

## Contour of an American Public Theology

Victor Anderson

Associate Professor of Christian Ethics  
Vanderbilt University

There are voices in the church today that urge the preservation of our faith story as the number-one task of the churches. But what are we to preserve? Enlightenment Christianity has already crumbled. No, once more we must risk faith's conversation with culture. Sometimes, it is called evangelism. (David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching*, Fortress:1994, 74).

The above quote is from my distinguished colleague, David Buttrick, at Vanderbilt University. It evokes discussions between Buttrick and myself, discussions carried on for over five years and usually over glasses of single malt whiskey while sitting at his kitchen table. As a professor of homiletics at a University based divinity school, Buttrick struggles day to day with the public relevance of the Christian gospel for a North Atlantic world that is entering into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching*, Buttrick takes notice of cultural shifts influenced by a new politics of difference that has decentered the cultural mainstream (a white, male, heterosexual, Protestant, and Eurocentric hegemony). Recalling a past era of American public theologians such as Paul Tillich and the Niebuhrs, he pronounces the end of the Protestant Era but not perhaps the end of the Protestant Principle (72).

Driven by the burden of public relevance, Buttrick calls for a renewal American public theology that engages the postmodern crises that characterize late 20th North American life. He suggests that it is the gospel that Christians are called to preach, not out of defensiveness, but in order to “see where God may lead us. And surely we delight in seeking new ways to speak, not fixed on the past, but on the unfolding future of God. In every age, the gospel is good news” (113). The gospel is Buttrick’s critical principle in public theology. Yet, the gospel remains to my mind, a vague, ambiguous rhetoric. What it means substantively as a publicly available category of criticism and empowerment has to be addressed thematically through a variety of theological symbols. That is what I attempt to do in this paper. For given the moral, political, and social crises that plague American public life today, American public theology will require more critical principles, and hence more theological rhetorics interpretative and critical of public

discourse. In this paper, in which I was asked to discuss some feature of my own work in theological ethics, I want to explicate the contour of a proposal for public theology that I laid out philosophically in my book, *Pragmatic Theology*.

## I.

I describe public theology as the deliberate use of religious languages and commitments to influence substantive public discourse, including public debates on morals. Ours is a time when we need an American public theology capable of criticizing our public culture driven by economic growth, multinational expansion, a burgeoning American middle class, and moral decay, violence, prison over population and privatization, and the like. We need theological concepts and symbols that connect the spirituality of religious communicants, their participation of public religions, and their democratic citizenship. To be sure, this last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed real publicity of religion in public life through television and the printed press . Names such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Billy Graham, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Louis Farakhan, and T. D, Jakes have become household names and expected commentators on America's ills. Yet, as an intellectual class, America's academic theologians remain marginal, if not silent and absent from these sources of publicity, effecting little change by means of their engagements of religion and public life.

It is public theology as an academic discourse that I want to examine. For a starter, I propose at least two criteria for understanding the aims of public theology: (1) *as an academic discourse, public theology involves the academic theologian in understanding, transmitting, and constructing theological categories which do not only sustain the political community in practices oriented toward moral fulfillment.* (2) *It also involves academic theologians in developing categories that are capable of correcting the moral conscience of the political community when public life is governed by policies that violate the democratic fulfillment of its citizens.*

We will not get very far in understanding public theology from an academic point of view

it we maintain the rhetoric of “the academy verses the real world”. I think that it is best to eliminate this talk, as if the academy--one of the West’s most permanent and, at times, insidious mediating institutions--is not co-present in our talk of “the real world”. The real world includes academics: white, black, people of color, rich, struggling, women, gays, and lesbians. America’s academic theologians are not aliens to this world, but inhabit shared social realities, a common world, and participate in a shared collective life. We do not only belong to various publics (the church, the academy, society, and various associations), we also hold membership in a generalized political community of democratic citizenship. Moreover, because theology is a cultural product and the languages of theology are cultural in meaning, the significance of theology is not isolated from the public realities from which these theological languages emerge. Rather, the theologian holds ownership of stock in languages of particular religious traditions as well as stock in languages that express the needs, interests, and goods of the generalized public. At the normative level, our intellectual practices ought to give symbolic expression to American public life in languages and practices that transact and bring to fulfillment our genuine public interests in health, safety, labor, education, and public administration. The task of public theology, then, is to integrate the various languages of the multiple communities of discourse that constitute public life. On this point, I find Linell Cady’s understanding of public theology illuminating:

The task of public theology is to elicit a recognition of and commitment to the common life within which we exist. In and through the appropriation of religious symbolism, public theology seeks to nurture, deepen, and transform our common life that, while obscure and damaged, is never totally eroded. Thus public theology is not simply proposing a utopian communal vision that flies in the face of what we know about cosmic and human life. It is, rather, offering a constructive agenda that grows out of discernible features of our individual and corporate experience (Linell E. Cady, *Religion, Theology and American Public Life*, SUNY:1992, 92).

In public theology, the question is whether the internal languages of theology (God, Christ, Spirit, Redemption, Creation, Sin, Grace, Reconciliation, Atonement, Judgment, and the like) are

capable of communicating genuine meanings beyond the narrow boundaries of one's own religious community. Whether they can embrace the concerns and hopes of the public at large without also rendering the academic public theologian religiously insignificant? *An adequate public theology entails in its own internal languages some conception of the integrity of human experience. It is recognized by (1) its interpretative contributions to public discourse, (2) the moral agreements it shares with various public discourses, (3) the claims that it makes on public life, and (4) its claims for the symbolic integration of public life.* Public theology takes its departure from the symbolic universes and social practices that constitute public life both in its generality and particularities. Like other public practices that intend the successful transaction of public interests, needs, and goods, public theology also carries along in its own internal meaning the tragic and ironic character of public life. (This is a point that I made central to *Pragmatic Theology*). And the adequacy of public theology lies in its theological capacity to render public life spiritually meaningful, morally livable, and culturally flourishing.

I understand public theology, then, to be the deliberate use of theological commitments to inform and influence substantive public debate and policy. It emphasizes the use of religious resources for the advancement of moral and social discourse on public life. To be sure, theological categories are lifted up as interpretative grids for reading and explicating not only the *negativities* of North American public life through various conceptions of sin and transgression. An adequate public theology also discerns in our life together *emancipatory* signs of grace which are possible in our interactions with one another. The languages of public theology are not the invention of academic religionists or theologians. Usually when they are, they further disconnect American academic theologians from a vital source of religious insight, namely, America's public religions. Rather, the languages of public theology are the inherited categories of public religions themselves. They are the languages of faith communities in their corporate, organized, and routine existence as spiritual and social communities of moral discourse.

## II.

In *Pragmatic Theology*, I offered a conceptual account of several theological languages from which I find rich possibilities for interpreting and criticizing our contemporary climate of morals. Among the categories are finitude, transcendence, God, and grace. With finitude and transcendence, I suggested that these categories are not at first theological but can be rendered theological. They can be rendered theological insofar as they circumscribe a fundamental structure of the world and human experience of the world. With American empirical theologians before me (theologians such as G. B. Foster, G. Birney Smith, Henry Nelson Weiman, D. C. Macintosh, H. Richard Niebuhr, and James M. Gustafson), I also seek to understand the relevance of theology in terms of the ways that theological languages disclose distinctive features of human life in the world.

Our world is understood as bounded by limiting conditions that human beings, despite all the power of their imaginations which they might muster up to overcome the limits, will necessarily be thwarted by the push and pull of nature, environmental conditions, our bodies, disease, mortality, and the fact that we are not omnipotent. At every moment, our lives are met with limits—finitude limits us in every action. As a consequence, in politics and public policy making, in our moral commitments to advance human happiness, in our interventions into the ecological ordering of life, and in our social endeavors to create healthy, prosperous societies where peace and justice are the norms of all interhuman encounters, we are met at every step with limits. Such a recognition, however, is not a human fault. It is simply a recognition of the way things are. Finitude marks a basic quality of all human experience of the world. We simply must deal with it.

However, it is not the case that we are morally and spiritually fated by this recognition. For co-present in the recognition of limits is the possibility of transcendence. Like finitude, transcendence is also a basic quality of human experience of the world. Even in the awareness of limits, we move about and act in the world, adapting circumstances so that they cooperate

toward satisfying some of our deepest goals. Adjusting ourselves to the limits so that we are not overcome by unwarranted feelings of futility, cynicism, and fatedness. For the increase of life, we muster our resources to create safe, healthy spaces where our children may be given the best chances we can to advance the good of their lives. Yet, we know all too well that not all will survive, that despite the hopes and dreams of parents and the best of chances, some will die in birth, others from disease, still others will die from the neglect and violence that surrounds them at every turn. For the increase of knowledge, we find ways to provide our generations with those ideas, skills, languages, and practices that have proven themselves capable of sustaining human communities through ages of cultivation, years of distress and war, decades of famine and disease. We pass on to others lessons learned in the hope that they will never undergo the negative experiences from which our ancestors mined life sustaining wisdom. Limits meet us at every turn, but we are not fated. Our generation is no more fated than those that survived the transatlantic slave trade to be transplanted in the hostile world of chattel slavery created, a world that sought to destroy in them that realm in which all are most free, namely, in their willing. Out of this fundamental human power of will, African people in America hoped against the limits and brought forth a new community, a new people, a new family, and a new possibility from the ruins of American Christianity. They brought forth a new creation, the black churches in America. As finitude meets us at every step, so transcendence, the possibility of freedom, openness, and creativity, conspire with the human will to adapt our circumstances and adjust ourselves to the ways of the world for the sake of human flourishing.

Finitude and transcendence are not empty concepts, even if they are regulative. They are what Nancy Frankenberry describes as “felt qualities of the world” and its processes. They are co-present in our experience of the world. And if religion takes up the unity of experience or life as an integral relation to the whole or the world ( a point which I have argued elsewhere), then finitude and transcendence can be grasped theologically through a conception of God as the totality or unity of the world itself. On my account, religious meaning entails a fullness of being,

a plenitude that is not reducible to human action, but also admits a resignation of human life and practices to larger wholes. (As the Apostle Paul decries, The good that I would I do not, who shall deliver me from this body of sin and death? I thank God it is through Jesus Christ.” The legitimacy of theological discourse depends on imaginative constructions of ideas and values that help persons cognitively and morally approximate the integration of themselves and the world processes. This is exactly what Henry Nelson Weiman meant by God when he said: “God is that interaction between individuals, groups and ages which generates and promotes the greatest possible mutuality of good. Only such an interaction can carry us to the greatest good. . .because it is the only way that the accumulated good gathered by all can become the heritage of each” (*Is There a God?*). Where finitude and transcendence are regarded as correlative principles, the world processes do not only present limiting conditions; also present is a world of possibilities, for the world is also open to novelty. The world, its processes, values, and meaning, is disclosed in the interaction and interdependence of all things to each other. The world is processive, open, and relational.

In what I have been saying, there is a metaphysical dimension in public theology that is framed by finitude (the recognition of limits to human action,) and transcendence (the recognition that human beings as they live in the world experience transformative moments of fulfillment). Transcendence remains possible when the self and community transcend isolated self-interests and seek human fulfillment in relation to larger wholes which entail the self with other selves and the community with other communities, even non-human others and communities. Howard Thurman puts it this way:

It is possible for the individual to move out beyond the particular context by which his life is defined and relate to other forms of life from inside their context. This means that there is a boundless realm of which all particular life is but a manifestation. This center is the living thing in human beings and animal. If a person or animal can function out of that center, then the boundaries that limit and define can be transcended (Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, Friends United Press: 1986, 74).

Like Weiman and Thurman, I also understand this unification of the self and others as religiously given and theologically interpreted in the idea of God.

God symbolizes that structure of experience that gives meaning and value to the whole of human experience because it transcends every particular experience in a unity of experience. The God-symbol conceptually enacts the unification of every reality--reality being the undifferentiated totality of experience. God signifies the union of all life in its concrete actuality and ideal potentiality. Therefore, the idea of God designates the totality of meaning and value. Or as Josiah Royce once proposed, God simply is the World. On this account, God symbolizes “an unrestricted field of value whose harmony involves an ever-enlarging process synthesis of the widest range and deepest contrast of relational data”, says Nancy Frankenberry (*Religion and Radical Empiricism*, SUNY: 1987, 191). The God symbol, “[enables] individuals (and cultures) to move from narrower, constricted patterns of perception and feeling to wider and deeper modes of sympathetic inclusiveness” (Ibid). And in a world where acts of racial and sexual violence, from dragging to death a black man by chains from a pick-up truck to leaving a young gay man to die on a fence, seem to be the norms of interhuman association, the God-symbol elicits our sympathies to see, perceive, and attend to others beyond the immediacy of our own narrow self-interest, families, and neighborhoods. It expands our moral sympathy to seek the flourishing of all that suffer from malicious forms of prejudice and violence.

James M. Gustafson has given a compelling interpretation of the significance of this conception of God when he argued that theology is a way of construing the world. For him, God is disclosed as the power(s) bearing down on us, sustaining us, and ordering human life within the nexus of natural and social processes and patterns (*Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, Volume I, Chicago: 1981, 236-51). God is the symbol that designates the powerful other that establishes the possibilities for human capacities to interact creatively with the processes and patterns of the world. However, Gustafson also reminds us that God also establishes limits to

human well being and human endeavors toward sustaining themselves against the world (246). Gustafson's conception of God attempts to present together the unity of human relations to time and chance (finitude) and human capacities to render life humanly satisfactory and fulfilling (transcendence).

In *Pragmatic Theology*, I argued that God symbolizes the totality of the world itself, the union of life in its concrete actuality (finitude) and ideal potentiality (transcendence). The symbol grasps the world in its dark and light dimensions and human experience in its tragic and utopian manifestations. The recognition that the world, its processes, and human experience of the world is at every point met with finitude and transcendence, limits to and possibilities for human flourishing or moral fulfillment allows grace to function as a powerful critical principle in public theology. The American theological ethics and public theologian, Paul Lehmann years ago placed "Grace" at the center of his public theology, when he argued that Christian ethics is not wholly determined by what God is doing in the Church. It is also determined by what God is doing in the world (*Ethics in a Christian Context*, Harper & Row: 1963, 74). By evoking Lehmann, I do not mean to re-inscribe on our context a conception of divine action overlaid with anthropomorphism. Nevertheless, Lehmann adequately supposes that the involvement of Christian communities with politics, public policy, human misery and suffering, and mass alienation of persons from those goods which all require for a life that reaches beyond mere subsistence toward maximal fulfillment is related to our estimation of the possibilities that God intends in the ordering of all things to each other and the integration of all our particular interests to the whole, to the world.

As I have suggested elsewhere, God is the condition for the possibility or potentiality of goodness, faith, trust, loyalty, and fulfillment in a world that is also set with limits in politics, social action, and moral endeavors. To recognize this potentiality is to recognize the signs of grace. As one philosopher notes:

The dialectical movement between finitude and transcendence marks the human process during all stages of growth and decline. Neither dimension can assume

priority in all respects, so that finitude is never bereft of those fitful moments of transcendence that move the self beyond the opacity of origins. Hope assures us that the destructive powers of origin will never completely overwhelm the human process, and that our radical expectations are secured against the forces of closure and death (Robert Corrington, *Nature & Spirit*, Fordham: 1992, 81).

The point here is that notwithstanding the ways our lives have been structured by choices, actions, and policies which we ourselves did not choose for ourselves, where there is great expectation for increasing social freedom, moral capacity, and constructing just policies, we are met with signs of grace. Through grace, great expectations are co-present in the situations of justice denied, of dreams deferred and unfulfilled, of malicious and culture eroding policies, and of democratic citizenship foreclosed to a generation of incarcerated young black males and people of color seeking freedom from poverty as they stand outside immigration gates because of American racist policies on immigration and criminal justice.

The recognition that grace attends the very structure of our moral and spiritual aspirations and actions can hardly be an invitation to quietism. For the gracious potentialities of the world must be seized, taken up, and grasped with urgency, if hope of a morally just political community is to be an end realizable in the present. We greet grace with a sense of urgency, if better housing, better health care, better educational policies, better living conditions for the poor, and better democratic participation is to be increased in our present moment. The urgency is great for sin lies at the door of our moral endeavors. Every potentiality of grace and transcendence is also met with the threat of closures. Each may be met not only by the limits of nature or the world, but each may also be limited or thwarted by our own negligence, by our own intentional desires toward selfishness and closure. Our own propensities toward totalizing our own private interests may foreclose our capacities to recognize the potentiality of grace. In the classical language of Christian faith, such a negative possibility is theologially grasped as Sin.

Notwithstanding how our moral lives are framed by finitude, limits, and sin, in the last stanza of a powerful poem in which Howard Thurman ponders the mystery of human finitude as

it is structured, as he says, by “the ebb and flow of oceans,” Thurman centers on the potentiality of transcendence and grace:

There is some wholeness at the core of man [sic]  
That must abound in all he [sic] does  
That marks with reverence his [sic] ev'ry step  
That has its sway when all else fails;  
That wearies the depth of frozen fears  
Making friend of foe,  
Making love of hate,  
And lasts beyond the living and the dead,  
Beyond the goals of peace, the ends of war!  
This man [sic] seeks through all his [sic] years;  
To be complete and of one piece, within, without.  
(Knowledge...Shall Vanish Away, Thurman, 1984, 11)

The theological themes that I have selected as critical principles in public theology, including finitude, transcendence, God, Grace, and Sin. They were also critical principles that laid centrally in the public theology of Howard Thurman. To these, he also included reconciliation and judgement. Thurman's practice was to take the rich vocabularies of the Christian community and construct them in such a way that they pushed beyond narrow meanings peculiar to the inner life of the community. They functioned for him as languages of social criticism. But they also elicited for him Christian responses to God's action in the world.

### III.

I have described public theology as the deliberate use of distinctively theological commitments to inform and influence substantive public discourse. Therefore, a viable public theology will not rest easy with any public/private distinction that might conceptually uncouple theological discourse from public discourse. America's public religions are distinctive locations where moral, social, and cultural practices are theologically criticized and legitimized through the apparatuses of doctrine, liturgy, and organization. In these communities of moral discourse, the

public function of theological categories may be prophetic, calling into question public acts that distort and disrupt effective communication of the common goods that persons require for social equilibrium and cultural fulfillment. However, public theology may also exercise a priestly function when the rich resources of doctrine, piety and organization encourage and enable the public realm to flourish in peace.

In times past, it was this dual intention in American public theology that brought Paul Tillich, Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, German-American thinkers, to the surface of North American Protestant public theology. Together, their voices exposed the demonic influences of national socialism in Germany and criticized what they perceived as an evangelical complacency and indifference of the United States toward world war intervention. Walter Lippmann recalls the American mind against which Tillich and the Niebuhr's gave prophetic and priestly guidance:

It did not come easily to one who, like myself, had known the soft air of the world before the wars to recognize and acknowledge the sickness of the Western liberal democracies. Yet, as we were being drawn unready and unarmed into the second of the great wars, there was no denying, it seemed to me, that there is a deep disorder in our society which comes not from the machinations of our enemies and from the adversities of the human condition but from within ourselves. (Walter Lippmann, *The Public Philosophy*, 1955, 12).

In their attempts to speak prophetically and priestly within their religious situation, American public theologians also challenged theological liberals to provide an effective mode of religious criticism in the context of a world at war. They helped a generation of Americans to understand that the fascist sickness plaguing Europe was not regionally isolated, but was constitutive of Western mass democracy and the capitalist impulses that justified it. Together, through such theological languages as the “Protestant Principle”, “The Impossible Possibility” and “Radical Transcendence”, Tillich and the Niebuhrs unmasked America’s moral and cultural pretensions through their critical, theological analyses of American public problems.

The public theology that I envision, paradoxically framed between finitude and

transcendence, also resists the uncoupling of theological discourse and public discourse and rejects any private/public and world/ church dualism. It also rejects any easy reduction of the private to the public or the Church to the world. Rather, American public theologians are called to search the internal vocabularies of America's public religions for critical principles, principles that would expose the tragic-demonic dimensions of American cultural life. We also seek theological languages that legitimate dimensions of social experience that bring about genuine fulfillment of not only the goods persons require minimally for making life in the United States morally manageable and that also bring about as much human flourishing as is possible in the world.

To conclude, as we face the threshold of a new century, our situation, which some describe as a postmodern moment, is in need of a renewed participation of America's academic theologians in the construction of viable, critical public theologies. The intellectual and moral pain and anguish it causes me to see and hear so much of church and parachurch theologians disseminate theological interpretations of America's public life in languages that offend the intellectual seriousness of the Christian faith. Given the preponderance of uncritical judgements about God's way and will regarding sexual orientation, behavior, and racial relationships, uncompassionate indifference to the plight of the poor while theologies of wealth and prosperity assume the form of the Gospel, and ungodly acquiesces to the prevailing individualism and protectionism that characterizes much of U.S. public policy on criminal justice and immigration, it does not surprise me that the very idea of public theology has become in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century a scandal and absurdity.

However, it will not be enough for academic theologians to criticize these public theologies for their inadequacies. As participants in American democratic citizenship, America's academic theologians are publicly responsible to offer to larger publics than our own small intellectual societies the best critical principles we can conceive toward advancing interpretations of the human condition, human encounters, and the goods and ends which all require for the moral

flourishing. We need a public theology that is always cognizant of the limits of human moral actions in a world framed by finitude, while, at the same time, always anticipating the signs of grace in a world framed by transcendence. As I concluded elsewhere, we need a public theology that “acknowledges the precariousness of human actions,” while also acknowledging that “people are warranted in maintaining hope against destructive closures, openness toward a wider vision of human potentialities, expectation that the creative processes of human life will lead toward moral fulfillment, and recognition that the realization of human flourishing is a sign of divine grace” (Anderson, *Pragmatic Theology*, p. 119-120). Such are the limits of public theology, such are its possibilities. I conclude by citing a passage from Howard Thurman’s *Jesus and the disinherited* in response to David Buttrick’s quandary over the gospel raised at the beginning of this talk:

What, then, is the word of the religion of Jesus to those who stand with their backs against the wall? There must be the clearest possible understanding of the anatomy of the issues facing them. They must recognize fear, deception, hatred, each for what it is. Once having done this, they will become increasingly clear that the contradictions of life are not ultimate. The disinherited will know for themselves that there is a Spirit at work in life and in the hearts of human beings which is committed to overcoming the world. . . . For the privileged and underprivileged alike, if the individual puts at the disposal of the Spirit the needful dedication and discipline, he and she can live effectively in the chaos of the present the high destiny of a child of God (*Jesus and the Disinherited*, Friends: 1981, 108-09).