be engaged in public life, as Christians, and what they should expect to have happen to them, as Christians, in that engagement. It would urge them toward a thicker appropriation of their faiths, an appropriation that would

12. See Ammerman 1997, R. S. Warner 1994, and Theusen 2002. See also Wuthnow on the importance of membership in more politically active congregations for training in skills for civic engagement (1998b and 1999b).
13. See Taylor 1989 and C. Smith 2005.

energize and inform their public engagement. Instead of arguing for the legitimacy of religion in public life, it would argue for the legitimacy of public life in religion. It would not ask, ''What does God have to do with politics?'' (see DiIulio and Dionne 2000), but instead, ''What does politics have to do with God?'' It would be a dogmatics of public life, which is what this book seeks to offer.

During the world: the dogmatics sketched

What will this dogmatics look like? First of all, it will not propound a system but sketch a communal way of life. Christian life is a life of inquiry into God, and the practices in which Christians engage do not simply assist that inquiry, they embody it. A ''theology of public life'' therefore includes a more concrete ascetical spirituality and ecclesiology of public life, which are manifest in and reinforced by a set of concrete practices, ''spiritual'' and otherwise.[14] Such a theology is well described as a normative ethnography of religious practices.

To do this we must confront the concrete challenges facing our attempts at ascetical formation, especially the fluidity and increasing marketization of our occupations, our relationships, and even our identities. In confronting these challenges we find that the best way to use them is to *endure* them – to see them as inescapable facts about our lives, realities which we experience most fundamentally by suffering them. Endurance is the crux of this proposal; it embodies the overall practice, the ascesis, that anchors this ''theology of public life.''

Enduring: an ascetical strategy

In talking about an asceticism based on an understanding of life as endurance, I have used two terms that need some unpacking before going further. Today ''asceticism'' suggests very thin, very bearded, near-naked men doing strange things to their bodies. All of those things can be part of an ascetic regimen. But none of them

14. See Greer 1986, Hadot 1995 and 2002, Charry 1997, Wuthnow 1998a and 2003, Sedgwick 1999, and Volf and Bass 2002. For challenges to such a spirituality, see Roof 1999, and M. F . Brown 1997.